

GLOBAL STRATEGIC PULSE



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Acronyms

ACIA	Arctic Climate Impact Assessment
AI	Artificial Intelligence
AJK	Azad Jammu and Kashmir
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AUKUS	Australia, United Kingdom, United States
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
BVR	Beyond Visual Range
CAA	Citizenship Amendment Act
CCS	Cabinet Committee on Security
CPEC	China-Pakistan Economic Corridor
EAM	External Affairs Minister
ECO	Economic Cooperation Organization
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
EU	European Union
EW	Electronic Warfare
GNSS	Global Navigation Satellite System
GTRI	Global Trade Research Initiative
IAF	Indian Air Force
IOR	Indian Ocean Region
ISR	Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance
IWT	Indus Waters Treaty
LAC	Line of Actual Control
LoC	Line of Control
MAGA	Make America Great Again
NASTE	New Arctic Strategic Triangle Environment
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDA	National Democratic Alliance
NSC	National Security Committee
NSP	National Security Policy
NSR	Northern Sea Route
NWP	Northwest Passage
OCCRP	Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project
OSINT	Open-Source Intelligence
PAF	Pakistan Air Force

PMO	Prime Minister's Office
QPQ+	Quid Pro Quo Plus
Quad	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue
RAW	Research and Analysis Wing
RCD	Regional Cooperation for Development
RIMPAC	Rim of the Pacific Exercise
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SLOC	Sea Lines of Communication
SVES	SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme
SWIFT	Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications
UAS	Unmanned Aerial System
UCC	Uniform Civil Code
UN	United Nations
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
US	United States
USD	United States Dollar
USGS	United States Geological Survey

RESEARCH PAPERS

Artificial Intelligence, Autonomy and the Human Factor: Strategic Lessons from the 2025 India-Pakistan Crisis

Amber Afreen Abid¹, Sher Bano²

Abstract

This study critically examines the 2025 India-Pakistan crisis, highlighting the failure of India's Artificial Intelligence (AI)-centric, space-integrated, military strategy and the decisive success of Pakistan's human-led, doctrine-driven response. Despite India's substantial investment in militarized AI, satellite-based Intelligence, Surveillancet and Reconnaissance (ISR) networks and Autonomous Weapon Systems (AWS), its overreliance on algorithmic warfare led to operational paralysis, strategic misjudgment and ultimate defeat. In contrast, Pakistan's victory stemmed from superior command and control, adaptive air and cyber operations and a national culture of resilience and unity. Through effective integration of manned reconnaissance, electronic warfare and moral resolve, Pakistan neutralized India's technological advantage. The conflict underscores enduring truths about warfare: technology cannot replace human judgment, institutional discipline or strategic clarity. As South Asia enters a new era of AI and space militarization, Pakistan's conduct offers a model of responsible deterrence, emphasizing selective modernization, defensive innovation and strategic restraint. This analysis reaffirms that the future of conflict will be shaped not only by machines but also by the intellect, willpower and adaptability of those who wield them.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Strategic Stability, Doctrine, Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance Networks, Pakistan, India, Deterrence

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Introduction

In recent years, India has pursued an aggressive trajectory in integrating Artificial Intelligence (AI) with its satellite-based Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. This transformation was part of a broader doctrinal shift aimed at leveraging emerging technologies to achieve strategic superiority in the South Asian region. New Delhi's vision involved fusing AI-enabled systems with satellite-based sensors and networked platforms to create a seamless architecture for real-time battlefield awareness, autonomous decision-making and precision strike capability.³ Influenced by global trends in algorithmic warfare and inspired by the operational success of AI-enhanced ISR in Western militaries, India framed technological superiority as the decisive factor in future conflicts.⁴

The heavy reliance on autonomous systems, vulnerable communication links and predictive analytics lead to inflexibility and unexpected vulnerabilities. Meanwhile, over-engineering and overconfidence in machine learning-driven command decisions could create a system optimized for control, but not for uncertainty, ambiguity or strategic surprise.⁵

The May 2025 crisis revealed a profound disconnect between India's technological ambition and its strategic effectiveness, thereby exposing the limits of New Delhi's technological determinism. Despite possessing highly sophisticated AI-augmented ISR systems, India's military strategy faltered when confronted with Pakistan's adaptive, resilient and human-centric response. Rather than achieving uncontested superiority, India's AI-centric doctrine proved fragile under operational stress.

