COMMENTARIES

Pakistan’s Indus Valley Claim: Civilisational Rebranding or Identity Contradiction?

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EXECUTIVE BRIEF & KEY FINDINGS

Pakistan’s renewed invocation of the Indus Valley Civilisation is no longer limited to cultural tourism or archaeology. In the last week, Pakistan’s Information Minister Attaullah Tarar framed the Indus as Pakistan’s “lifeline” and vowed to protect the “inalienable right” of 240 million Pakistanis to the waters of the Indus River System, turning a water dispute into a civilisational and national-security claim. Around the same messaging cycle, clips circulated of Tarar saying that Pakistanis are “proud of Indus Civilization” because it has given them identity, while Pakistan’s Embassy in Brussels officially linked contemporary Pakistani craftsmanship to a “civilizational legacy stretching back to the Indus Valley Civilization” and invoked 5,000-year-old Mohenjodaro as evidence of Pakistan’s ancient urban sophistication. This sudden embrace of the Indus past is striking because Pakistan’s state narrative has historically privileged Islamic exceptionalism and separation from India. This analysis examines why Islamabad is now reaching back to Mohenjodaro and Harappa, what this reveals about Pakistan’s identity anxieties, and how civilisational branding is being used to strengthen its position in the Indus waters dispute with India.

Pakistan’s recent emphasis on the Indus Valley Civilisation should be read less as a genuine civilisational rediscovery and more as a strategic narrative adjustment. Pakistan is not abandoning its Islamic identity or the Two-Nation Theory. Rather, it is trying to place an older territorial and civilisational layer beneath that identity. This allows Pakistan to say

that it is not merely a state born in 1947 out of Muslim separatism, but also the inheritor of a 5,000-year-old civilisation rooted in the Indus basin.

Historically, Pakistan has a legitimate geographical claim to major Indus Valley sites. Mohenjo-daro is in Sindh, Harappa is in Punjab, and Pakistan's own Department of Archaeology describes Mohenjo-daro as a metropolis of the Indus Civilisation. UNESCO also describes Mohenjo-daro as a major third-millennium BCE urban site in the Indus valley. But the problem begins when this becomes an exclusive political claim. The Indus Valley Civilisation was not "Pakistani" or "Indian" in the modern nation-state sense. It spread across present-day Pakistan and north-western India, and scholarly work continues to describe it as a wider South Asian Bronze Age civilisation rather than the civilisational property of one modern state.

The contradiction is visible because Pakistan's military leadership still publicly returns to Islamic separation as the ideological foundation of the state. Reuters reported that Asim Munir underlined "fundamental differences" between Islamic Pakistan and predominantly Hindu India, using religious language during the 2025 India-Pakistan crisis. India Today also reported his remarks invoking the Two-Nation Theory and saying Pakistanis were different from Hindus in religion, customs, traditions, thoughts and ambitions. So the Indus turn is not replacing the Islamic-nationalist narrative. It is being layered on top of it.

Why Pakistan Is Doing This

The first reason is an identity deficit. Pakistan's founding ideology has long relied on Islam, Urdu, and opposition to India as integrative symbols. Tariq Rahman's work on language and politics in Pakistan notes that Islam and Urdu were used as symbols of national integration and Pakistani identity. An IDSA monograph similarly argues that even after 1971, Pakistan continued to define national identity through Islam and anti-India sentiment. This created a narrow national story. It gave Pakistan ideological separation from India, but not deep historical rootedness. Claiming the Indus Valley helps Pakistan extend its national imagination backwards by several millennia.

The second reason is civilisational competition with India. India increasingly projects itself as a civilisational state with continuity from ancient to modern times. Pakistan cannot counter that effectively if its own official story begins only with Muhammad bin Qasim, the Delhi Sultanate, the Mughals, or 1947. By invoking Mohenjo-daro, Harappa, Mehrgarh and Gandhara, Pakistan is trying to create a rival antiquity narrative. Official Pakistani platforms already highlight Pakistan's archaeological legacy from the Indus Valley Civilisation to Gandhara, Buddhist heritage and Islamic architecture.

