



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

POLICY BRIEF

Symbolism over Substance: Pakistan's UNSC Presidency

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Cover Photographs:

A wide view of the Security Council meeting on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question, held in New York, on July 23, 2025. Source: [United Nations](#)

The Security Council Chamber from the vantage point of the President of the Council at the UN Headquarters in New York, on February 7, 2017. Source: [United Nations](#)

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by

Ambassador Ruchira Kamboj

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Symbolism over Substance: Pakistan's UNSC Presidency

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Ambassador Ruchira Kamboj

Introduction

Pakistan's turn at the UNSC helm winds down at July end. Under established procedure, all UNSC members - permanent and non-permanent - hold the presidency at least once in their two-year term. That Pakistan assumed the role was a routine consequence of institutional rotation. It will next hold the presidency in October 2026.

The presidency allows the holder to set the agenda, frame the narrative, and raise issues of concern. The President becomes the focus of attention during this brief period, and is regarded as the primary point of contact for global issues. With a constant stream of meetings and visitors for the UNSC President, this is a period of maximum soft power, visibility, and influence.

But that is where the line is drawn. The presidency cannot unilaterally drive policy nor can it change policy. The Security Council is structurally weighted in favour of the P5. The scope to influence substantive policy is minimal, particularly in areas where entrenched positions prevail. While the presidency offers a platform to articulate concerns, it does not confer agency to effect structural change.

Peaceful Settlement of Disputes

Pakistan's presidency featured three marquee events - back to back - the highlight being a July 22 open debate on 'Multilateralism and the Peaceful Settlement of Disputes'. The choice was astute and strategically calibrated to tap into a moment of global disquiet, where the sheer scale of unresolved conflicts have underscored the Council's waning authority.

Ahead of the debate, and in line with established procedure, a concept note was circulated highlighting the link between unresolved disputes and the proliferation of conflicts worldwide. It invoked Chapter VI of the UN Charter - particularly Article 33 - which outlines a range of peaceful dispute resolution mechanisms that have, over time, been sidelined. The note argued for a renewed focus on these foundational tools, which have been eclipsed by the Council's increasing preoccupation with crisis management. It also referenced Article 16 of the 'Pact for the Future', adopted by member states last year, which calls for the pacific settlement of disputes. The note called for revitalised

diplomacy and mediation, underpinned by the political will of member states to realise the Pact's vision of promoting dialogue and preventive engagement.

Specifically, the note posed four questions to help guide the discussion at the meeting¹:

- How can the Security Council better leverage the full potential of Charter-mandated tools for the pacific settlement of disputes?
- What challenges impede effective implementation of Council resolutions, and how can they be overcome?
- What more can be done to strengthen the Secretary-General's role in preventive diplomacy?
- Beyond crisis management, what additional steps can the Security Council take for the peaceful settlement of disputes and resolving conflicts for lasting peace and security?

Expectedly, the meeting saw strong engagement, with over eighty member states registering to speak, of whom at least three were Ministers: UK, Thailand and Saudi Arabia. The UN Secretary General's presence, although quite typical at such signature high level events of elected members, signalled institutional support for the issues that Pakistan highlighted and the multilateral character of the debate beyond the Council's fifteen members.

Pakistan's 'Compromise'

The meeting was not without consequence. Resolution 2788 was adopted unanimously by the Security Council urging all members states to settle disputes peacefully through measures outlined in Article 33 under Chapter VI of the UN Charter, such as negotiation, mediation, arbitration or judicial settlement. The language was recycled, drawing heavily from earlier texts - including the UN Charter and the 'Pact for the Future'. Kashmir was omitted in a calculated trade-off to avoid vetoes and secure adoption. While the resolution lacked bite, Pakistan's ability to secure an outcome document was a modest but notable feat in today's fractured multilateral landscape. It was also designed to boost Pakistan's image as a peace advocate while embedding its latent agenda in a globally endorsed framework.

Unsurprisingly, the Foreign Minister of Pakistan had his 'moment' when in his opening remarks he referenced Kashmir in all too familiar terms, as an

¹ "Letter dated 1 July 2025 from the Permanent Representative of Pakistan to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General". United Nations Security Council – S/2025/443, July 2, 2025. <https://docs.un.org/en/S/2025/443>

internationally recognised disputed territory whose final status must be decided in accordance with UN Security Council resolutions and the wishes of the Kashmiri people. He also invoked the Indus Waters Treaty, accusing India of unilaterally disrupting long-standing water-sharing arrangements, offering just enough substance for domestic lobbies to claim a moral victory.

The strategy was thus two-pronged, balancing diplomatic pragmatism with domestic political messaging. While the Minister engaged in grandstanding on Kashmir for audiences back home, Pakistan sought to position itself as a champion of multilateralism, anchoring the debate in under-utilised mechanisms for the peaceful settlement of disputes under Chapter VI of the UN Charter. Many delegations commended Pakistan for convening a timely UNSC debate, especially amid current geopolitical divides.

Were there any surprises in a meeting that otherwise went by the script? Turkey raised Kashmir as an 'obstruction', to the extent of triggering military clashes, but then also favoured bilateral dialogue: "We firmly support a just and lasting resolution through constructive dialogue between the parties". The US Representative restated President Trump's claim on mediating the India-Pakistan ceasefire. There were no further references to Kashmir, or for the matter to India-Pakistan.

India chose to set the record straight, framing its arguments within the broader context of terrorism. It reiterated its stance of zero tolerance for terror. Operation Sindoor was characterised as a precise and non-escalatory response to the Pahalgam terror attack, with a clarifying note that the operation had been called off at Pakistan's request. The invocation of the Indus Waters Treaty was presented as a necessary diplomatic countermeasure to a sustained cross-border onslaught, shifting the narrative from Kashmir to Pakistan's role in fostering terrorism.

The Palestinian issue, now a permanent fixture in UNSC proceedings, saw heightened attention in the July 23 ministerial-level debate, but again, only served to reaffirm familiar positions without altering the status quo.

The third meeting, convened by Pakistan on July 24 as a public open briefing, examined the UN's cooperation with regional and subregional organisations, with a particular focus on the OIC. In line with Chapter VIII of the Charter, the UN has increasingly relied on regional actors to support conflict resolution and peace-building. As expected, the meeting called for enhanced institutional cooperation between the UN and the OIC. Also unsurprising was the familiar reference to Kashmir, as the OIC was commended for championing Palestinian

rights, advocating for the people of Jammu and Kashmir, and supporting peace efforts in Libya, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, the Sahel, and beyond.

The outcome document, a Presidential Statement, was strong on optics but had limited real-world impact, offering just enough for the presidency to present it as a substantive achievement.

Symbolism over substance

Expectations from any UNSC presidency, especially that of an elected non-permanent member, are necessarily modest, given that this is mainly a procedural, symbolic, and coordinating role within a collective decision-making body. Within these constraints, Pakistan used its presidency to remind global and domestic audiences of issues it considers central, notably Kashmir, in a manner that was more symbolic than strategic. The outcomes were entirely along expected lines, reinforcing the reality that while the UNSC presidency offers visibility, it seldom results in policy decisions.

That in itself is a commentary on the severe limitations of the UNSC's current architecture, one where symbolism routinely substitutes for substance. This is a structure that leaves little room for recalibration, no matter who holds the gavel.



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