In contrast, Pakistan responded not by attempting to match India's technological sophistication but by integrating emerging technologies in a more modest, deliberate and adaptive manner. It approached AI and ISR tools through a constructivist lens, embedding them into a broader framework of doctrine, culture and leadership. Pakistan's doctrine, shaped by decades of asymmetric military experience and a deep culture of strategic caution,

³ Shashank Joshi, "India's AI Gamble: Space, Surveillance, and Strategic Posture," *International Affairs* 99, no. 4 (2023): 897-913.

⁴ Michael C. Horowitz, "Artificial Intelligence, International Competition, and the Balance of Power," *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 3 (2018): 36-57.

⁵ S. Paul Kapur and Vipin Narang, *Technology, Strategy, and Stability in South Asia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024).

emphasized operational resilience, mission command and the intelligent use of human judgment within digital systems.⁶ Rather than pursuing AI for prestige or determinism, Pakistan selectively integrated it to augment, not replace, human-led operations. These included defensive deception, rapid force dispersion, electronic warfare techniques designed to disorient AI-driven targeting algorithms, and ISR fusion systems. Pakistan's strategic culture, rooted in defensive realism and crisis management under nuclear deterrence, thus provided a more flexible and resilient framework than India's AI-centric operational strategy.⁷

This research challenges the prevailing narrative of technological determinism in modern warfare, the notion that superior technology alone guarantees battlefield success. While emerging technologies like AI and ISR satellites offer transformative potential, their efficacy depends fundamentally on how they are embedded within national doctrines, military institutions and leadership cultures.⁸

The May 2025 conflict underscores that it is not the technology itself, but its integration with strategy, adaptability and human resources that shape outcomes. Pakistan's success illustrates that states with limited technological means can still prevail through doctrinal innovation, robust leadership and strategic coherence.

Thus, the May 2025 crisis offers a powerful case study of how technological determinism fails, while constructivist integration succeeds in shaping war outcomes. Moreover, the case holds broader implications for the future of warfare in the Global South. As more militaries adopt AI and ISR systems, the experience of South Asia in May 2025 illustrates the risks of overreliance on untested experimental technologies or systems and the enduring importance of strategic balance. It invites policymakers and military strategists to reconsider the assumption that cutting-edge technology will automatically translate into dominance, especially when adversaries possess the will and capacity to adapt.

⁶ International Institute for Strategic Studies. *Nuclear Deterrence and Stability in South Asia: Perceptions and Realities*. IISS Primer (London: IISS, 2021).

⁷ Ashley J. Tellis, *India's Emerging Nuclear Posture: Between Recessed Deterrent and Ready Arsenal* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2001).

⁸ Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

India's Militarized AI-Space Strategy: A Flawed Approach

Significant investments in space militarization have marked India's pursuit of a technologically advanced, AI-enabled military strategy. India's AI-space doctrine epitomizes technological determinism: the belief that mastery of advanced systems would automatically yield superiority. Platforms such as the Cartosat and Radar Imaging Satellite (RISAT) series of satellites, designed for high-resolution optical and radar imaging, respectively, form the core of India's ISR constellation. The deployment of the Electromagnetic Intelligence-gathering Satellite (EMISAT) further augments India's capabilities for monitoring electromagnetic signatures across hostile territories.⁹ Complementing these systems, India experimented with autonomous drone swarms, battlefield robotics and AI-driven decision-support tools to create what appeared to be a cutting-edge military ecosystem geared toward rapid detection, targeting and engagement.¹⁰

However, this technologically ambitious approach was deeply flawed in its overreliance on automation, centralized ISR architecture and predictive algorithms. Rather than enhancing strategic agility, India's AI-space integration inadvertently created critical operational vulnerabilities, particularly when confronted by Pakistan's decentralized, adaptive and deception-based military tactics during the May 2025 crisis.

Rigid AI Targeting

One of the main weaknesses of India's approach was the inflexibility of its AI-based targeting systems. Algorithms trained on historical patterns and predefined behavior models failed to adapt when Pakistani forces employed irregular and deceptive maneuvers. For instance, Pakistan successfully exploited these rigid targeting parameters by using decoys, electronic spoofing and manipulating thermal and radar signatures. These techniques confused AI models, which were unable to distinguish between real and false targets due to induced ambiguity.¹¹ The inability of machine learning systems to grasp

⁹ Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "India's Military Space Ambitions: Challenges and Opportunities," ORF Occasional Paper 302, 2021.

