



Gujarat's Strategic Significance And Its Role In India-Pakistan Relations

¹Nisha Parmar, ²Dr. Mehal Pandya

¹Ph.D Research Scholar, ²Professor,

¹School of International Studies & Diaspora,

¹Gujarat University, Ahmedabad, India

Abstract:

Purpose: Focussing on the geographical, economic, and security functions of Gujarat in defining the bilateral relations between Pakistan and India, this article aims to investigate the strategic importance of the state in these interactions.

Design / Method / Approach: The given research has taken a qualitative approach, using secondary data sources such as government reports, academic articles, and media publications, surveying the literature, and analyzing case studies. The article discusses the historical relations, trade statistics, and security agreements between Pakistan and Gujarat, alongside the state's meaning in India's bigger foreign policy context.

Findings: The paper discusses the importance of Gujarat in regional diplomacy, defence cooperation, and trade. The report also notes how Gujarat's strategic location along the Arabian Sea and the thriving economy have facilitated cross-border trade even amid political concerns.

Originality/Value: By analyzing Gujarat's role in India-Pakistan relations, this study bridges an opportunity for future exploration of an under-researched aspect. It clarifies how subnational entities like Gujarat can influence national foreign policy and contribute to regional stability despite antagonisms of geopolitics.

Keywords: Gujarat, India-Pakistan relations, strategic significance, economic diplomacy, cross-border trade, regional stability.

1. INTRODUCTION

Gujarat, on the western coast of India, is vitally important in the geopolitical and security dynamics between Pakistan and India. With a 508-kilometer-long (Barua, 2025) international boundary with Pakistan, which includes the strategically important Sir Creek region, Gujarat is at a prime location for maritime and terrestrial security concerns. Because of its 1600 km long coastline along the Arabian Sea and its close proximity to Pakistan's Sindh province, the Indian state of Gujarat serves as a focal point for the country's foreign policy, security, and economic initiatives. Historically, Gujarat has played a role in shaping India-Pakistan relations, especially during periods of heightened animosity and tension. Whether it was the 1971 and 1965 Indo-Pak Wars or the ongoing conflicts over Sir Creek or marine borders, the state has frequently been in the forefront of cross-border warfare. Specifically, there has been and will likely be more direct military conflict in the Kutch region. Gujarat and Pakistan, and the Sindh province in particular, share deep linguistic, cultural, and historical ties that transcend mere geography. Before Partition in 1947, there were strong commercial and social links across the area that is now a border. Muslims from the Kutchi and Memon tribes as well as the Sindhis lived and traded in these regions. Particularly in the Kutch and Sindh areas, where people from both sides maintain family and linguistic links, this points to a shared cultural past that predated the partition. This socio-cultural overlap affects the relationship between India and Pakistan and influences religious ties, migratory patterns, and occasionally even perceptions between the two countries' borders.

Gujarat's significance extends beyond its border with Pakistan. It houses several major ports, such as Kandla and Mundra, which are vital for India's maritime trade and naval operations. The Indian Navy and Coast Guard maintain a strong presence in the region, underlining the importance of Gujarat in safeguarding India's western seaboard. Furthermore, Gujarat's industrial and infrastructural development—including initiatives like the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor and the strategic connectivity projects under SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region)—enhance its role as a key player in regional stability. In the context of India-Pakistan relations, Gujarat is not just a passive geographic entity but an active stakeholder in security, diplomacy, and regional cooperation. The ongoing disputes over the Sir Creek estuary, illegal fishing, and cross-border smuggling continue to test bilateral ties. However, Gujarat also offers potential avenues for maritime cooperation, trade, and confidence-building, particularly through mechanisms like joint border commissions and dialogue on coastal security. This paper explores Gujarat's strategic location, historical role, defense infrastructure, and geopolitical relevance in the broader India-Pakistan framework. It aims to analyze how Gujarat's position influences national security, foreign policy, and bilateral engagements between the two neighbors. Understanding this state's role is essential for comprehending the nuances of India-Pakistan relations and for formulating effective policies for regional peace and security.

