

# SPORT

## NEW-LOOK SIDES, SAME OLD RIVALRY



NABID YEASIN

When India and Pakistan meet -- in any sport -- the stakes spill over into something more than just a game. It becomes a clash between neighbours bound by political tension, history, and

(ACC) has ensured that the Asia Cup maximises India-Pakistan encounters. Placed together in Group A alongside UAE and Oman, the two sides are likely to meet multiple times -- potentially thrice if they reach the final. It is another effort to give fans what they crave most: the

For India, the tournament signals the beginning of the post-Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli era. With seven changes from the 2024 T20 World Cup-winning squad, the Asia Cup doubles as a springboard for their 2026 T20 title defence.

Attention centres on the top order.

averaged 55.80 at a strike rate of 219.69 in 2025, while Samson became the first to hit three T20I centuries in a calendar year in 2024 -- yet their highest stand together was just 73. Gill's return forces a selection dilemma, compounded by Yashasvi Jaiswal's omission, which drew a lot of criticism.

India's middle order is stacked with options: Suryakumar, Tilak Varma, Hardik Pandya, Axar Patel, Rinku Singh, Shivam Dube, and Jitesh Sharma. Meaning, balancing batting depth with bowling utility will be key.

Jasprit Bumrah and Arshdeep Singh are certainties in the pace attack, leaving the spin combination -- likely between Kuldeep Yadav and Varun Chakravarty -- to be settled.

Pakistan, meanwhile, are still seeking stability. Since their group stage exit at the 2024 T20 World Cup, they have won only 12 of 26 games, beating Zimbabwe, Bangladesh (at home), and West Indies, but losing to stronger opponents such as Australia, South Africa, New Zealand, and once away to Bangladesh.

Their preparation, however, has been stronger than India's. Pakistan reached the final of a tri-series with UAE and Afghanistan just before the Asia Cup, while India played only five T20Is against England earlier in the year.

Their batting, however, remains fragile. Even though the omission of Babar Azam and Mohammad Rizwan -- criticised for low strike rates and

struggles against spin -- was expected, it left an untested middle order. Captain Salman's 124.53 strike rate this year reflects their conservative starts, while Hussain Talat and Khushdil Shah have underwhelming strike rates and averages.

There are, however, bright spots. Saim Ayub, despite inconsistency, is their top scorer since the 2024 World Cup. Sahibzada Farhan has been prolific in 2025, with four T20I centuries and three POTM awards in 10 games. Hasan Nawaz, meanwhile, has emerged as a key middle-order hitter. In 14 T20Is, he showed adaptability by batting in five positions, with a career strike rate of 175.64 that reflects his clean hitting and ability to clear the ropes.

Pakistan could hope for something from their spin department in UAE conditions. Abrar Ahmed and Sufiyan Muqeem form a mystery-spin duo, supported by all-rounder Mohammad Nawaz, even if his record against India remains uninspiring. The trio have combined for 53 wickets in 26 matches since the last World Cup.

For all their contrasts, both teams share a sense of renewal -- India refining a champion side, Pakistan still seemingly piecing theirs together.

Remarkably, India and Pakistan have never met in an Asia Cup final, despite repeated scheduling manoeuvres designed to create such a showdown. This time, with their revamped squads, could it finally happen?



deep mistrust.

That will be the case again in the Asia Cup 2025, when Suryakumar Yadav's India, the defending champions, take on Salman Ali Agha's Pakistan on September 14 at the Dubai International Stadium.

Once again, the Asian Cricket Council

high-voltage spectacle of the two sides colliding, even if bilateral cricket between the two sides remains suspended since the 2009 Mumbai attacks.

From a cricketer's lens, both squads have one similarity as they arrive with fresh faces.

Vice-captain Shubman Gill returns after a prolific IPL campaign, having earlier partnered with Abhishek Sharma in all five T20Is on the Zimbabwe tour. But in the past year, Abhishek and Sanju Samson opened in 12 straight T20Is. Both excelled individually -- Abhishek

## Varying stakes as captains embark on maiden voyage

ASHFAQ-UL-ALAM

The weight of captaincy in any sport compounds exponentially under the bright lights of a major tournament. On top of that, if the captain has not experienced the pressure of leading in that event before, it should put them at an even bigger disadvantage.

But this logical conclusion doesn't hold water in the Men's Asia Cup, as in nine out of its 16 editions so far, a captain leading for the first time in the competition has lifted the trophy.

Sunil Gavaskar, Dilip Vengsarkar, Mohammad Azharuddin, Marvan Atapattu, Mahela Jayawardene, Misbah-ul-Haq, Angelo Mathews, Rohit Sharma and Dasun Shanaka are captains who have triumphed on their first attempt in the past.

And while there is no way to predict which skipper will triumph in the 17th edition, set to begin in the UAE on September 9, another name is sure to

different.

**Aiming for new heights**  
After 2016 and 2022, Asia Cup is set to be held in the T20 format for the third time.

Bangladesh had competed in both previous instances, and in 2016 had even reached the final. But in both editions, Litton Das, the current captain of the Tigers, was absent from the squad.