¹⁰ Ritu Sharma, "Emerging Technologies and the Future of Indian Warfare," *Journal of Defence Studies* 16, no. 2 (2022): 45-68.

¹¹ Petr Topychkanov, "AI and Pakistan's Nuclear Command-and-Control System." In *The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Strategic Stability and Nuclear Risk in South Asia*, edited by Petr Topychkanov, SIPRI, 2020. 47-51.

contextual nuance, a strength still retained by human operators, proved costly during dynamic combat situations.¹²

Overreliance on ISR Feeds

India's ISR systems, though sophisticated, operated within a highly centralized and latency-prone architecture. Decision-making processes were often bottlenecked by the need to validate satellite data and generate machine-analyzed threat assessments.¹³ In rapidly evolving tactical environments, such as urban or mountainous engagements, this dependence on ISR created delays that prevented Indian forces from responding in real-time during the May 2025 crisis. By contrast, Pakistan relied more on tactical autonomy at the unit level, enabled by commanders who were trained to act with limited digital oversight. This approach proved more effective in fluid, time-sensitive scenarios.

Misguided Strategic Assumptions

Underlying these vulnerabilities were misguided strategic assumptions within Indian leadership circles. India's military planners increasingly place trust in algorithmically generated assessments over traditional battlefield intuition and human judgment. In several instances, AI-generated threat maps and operational suggestions are followed with minimal human skepticism, leading to flawed deployments and misaligned priorities.¹⁴ This faith in technological objectivity ignored both the inherent biases in training data and the contextual blind spots of AI, particularly in unconventional warfare environments. By contrast, Pakistan's strategy maintains a balance between machine input and human oversight, recognizing that war is as much a psychological and social contest as a technological one.¹⁵

The Absence of Human-Machine Synergy

While India's technological capabilities appear formidable on paper, they lack the human mastery and doctrinal adaptability required for

¹² Michael C. Horowitz, "Artificial Intelligence, International Competition, and the Balance of Power," *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 3 (2018): 36-57.

¹³ S. Paul Kapur and Vipin Narang, *Technology, Strategy, and Stability in South Asia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024).

¹⁴ Shashank Joshi, "India's AI Gamble: Space, Surveillance, and Strategic Posture," *International Affairs* 99, no. 4 (2023): 897-913.

¹⁵ Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

high-pressure, unpredictable conflict environments. The Indian military's approach to AI is largely additive, introducing automation into existing systems without corresponding changes in doctrine, training or command philosophy.¹⁶ This creates a gap between capability and competence. Technologies like drone swarms and satellite surveillance are not inherently flawed, but their deployment in rigid, top-down command structures without real-time adaptability renders them strategically ineffective.

Technological determinism blinded India to the social dimension of war. It assumed machines would reduce uncertainty, ignoring that adversaries actively exploit and manipulate rigid systems. In contrast, Pakistan's emphasis on human-machine collaboration, flexible decision-making and the decentralization of command allowed it to respond creatively to India's technological advancement. The 2025 conflict thus underscored that technological overmatch does not equate to strategic superiority, particularly when the adversary effectively weaponizes flexibility, deception and doctrinal innovation.

Indian Aggression: A Technological Gamble

The 2025 India-Pakistan crisis marked a watershed moment in the strategic landscape of South Asia, testing the real-world effectiveness of AI-enabled warfare in a contested environment. On the night of 6–7 May 2025, India initiated Operation Sindoor, a high-risk military campaign grounded in algorithmic warfare and network-centric doctrines. The operation aimed to deliver a quick, decisive blow to Pakistani command and control infrastructure, using a constellation of AI-guided platforms operating across multiple domains.

The campaign began with Rafale-led multirole fighters launching precision-guided cruise missiles, supported by loitering munitions and autonomous drone swarms, all targeting pre-designated nodes identified through AI-generated ISR analysis. Indian strategists, drawing confidence from real-time satellite feeds and machine learning-based targeting algorithms, sought to compress the decision-action cycle and overwhelm Pakistani defenses before a coherent counter-response could be mounted.¹⁷ Yet, despite

¹⁶ Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "India's Military Space Ambitions: Challenges and Opportunities," ORF Occasional Paper 302, 2021.

¹⁷ S. Paul Kapur and Vipin Narang, *Technology, Strategy, and Stability in South Asia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024).

the apparent sophistication of its operational model, India's technological gamble quickly unraveled.