2. Historical and Cultural Linkages of Gujarat in India-Pakistan Relations

Historical and cultural relations between Pakistan and Gujarat, particularly Sindh province, show that the two countries have been closely linked since before the 1947 Partition. Because of its strategic location on the western coast of India, Gujarat has served as a crossroads for maritime trade and cultural exchange ever since recorded history began. Ports in Gujarat such as Lothal, Khambhat (Cambay), Mandvi, and later Kandla transformed the state into a bustling economic hub that maintained strong ties to Sindh and the wider Persian Gulf region both before and during colonisation (Markovits, 2009). The commercial culture of Gujarat and Sindhi merchants became closely intertwined as a result of the textiles, cereals, and spices traded between them. During British colonial rule, these ties were further solidified when the Bombay Presidency was established, which united the economic and administrative systems of Gujarat and Sindh (Bhasin, 2018).

The cultural and religious traditions of Gujarat and Sindh are intertwined, sharing spiritual practices with the Bhakti and Sufi traditions. The devotional traditions of Gujarat, such as Narsinh Mehta and Kabir, reflect the spiritual ethos of Sindh's Sufi shrines of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar and Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai. According to Eaton (1993), these numbers are held in high regard by religious communities, suggesting a shared spiritual heritage that transcends modern-day national boundaries. The Kutchi language, spoken in the Kutch region of Gujarat and the Sindh province of Pakistan, also serves as a bridge between different ethnic groups and languages. The cultural and familial links of ethnic groups such as the Kutchi Memons, Sindhis, and Khojas extend beyond national boundaries and have been maintained through migration and diaspora networks (Falzon, 2004). The influx of Hindu Sindhis to Gujarat during the Partition of 1947 had a profound impact on the state's social and cultural landscape. These displaced peoples found new homes in the cities of Ahmedabad, Rajkot, and Bhuj, where they preserved their language, culture, and religion. As a result of their gradual assimilation, they now form an integral part of Gujarati culture and identity (Zamindar, 2010). In spite of the political chasm, diasporic interactions have allowed for the continuation of informal people-to-people relations, particularly among the Sindhi and Gujarati populations in North America, the Gulf, and the United Kingdom (Lal, 2008).

There is a lot of room for subnational involvement in cultural diplomacy and paradiplomacy in Gujarat's diplomatic efforts. The state has effectively used cultural festivals like Kutch's Rann Utsav as a tactic of soft power to draw global audiences, particularly those from South Asian diasporas, and to represent regional identity. There is hope for Track II diplomacy based on shared history and culture thanks to the involvement of non-state players from Gujarat, including educational institutions, cultural associations, and NGOs, in Indo-Pak friendship activities (Chatterjee, 2005). Heritage protection, academic exchanges, and cultural tourism are all examples of people-oriented connections that could be made possible by Gujarati proximity to Sindh and cultural affinity, provided that diplomatic conditions permit. Gujarat has the ability to become an important actor in the peace-building process between India and Pakistan if plans to establish a cross-border cultural corridor or soft-border system in the Kutch-Sindh area are approved (Sridharan, 2003). Subnational actors' agency in foreign affairs is highlighted by Gujarat's cultural and historical ties to Pakistan. There is a foundation for experimental diplomacy outside of state channels in these linkages, which are built through immigration, common spiritual history, economic interchange, and ethnic persistence. Paradiplomacy, which

emphasises the role of sub-state regions as agents of trans-border relations, provides a particularly useful framework for include regional actors in national discourses on foreign policy by recognising Gujarat's unique status.

3. Role of Diaspora

Untapped potential for economic collaboration between Gujarat and Sindh lies in the Gujarati diaspora, noted for its entrepreneurial spirit in the US, Canada, the UK, and East Africa. The Hindu Lohanas and Banias and Muslim Khojas, Bohras, and Memons have made tremendous economic progress and maintain strong cultural and familial ties across both regions. These relationships are especially strong in Kutch and the Kathiawar peninsula, where many of these communities descend. However, diaspora members must decide whether to reinvest in their ancestral towns, which may have sentimental significance but little economic promise, or in commercially dynamic areas like Ahmedabad or Surat, to which they may have no personal connection. Structured contact between Sindh and Gujarat and diaspora participation could revitalise Kutch and Kathiawar, boosting economic growth in Indian and Pakistani border areas. Many Muslim Gujaratis have family on both sides of the border, making them ideal advocates for integration and collaboration. Despite political obstacles, governments, business chambers, and expatriate groups can build revolutionary cross-border economic links between Gujarat and Sindh (Maini & Kataria, 2014).