The 30-year-old is coming into the tournament with runs in his kitty, having made 145 runs in the three-match T20I series against the Netherlands this month. His team is also enjoying a successful streak with three consecutive T20I series wins against Sri Lanka (2-1), Pakistan (2-1) and the Netherlands (2-0).

captaincy in just his third T20I, is leading a Pakistan side that is trying to adopt a bold new style.

His time at the hot seat has been challenging, with series defeats to New Zealand and Bangladesh away, but there were also glimmers of hope in series wins against Bangladesh at home and West Indies in the Caribbean islands.

However, Salman's career strike rate of just 118.32 is already drawing criticism as it goes against the presumed direction head coach Mike Hesson is trying to take the team.

Another captain whose form has been questionable heading into the tournament is Sri Lanka's Charith Asalanka -- who has failed to get into the double-figure mark in six out of his last 10 innings.

He leads a team with several T20 stars and will aim to uphold their reputation of always turning up in big events by bringing home their seventh



get added to this list, as in this year's Asia Cup, all eight captains are first-timers.

**Different stakes**  
For the first time in the competition's history, eight teams -- Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Hong Kong, Oman and the UAE -- are competing in a single edition.

Captains of the respective sides will come into the event with certain goals -- some personal and others collective.

For skippers of Associate sides -- Yasim Murtaza (Hong Kong), Jatinder Singh (Oman), and Muhammad Waseem (UAE) -- causing an upset or two would constitute a successful campaign and qualifying for Super Four would be historic.

But for the men leading the five full-member teams, the stakes would be

For Litton, the ultimate goal would be to take three-time runners-up Bangladesh one step further and, on a personal note, prove his quality on the global stage.

But first, the right-hander would want to survive the perilous Group B, which, alongside Sri Lanka and Hong Kong, includes the dangerous Afghanistan led by Rashid Khan.

Just last year, the maverick wrist-spinner led the Afghans to the semifinals of the ICC T20 World Cup for the first time.

The familiarity of the conditions in the UAE will further aid Rashid and his teammates, who will dare to dream of the main prize this time.

**Rebuild and redemption**  
Salman Ali Agha, who was handed the

Asia Cup title.

**The weight of the crown**  
India captain Suryakumar Yadav is leading the strongest squad in the tournament, who are the odds-on favourites to retain the title.

Although India's nonchalant buildup to the event -- not playing any T20Is in the lead-up -- indicates that the Asia Cup is more of a preparatory tournament for them ahead of next year's ICC T20 World Cup, it would be foolish to assume there are no stakes involved for Surya.

With Test captain Shubman Gill being touted as a future all-format skipper for India, the pressure will be on him to deliver India's ninth Asia Cup trophy or risk losing his chance to lead the national side in next year's ICC T20 World Cup.

### ASIA CUP FIXTURES

#### GROUP A

India, Oman, Pakistan, UAE

#### GROUP B

Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Hong Kong, Sri Lanka

GROUP STAGE	DATE	MATCH	TIME (BST)	VENUE
	9 September	Afghanistan-Hong Kong	8:30 pm	Abu Dhabi
10 September	India-UAE	8:30 pm	Dubai	
11 September	Bangladesh-Hong Kong	8:30 pm	Abu Dhabi	
12 September	Pakistan-Oman	8:30 pm	Dubai	
13 September	Bangladesh-Sri Lanka	8:30 pm	Abu Dhabi	
14 September	India-Pakistan	8:30 pm	Dubai	
15 September	UAE-Oman	6:00 pm	Abu Dhabi	
15 September	Sri Lanka-Hong Kong	8:30 pm	Dubai	
16 September	Bangladesh-Afghanistan	8:30 pm	Abu Dhabi	
17 September	Pakistan-UAE	8:30 pm	Dubai	
18 September	Afghanistan-Sri Lanka	8:30 pm	Abu Dhabi	
19 September	India-Oman	8:30 pm	Abu Dhabi	
SUPER FOUR	20 September	B1-B2	8:30 pm	Dubai
	21 September	A1-A2	8:30 pm	Dubai
	23 September	A2-B1	8:30 pm	Abu Dhabi
	24 September	A1-B2	8:30 pm	Dubai
	25 September	A2-B2	8:30 pm	Dubai
	26 September	A1-B1	8:30 pm	Dubai

#### FINAL

28 September | Super Four1-Super Four2 | 8:30 pm | Dubai

#### ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW

Even though India are the official hosts of the 17th Asia Cup, the competition will take place in the UAE. Due to geo-political tensions between India and Pakistan, the two teams don't play in each other's countries.

The Asia Cup was originally played in the ODI format, but over the past decade it has alternated between ODIs and T20Is, depending on the format of the upcoming World Cup.

For the first time in its history, the Asia Cup will feature eight teams. Oman will make their maiden appearance at the Asia Cup, while Nepal -- despite their impressive progress in recent years -- will miss out.