Pakistan's Counter-Response: Adaptation, Deception and Doctrinal Excellence

Pakistan's approach illustrates social constructivism: technology acquires meaning only when embedded in doctrine, leadership and culture. Rather than pursuing AI for prestige or parity, Pakistan deliberately integrated modest technological tools within a resilient doctrinal framework.

Pakistan responded with a layered and adaptive defense strategy that neutralized the advantages of India's AI-centric offensive. Rather than attempting a symmetrical technological response, Pakistan weaponized flexibility, electronic disruption and doctrinal preparedness to confound India's high-tech systems.

Electronic Warfare and Drone Disruption

One of Pakistan's most effective countermeasures was the deployment of advanced Electronic Warfare (EW) units, which targeted the communication links and navigational systems of India's drone swarms and loitering munitions.¹⁸ These units deployed jamming, spoofing and frequency-hopping disruption to confuse autonomous platforms that relied on precise Global Navigation Satellite System (GNSS) signals and real-time data transfer for coordination.¹⁹ As a result, many Indian drones deviated from flight paths, collided mid-air or failed to locate viable targets.

Decoy Deployment and AI Confusion

In addition, Pakistan executed a wide-scale decoy deployment campaign, simulating high-value military installations using radar reflectors and electromagnetic signatures. These measures exploited the pattern-recognition limitations of India's AI targeting systems, which struck several decoy positions under the false assumption of their authenticity.²⁰ As

¹⁸ Vikram Mittal, "Electronic Warfare Is Key To Indian And Pakistani Military Strategies." *Forbes*, May 15, 2025.

¹⁹ Vikram Mittal, 2025.

²⁰ "South Asia's New Arms Race: How India-Pakistan Drone Clashes Are Escalating Military Competition," *Daily Management Review*, accessed August 19, 2025, https://www.dailymanagementreview.com/South-Asia-s-New-Arms-Race-How-India-Pakistan-Drone-Clashes-Are-Escalating-Military-Competition_a11738.html.

Horowitz has noted, algorithmic warfare is highly vulnerable to adversarial deception, particularly when systems are trained on datasets lacking the diversity to distinguish between real and engineered cues.²¹

Adaptive Air Defenses and Strategic Discipline

Pakistan's air defense, particularly units operating the LY-80 (HQ-16) platforms, adopted a strategy of selective engagement.²² Rather than reacting uniformly to all incursions, commanders withheld fire against decoys or low-value assets, preserving missile stocks for credible threats. This judicious use of firepower, combined with a decentralized command model, ensured sustained defensive capacity throughout the crisis.²³ Meanwhile, Pakistan's strategic reserve forces remained dispersed, avoiding detection and maintaining readiness for escalation, which India's algorithms failed to anticipate due to their reliance on conventional massing patterns.

India's faith in machine-led warfare proved deeply misplaced when confronted by a well-prepared adversary employing a blend of human leadership, deception and flexible doctrine. The Indian campaign's dependence on pre-scripted targeting logic and centralized ISR denied it the ability to adapt mid-operation, especially when its data inputs were corrupted or misleading. In contrast, Pakistan's decision-making processes empowered field commanders, respected the ambiguity of the battlefield and adapted to the fluid nature of high-stakes conflict under nuclear overhang.²⁴

The triumph of Pakistan's defense in this crisis reveals a fundamental truth in contemporary warfare: that strategic coherence and adaptability often matter more than technological advantage. While India possessed the more advanced hardware and informational capabilities, Pakistan leveraged cognitive and doctrinal superiority to frustrate and ultimately reverse the offensive.

²¹ M. C. Horowitz, "The Promise and Peril of Military Applications of AI," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 2018.

²² "HQ-16A LY-80 SAM," *Army Recognition*, May 9, 2025, <https://armyrecognition.com/military-products/army/air-defense-systems/air-defense-vehicles/hq-16a-china-uk>.

²³ "The First Drone War Opens a New Chapter in India-Pakistan Conflict," *BBC News*, accessed August 19, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cwy6w6507wqo>.

²⁴ Rajesh M. Basrur, *Minimum Deterrence and India's Nuclear Security* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

Pakistan's Strategic and Operational Excellence

During the 2025 crisis, Pakistan's armed forces showcased a model of multi-domain warfare rooted in doctrinal discipline, human leadership and adaptive innovation. Faced with India's AI-heavy offensive under Operation Sindoor, Pakistan did not attempt to match technology for technology. Instead, it relied on a comprehensive strategy that emphasized command flexibility, real-time responsiveness, precision targeting and cyber disruption.