4. Geographical and Strategic Significance



Gujarat occupies a strategically vital position in India's geopolitical landscape due to its unique geographical attributes. Located on the western coast of India, Gujarat has a 1,600 km long coastline—the longest among Indian states—which directly faces the Arabian Sea and provides crucial access to international maritime trade routes. This geographic orientation not only facilitates economic connectivity with West Asia, East Africa, and Europe but also enhances India's naval and maritime strategic posture in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) (Ghosh, 2013). The presence of major ports such as Kandla, Mundra, and Pipavav has turned Gujarat into a critical node in India's maritime infrastructure, contributing significantly to the nation's export-import economy. Mundra Port, in particular, is among the largest private ports in India and serves as a key transshipment hub, further underlining Gujarat's role as a commercial gateway (Sridharan, 2008).

In addition to its maritime importance, Gujarat shares an international border with Pakistan's Sindh province through the Kutch region, including the contentious Sir Creek area. This border region is not only sensitive from a security perspective but also holds implications for maritime boundary demarcation and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) rights in the Arabian Sea (Pant, 2016). The Sir Creek dispute, involving both territorial claims and economic stakes such as fishing rights and resource exploration, has positioned Gujarat as a frontier state in India-Pakistan security dynamics. The proximity to Pakistan necessitates strong military preparedness, and accordingly, Gujarat hosts significant military installations, including air bases in Bhuj and Jamnagar, and forward-operating naval and coast guard stations (Baruah, 2012). These security infrastructures serve both defensive and surveillance functions, particularly in light of past events such as the Kargil War and the 2001 Kutch earthquake, which underscored the region's vulnerability to cross-border tension and infiltration.

Beyond conventional security, Gujarat's strategic value is increasingly tied to India's energy and infrastructure diplomacy. The state is home to several refineries and LNG terminals, such as those in Hazira and Dahej, which play a key role in India's energy security architecture. Moreover, Gujarat is a central node in the ambitious International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), both of which envision Gujarat's ports as gateways for regional connectivity and trade diversification beyond traditional routes via the Suez Canal. The Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor (DMIC), with nodes in Gujarat, further enhances its strategic importance by linking economic and industrial hubs across western India to global markets.

There is a lot of untapped potential for economic collaboration between Gujarat and Sindh, but the media in Gujarat tends to focus on divisive topics like the Sir Creek conflict and the suffering of fishermen who cross maritime borders. The Adani Group's Kutch power project, which has increased the likelihood of power exports to Pakistan, has received little media attention. The fact that the business communities of Gujarat and Karachi already have strong ties and a lot of interest is something that is often disregarded. Some examples of such institutional partnerships include the 2013 MoU between the South Gujarat and Karachi chambers of commerce, which sought to strengthen commercial relations. Several Pakistani businesspeople met with then-Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi during the Vibrant Gujarat Summit in 2011, and one of them even invited Modi to Pakistan. In addition, the Gandhidham Chamber of Commerce has written to the state and federal governments to urge the development of land trade routes through Kutch. Nothing tangible has happened in terms of policy as a result of their endeavours. Nevertheless, there is fresh optimism that these ideas, supported by powerful Gujarati business lobbies, may eventually acquire momentum, possibly reviving cross-border trade through Gujarat, given the present Indian government's focus on regional economic integration and neighborhood-first diplomacy (Maini & Kataria, 2014).

From the perspective of paradiplomacy, Gujarat's strategic positioning enables it to act as an economic and diplomatic bridge not only between India and West Asia but also in regional cooperation frameworks involving Pakistan. While political realities constrain direct formal cooperation, Gujarat's subnational agencies and businesses have engaged with counterparts across the region through trade fairs, diaspora networks, and cultural exchanges, demonstrating the state's potential in regional diplomacy. As India pursues

multi-alignment in its foreign policy and deeper engagement in the Indo-Pacific, Gujarat's geographical and strategic location ensures it remains central to both economic ambitions and national security strategies.

