



# **DO PAKISTAN AND CHINA POSE A HURDLE FOR CLOSER COOPERATION BETWEEN EUROPE AND INDIA IN WEST ASIA?**

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The question itself seems wrongly conceived. Europe and India do not agree even on the name of the region at issue: Europe calls it the Middle East; India calls it West Asia – on the not unreasonable grounds that the “Middle East” for India cannot lie to our west! For us, the “Middle East” is surely somewhere near Seattle!



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But verbal calisthenics apart, historical perspectives on the region differ significantly for Europe and India. For Christendom, Jerusalem was the focus of the Holy Land, awaiting liberation by the Crusaders. Edward Said, the well-known Palestinian intellectual who challenged the assumptions of western “Orientalism”, laid at the door of the Crusades Europe’s inability to understand the Middle East/West Asia. For India, historically, the Gulf was our principal trading party for millennia, and also the intellectual entre pot through which traditional Indian folk tales were exported to Greece where they became Aesop’s fables, and through which Roman numerals were displaced by the Indian ‘zero’.

Moreover, about 1400 years ago, the Prophet Mohammad gave the message of the Holy Qu’ran to his people, which reached south India (the Kerala coast) in the same century as the Prophet lived, and north India about a century later. India today has the second largest Muslim population in the world; at least in the mind of secular Indians, it is as impossible to conceive India without Islam as it is to conceive Islam without India. One hastens to add that this “Idea of India” as a composite civilization is not shared by all Indians; thus, the current political dispensation is backed by ideological forces that seek a “Hindu” India. However, the fact that West Asia is the place of work for over seven million Indians of every religion, including nearly three million in Saudi Arabia, whose remittances are a key source of foreign exchange for our country, and that the Gulf is among the most important destinations for Indian exports as well as the source of much of our oil imports, make all Indian governments of whatever hue assiduously cultivate West Asian governments of all hues.

Political and economic stability in West Asia is a vital Indian national interest. Pakistan’s stakes in West Asia are similar to ours. They too have a large diaspora in West Asia and are heavily dependent on remittances to sustain their economy.

They too have to navigate with caution their way between differences that divide West Asian governments from each other. There was a time when Pakistan hoped to leverage its “Muslim” character for political advantage over India, especially in the forum of the Organization of Islamic Conference (as it was initially called). But deft diplomacy by India has never really enabled Pakistan to do so. Indeed, when various republican revolutions occurred through much of the Arab world, the new regimes trusted India rather more than they did Pakistan, especially because Pakistan was allied to Western powers through the Baghdad Pact in West Asia and Seato in south-east Asia. With the end of the Cold War, these military pacts of the Dulles era have lost their significance and Pakistan has realized the wisdom of keeping out of any “coalition of the willing” put together by Western powers or taking sides in West Asia’s internecine strife.

There also appears to be no clash of interests between China and India in West Asia. Of course, there is economic competition, particularly in the petroleum sector, but, by and large, China’s position on

West Asian issues pose no major issues for India. Pakistan, of course, tries to align its foreign policies as closely as it can to China's. But that too poses no special problems for India.

With regard to European and American approaches to West Asia, there are, however, issues with India requiring adjustment and reconciliation. When in early 1947, negotiations started in the UN over the ending the League of Nations' mandate over Palestine, India, even before her Independence, was asked to serve on the UN bodies considering the issue. With partition looming over the sub-continent as the price to be paid for our freedom, India warned against the proposed partition of Palestine to create Israel, foreseeing with foreboding that this would open the road to endless trouble and turbulence. But the Western countries and the Soviet Union were equally determined to ensure that the establishment of Israel would have to be paid as the price for the national independence of West Asian countries. Eventually, at the United Nations in November 1947, India was the only non-Arab, non-Muslim state to vote against the partition of Palestine. That has since remained a major root cause of differences between India and the West on how to handle West Asia. True, over the last 70 years, Israeli intransigence and atrocities on Palestinians have brought the European and American views closer to the Indian view even as dissension between Palestinian leaders of Gaza and the West Bank, and the emergence of Israel's growing defenceties with India, have resulted in India moving closer to the Europe-US position.