Superior Command and Control

Central to Pakistan's success was its decentralized and flexible command and control structure, which allowed rapid response to India's unfolding strikes. Leveraging a network of mobile command posts and secure communication channels, Pakistan maintained operational continuity even under electronic duress. Unit-level commanders were granted autonomy to act within the commander's intent, facilitating faster tactical adjustments than India's algorithmically delayed decision loops could accommodate.²⁵ Pakistan's model was consistent with historical military effectiveness literature, which emphasizes initiative-based leadership and bottom-up responsiveness in dynamic conflict environments.²⁶

Precision Counterstrikes

Pakistan Air Force (PAF) played a decisive role by executing precision counterstrikes against key Indian forward-deployed assets. Unlike India's AI-targeted systems, PAF squadrons relied on manned reconnaissance, Human Intelligence (HUMINT) and selective electronic intercepts, which allowed them to engage verified, high-value targets such as supply depots, radar installations and mobile missile units.²⁷ Pakistan's strike coordination center integrated live intelligence with human analysis, ensuring that its air strikes were both accurate and strategically calibrated. The resulting impact neutralized significant portions of India's offensive momentum while preserving Pakistan's own operational depth.

²⁵ "KJ 500 Network Warfare Arrives: Pakistan's Command and Control Leap, Threatens India's Skies." *Defence Security Asia*, June 2025.

²⁶ Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

²⁷ Ahmed Khaled. "How the Pakistan Air Force Outmanoeuvred the Indian Air Force." *BD Military*, June 2025.

Cyber Superiority

Pakistan also demonstrated cyber superiority by deploying offensive cyber capabilities that disrupted India's communications and ISR coordination networks.²⁸ According to leaked after-action reports, Indian command units experienced data delays, false targeting inputs and widespread network instability, believed to be the result of Pakistani malware attacks on Indian satellite relays and tactical cloud systems.²⁹ This cyber campaign blinded India's real-time awareness, preventing effective follow-up strikes and delaying reinforcement movements. In modern warfare, where ISR is the linchpin of operational tempo, cyber dominance functioned as a strategic equalizer, compensating for India's advantage in hardware.³⁰

Moral and National Resolve

Perhaps the most underappreciated element of Pakistan's success was the moral cohesion and national resolve of its military and citizenry. Faced with a technologically advanced offensive, Pakistani forces responded with high morale, fueled by a clear national narrative of defense and sovereignty. Civil-military coordination ensured logistical support, national media reinforced public confidence and no signs of internal dissent were reported in the ranks.³¹ This human factor proved decisive, as India's technologically dependent formations suffered from lower cohesion under stress, especially when automated systems began to fail.

By the end of the conflict, Pakistani forces had: (i) targeted advanced Indian surveillance equipment and drone systems; (ii) established air superiority; and (iii) disrupted India's digital battlespace in cyber and information domains.

Indian Strategic Collapse

In stark contrast to Pakistan's cohesive and adaptive campaign, India's AI-reliant military strategy collapsed under battlefield conditions. While India

²⁸ "Pakistani Cyber Offensive Hits Indian Systems, BJP Website," *The Express Tribune*, May 10, 2025, accessed August 19, 2025.

²⁹ "Operation Sindoor: Govt Digital Infrastructure Faced 75% of Cyber Attacks," *The Times of India*, May 14, 2025.

³⁰ Michael C. Horowitz, "Artificial Intelligence, International Competition, and the Balance of Power," *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 3 (2018): 36-57.

³¹ "Pakistan rallies around the military. But political unity is elusive," *The Washington Post*, 16 May 2025.

entered the conflict with superior hardware including Rafale jets, S-400 missile systems, loitering munitions and AI-integrated ISR platforms, it failed to integrate these assets within an effective and adaptive doctrine. The result was a technologically advanced yet strategically brittle response.

Ineffective Air and Missile Defense

India's much-touted S-400 Triumf air defense system and the indigenous Akashteer battlefield air defense network was ineffective against Pakistan's low-altitude, mobile and time-sensitive strikes. The S-400 system, optimized for high-value aerial threats, was unable to respond effectively to Pakistan's precision missile attacks and manned aircraft flying at low altitude.³² Meanwhile, Akashteer suffered coordination issues, worsened by ISR confusion and network degradation caused by Pakistani cyberattacks.