The third reason is soft power. Pakistan's international image has been dominated by terrorism, military rule, extremism, economic crisis and political instability. Ancient heritage provides a softer vocabulary. It allows Pakistan to speak about urban planning, archaeology, Buddhism, Gandhara, Sufism, heritage tourism and cultural diplomacy. Pakistan's foreign ministry and official tourism platforms now present Mohenjo-daro, Taxila and Gandhara as part of Pakistan's global cultural identity. This is useful for tourism, diplomacy, UNESCO-linked cultural promotion and image repair.

The fourth reason is water politics. The word "Indus" is not only archaeological. It is strategic. Pakistan's state survival is tied to the Indus basin, agriculture, irrigation and the Indus Waters Treaty. Amid renewed India-Pakistan water tensions, Dawn reported that Asim Munir warned India against choking the Indus River and said the river was not India's "family property." By calling Pakistanis "children of the Indus," the state can turn a water-security argument into a civilisational claim. It emotionally binds river, territory, history and national survival.

The fifth reason is domestic cohesion. Pakistan is ethnically fragmented across Punjabis, Sindhis, Baloch, Pashtuns, Saraikis, Kashmiris and others. Islam alone has not erased ethnic nationalism, as seen in the creation of Bangladesh and persistent Baloch, Pashtun and Sindhi grievances. The Indus narrative offers a territorial identity that can

theoretically include Sindh, Punjab and Balochistan without depending only on Islamic ideology. It is an attempt to say that Pakistan is not just an Islamic state, but an indigenous land-based civilisation.

The Core Contradiction

The contradiction is that Pakistan wants the antiquity of the Indus but not the full civilisational continuity of the subcontinent. Pakistani narratives often accept pre-Islamic heritage when it is separated from Hindu influence. Haroon Khalid made this point in Dawn, arguing that Pakistan's appreciation of the Indus Valley Civilisation often comes with an effort to detach it from its Hindu or broader Indic associations. This produces a selective civilisational claim. Mohenjo-daro can be celebrated, Gandhara can be promoted, Buddhist sites can be used for diplomacy, but Hindu and Sikh continuities remain politically uncomfortable.

This is why the move is not purely historical. It is narrative engineering. Pakistan wants to claim antiquity without weakening the Two-Nation Theory. It wants to inherit the Indus Valley without accepting a shared civilisational continuum with India. It wants pre-Islamic depth, but not a civilisational framework that blurs the ideological separation between Hindus and Muslims.

What India Should Understand

India should not dismiss this merely as hypocrisy. It is more strategic than that. Pakistan is trying to solve a long-standing ideological weakness. A state that defines itself only by religious separation remains trapped in a defensive identity. A state that can claim ancient territorial civilisation gains cultural depth, tourism value, diplomatic softness and a stronger narrative in global forums.

However, Pakistan's claim will remain vulnerable as long as it is exclusive, selective and anti-Indic. The Indus Valley Civilisation predates both modern India and modern Pakistan. Its script remains undeciphered, and there is no scholarly basis to reduce it to a modern Pakistani national identity. The more accurate position is that Pakistan is a major custodian of Indus sites, but not the sole civilisational inheritor of the Indus world.

Bottom Line

Pakistan's Indus turn is an attempt to move from a purely ideological state narrative to a civilisational state narrative. It helps Pakistan address identity insecurity, compete with India's civilisational diplomacy, strengthen its water-security messaging, and soften its international image. But it also exposes a deep contradiction. Pakistan cannot permanently claim Indus antiquity while simultaneously insisting that its people are civilisationally separate from the broader Indic world in "every possible aspect." The move is therefore useful for Pakistan's narrative strategy, but intellectually unstable unless Pakistan accepts the Indus as a shared South Asian inheritance rather than an exclusive national possession.

The views expressed are those of the authors and do not represent the views of CNAWS.

Image Source: ChatGPT