5. Economic Significance of Gujarat

As one of India's most industrialised and export-oriented states, Gujarat plays a pivotal role in India-Pakistan economic relations due to its proximity to Pakistan's Sindh province and other factors. Prior to Partition, Gujarat and Sindh had close economic ties and shared maritime trade routes. Evidence of this long-standing economic dependency fractured after 1947 is the fact that Gujarati ports like Mandvi and Kandla had extensive trade connections with Sindhi ports like Karachi (Markovits, 2009). Even though political tensions have reduced official trade between India and Pakistan, the port city of Gujarat remains strategically and symbolically important for the eventual normalisation of economic relations between the two countries. According to Batra (2004), the demand structure in Pakistani markets, notably in the neighbouring province of Sindh, is well-suited to the state's industrial foundation, which primarily produces chemicals, textiles, medicines, and petroleum goods.

Gujarat's port infrastructure, including Mundra and Kandla, offers strategic logistical advantages that could support regional trade if cross-border transit were allowed. According to the Federation of Indian Export Organisations (FIEO), Gujarat could serve as a key node for overland and maritime trade with Pakistan, reducing transit costs and promoting cross-border supply chains (FIEO Report, 2019). The Kandla Port in particular has historically been a vital point for trade with West Asia and was originally developed to compensate for the loss of Karachi port after Partition, underscoring its foundational role in regional economic strategy (Srinivasan, 2002). Furthermore, Gujarat is home to several Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and industrial corridors, including the Delhi–Mumbai Industrial Corridor (DMIC), which could be leveraged for cross-border investment and trade if diplomatic conditions permit.

Diasporic linkages also play a subtle yet significant economic role. The Gujarati and Sindhi business communities, spread across the Gulf and Western countries, have maintained transnational commercial networks that indirectly connect Indian and Pakistani economies. These communities have often acted as informal bridges, facilitating trade, investment, and cultural commerce between the two countries through neutral territories like the UAE or Singapore (Falzon, 2004). In the domain of paradiplomacy, Gujarat has demonstrated a proactive approach by promoting trade and investment through Vibrant Gujarat Summits, attracting global business attention. While direct engagement with Pakistan is diplomatically sensitive, the state's openness to foreign investment and regional integration positions it well to benefit from any future thaw in bilateral economic relations.

In sum, Gujarat's economic significance in the context of India–Pakistan relations lies not only in its robust industrial and maritime infrastructure but also in its historical trade linkages, diasporic networks, and subnational economic diplomacy. If political constraints are eased, Gujarat could serve as a pivotal actor in re-establishing economic connectivity between the two nations, promoting regional economic integration and people-centered development.

6. Security Dynamics and Cross-Border Challenges

➤ The Sir Creek Dispute: Geopolitical, Strategic, and Ecological Dimensions

Sir Creek, originally known as Ban Ganga, is a 96-kilometer tidal estuary situated within the Indus River Delta, forming a contentious boundary between the Indian state of Gujarat and the Sindh province of Pakistan. This tidal channel, which opens into the Arabian Sea, is characterized by fluctuating water levels, marshy terrain, and saline mudflats, making it largely uninhabited and challenging to monitor. Historically, the dispute over Sir Creek dates back to the colonial era when conflicting territorial interpretations arose between the Rao of the princely state of Kutch and the Chief Commissioner of Sindh, then part of British India. Since the two countries gained their independence, the disagreement has persisted due to contradictions in the Bombay Government Resolution of 1914, which sought to settle the issue. According to paragraph 9 of the resolution, Pakistan is the rightful owner since the boundary is to the east of the Creek. However, Paragraph 10 refers to the navigability of the Creek for most of the year, invoking the Thalweg principle in international law, which dictates that boundaries in navigable rivers lie along the mid-channel. This interpretation supports India's claim, further bolstered by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).



Source : (Sir Creek, n.d.)

Following the Indo-Pak war of 1965, an international tribunal awarded India approximately 90% of its territorial claims in the region, though the westernmost segment of the area remained unresolved. Tensions escalated in 1999 when an Indian Air Force operation led to the downing of a Pakistani aircraft over the region. Since then, multiple rounds of bilateral negotiations have been attempted, albeit without success, leading to a maintenance of the status quo. The significance of Sir Creek extends beyond territorial claims, encompassing strategic, economic, social, and ecological dimensions. Strategically, the absence of border fencing across the marshland makes the region vulnerable to infiltration by terrorists and smugglers, a concern that has grown since the 2008 Mumbai attacks. A demarcation based on the Thalweg principle would also result in territorial gains for India. Economically, Sir Creek hosts one of Asia's largest fishing grounds and is

