

AFTER BALAKOT

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Pakistan

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The first ever invitation for Delhi to address a ministerial gathering of the Islamic nations is an important breakthrough in independent India's diplomacy. Delhi certainly appears to have outsmarted Pakistan, which has for decades sought to block or undercut India's outreach to the Islamic nations.

The back story with Pakistan at the Organisation of Islamic Conference is nearly half a century old. India was invited to participate in the founding conference of the OIC at Rabat, Morocco in 1969, but Pakistan compelled the Conference to "disinvite" India. Rabat has been one of independent India's worst diplomatic humiliations. Since then, Pakistan has repeatedly used the forum to target India on Kashmir. The OIC, with its provocative pronouncements crafted in Pakistan, became a permanent headache for Indian diplomacy, becoming more intense in moments of crises with Pakistan of the kind that is playing out since the Pulwama attack.

That the Indian foreign minister can now walk into the OIC and address it as a guest of honour is an important inflection point in India's engagement with the Muslim world. The government of Pakistan could not even publicly protest against the invitation to Swaraj, for the initiative has come from one of Islamabad's closest partners — the United Arab Emirates.

It has strong support from Pakistan's other long-standing allies like Saudi Arabia and Turkey. The invitation also reflects the altered perceptions of Pakistan and India in the Middle East and beyond. In the 1950s and 1960s, Pakistan was seen as one of the natural leaders of the Muslim world. Today it is seen as an economic supplicant looking for dole from oil rich nations. India, in contrast, is seen as a major economic partner by all the key Islamic countries.

For Swaraj, the OIC meeting provides a big opportunity to explain the origins of the current crisis with Pakistan, the rationale behind the preemptive attack on the Balakot terror camp, and Delhi's repeated efforts for peace and reconciliation with Pakistan. Beyond the immediate, Swaraj can build on the fact that most Muslim countries are threatened by violent religious extremism and are open to long-term security cooperation with India.

Delhi must focus on converting this diplomatic breakthrough into sustained institutional engagement with the OIC, including a possible observer status in the organisation. India's formal engagement with the OIC, however, is unlikely to stop Pakistan from taking advantage of India's internal troubles. As Delhi begins to leverage the new goodwill in the Islamic world, it must also renew the process of healing in Kashmir.

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