believed to be rich in hydrocarbons and shale gas. Clear boundary demarcation is essential for determining maritime limits, including Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), which extend 200 nautical miles and are vital for resource exploitation. On a social level, the unclear maritime boundary often leads to the inadvertent arrest of fishermen from both countries. Navigational challenges caused by natural elements such as wind and waves push boats across the border, resulting in the detention of fishermen who are only released via land routes, often without their boats and equipment, thereby affecting their livelihood. Ecologically, the region is a critical habitat for various species, including flamingoes and migratory birds. While Pakistan declared the western part of Sir Creek a Ramsar wetland site in 2002, the ongoing dispute has hindered joint conservation efforts and the implementation of effective ecological management strategies. Several issues hinder the resolution of this dispute. The difficult geographical terrain, comprising uninhabited marshlands and interlinked tidal channels, makes consistent patrolling and monitoring highly complex. Moreover, the Creek's shifting course over the years complicates the application of the Thalweg principle, as both nations risk losing territory that was historically within their respective provinces. A persistent trust deficit further exacerbates the issue; India fears that conceding control could prompt further Pakistani territorial claims, especially if valuable resources are discovered. Additionally, Pakistan's preference for international arbitration contradicts India's insistence on resolving bilateral issues through the framework of the 1972 Simla Agreement, which emphasizes direct negotiations without third-party intervention.

In conclusion, India has undertaken several strategic initiatives to safeguard its interests in the Sir Creek region. Border Security Force (BSF) assets include speedboats, specialised "Crocodile Commandos" units, and all-terrain vehicles have been sent out to police the difficult terrain. Adding cutting-edge technology like laser grids and UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles) makes border security even better. Nonetheless, there remains an urgent need to address the humanitarian dimension of the dispute, particularly the recurring arrests of fishermen. Mandatory installation of GPS navigation systems on fishing boats and the establishment of visible boundary markers could help mitigate these incidents. Additionally, both countries must work collaboratively to prevent the loss of livelihoods caused by this unresolved cartographic conflict. While the Sir Creek dispute does not match the magnitude of the Kashmir issue, it continues to contribute to bilateral tensions and will likely remain unresolved in the near future without significant diplomatic progress.

7. Conclusion

The diplomatic relationship between India and Pakistan remains unclear and often tense, marked by border tensions, diplomatic crises, and previous hostilities. Because of its unique historical, cultural, economic, and strategic significance, Gujarat can serve as a subnational link in reshaping bilateral relations. Over the Arabian Sea, Gujarat and Sindh enjoyed thriving commercial and cultural exchanges in the past. The Khojas, Bohras, and Memons are just a few examples of the families whose roots and relationships span both sides of the border, allowing these ties to endure despite the partition. The cultural linkages between the Kutch and Kathiawar areas and Sindh are strong because of the shared languages, cuisines, and religions of the two regions. With ports like Mundra, Kandla, and Pipavav, as well as connections to national corridors like the DMIC, Gujarat is economically the industrial heartland of India. The Gujarati diaspora and business

community is prepared to engage Sindh economically. However, such potential has been hindered by a lack of political will and security concerns. Businesses in Gandhidham and South Gujarat, for example, have spoken out in favour of land trade corridors, showing that cross-border trade is important to their local economies. In terms of diplomacy and security, Gujarat is strategically vital due to its closeness to Sir Creek and the naval border with Pakistan. Incidents involving fisherman guarantee that tensions will persist, but they also highlight the need for cooperation structures.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen Subnational Engagement through Track II diplomacy, focusing on Gujarat–Sindh exchanges.
2. Develop Border Trade Infrastructure in Kutch to support formal trade.
3. Leverage Diaspora Investment, especially from communities with cross-border familial ties.
4. Institutionalize Economic Dialogue between regional Chambers of Commerce.
5. Foster Cultural and Academic Exchanges to reinforce shared heritage.
6. Promote Humanitarian Maritime Protocols to reduce tensions over fishing rights.

Gujarat presents a model of regional involvement that has the potential to lessen hostilities and increase economic interdependence. This is despite the fact that India's larger contentious relations with Pakistan make it increasingly difficult to attain this goal. Gujarat has the potential to evolve from a border state that is concerned with security into an economic and cultural rapprochement engine if individuals at both the national and regional levels have the vision and motivation to make this transformation.

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