AI Decision Loops and Tactical Paralysis

India's machine-dependent decision architecture proved to be a liability in fast-paced combat. AI systems, trained on peacetime data and structured war games, struggled to adapt to the asymmetric tactics employed by Pakistan. Automated response algorithms created delays in engagement decisions, often waiting for confirmation loops that failed under cyber interference. These delays in action allowed Pakistani forces to seize the initiative and exploit Indian hesitation.³³

Collapse of Morale

As operational losses mounted and communications faltered, Indian morale eroded rapidly. Several forward units, unable to communicate with higher headquarters or confirm orders, withdrew prematurely or surrendered equipment intact.³⁴ The Indian public, initially fed narratives of a quick victory through superior technology, grew increasingly disillusioned as reports of battlefield failures and strategic confusion emerged. Analysts have long warned of the dangers of technocratic hubris in warfighting, where overconfidence in

³² Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "India's Missile Shield and the Challenges of Integrated Air Defence," *ORF Issue Brief* no. 581, 2023.

³³ Shashank Joshi, "India's AI Gamble: Space, Surveillance, and Strategic Posture," *International Affairs* 99, no. 4 (2023): 897-913. S. Paul Kapur and Vipin Narang,

³⁴ *Technology, Strategy, and Stability in South Asia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024).

tools can obscure the need for robust leadership and human adaptability.³⁵

Here, technology served strategy, not the other way round. By embedding emerging tools within its doctrinal culture of defensive realism, Pakistan demonstrated the constructivist logic that war is socially and institutionally constructed, not technologically predetermined.

Strategic Lessons: Man over Machine

The 2025 India-Pakistan conflict stands as a pivotal moment in the evolution of modern warfare, not merely due to the technologies deployed but because of the profound strategic truths it reaffirmed. Above all, the crisis illustrated that warfare remains an inherently human endeavor, where leadership, discipline and moral cohesion ultimately determine outcomes, not machines alone. India's defeat demonstrates that AI and ISR superiority cannot guarantee success. Deterministic thinking creates fragility when adversaries exploit machine rigidity and data vulnerabilities.

Technology as a Tool, not a Substitute

As advanced as India's AI-enabled systems appeared, they proved vulnerable when pitted against an adversary that understood the limits of technology and emphasized adaptability. India's defeat illustrates that AI and ISR superiority cannot guarantee success. Deterministic thinking creates fragility when adversaries exploit machine rigidity and data vulnerabilities. Pakistan's military demonstrated that technology must serve strategy, not replace it. This principle echoes classic strategic theory from Clausewitz to Biddle, who argue that the essence of war lies not in material superiority, but in the integration of technology with training, cohesion and sound judgment.³⁶

India's overreliance on automation produced an illusion of control. The assumption that AI could reduce the fog of war, or make real-time decisions faster and better than humans, collapsed when unstructured, adversarial behavior overwhelmed machine learning algorithms trained on peacetime patterns.³⁷ In contrast, Pakistan's forces relied on seasoned military leadership,

³⁵ Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

³⁶ Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

³⁷ Michael C. Horowitz, "Artificial Intelligence, International Competition, and the Balance of Power," *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 3 (2018): 36–57.

honed through experience in counterinsurgency and conventional operations, to read battlefield cues and react effectively under pressure.

The Limits of Artificial Intelligence in War

The 2025 war also highlighted the significant limitations of AI in complex, unpredictable conflict environments. AI systems, particularly those trained on structured datasets, struggled to process deceptive patterns, unexpected maneuvers and information denial strategies employed by Pakistan. While algorithms excel at recognizing predictable patterns, they falter in ambiguity-rich, adversarial decision environments, which remain the hallmark of high-intensity warfare.³⁸

Pakistan capitalized on these vulnerabilities by deploying non-standard tactics, employing decoys, electronic jamming and deception, which AI could not readily interpret. Indian autonomous systems, unable to verify data in real-time or question their programming, struck false targets or hesitated in critical moments.³⁹ A form of algorithmic paralysis that compounded India's strategic confusion.

In contrast, Pakistan's human-led decision-making model enabled flexibility and accountability at every level. Unit commanders adapted to battlefield contingencies, reevaluated plans in real-time and acted with clarity of intent, elements that AI currently cannot replicate, especially in complex, high-stakes scenarios. Pakistan's victory stemmed from embedding technology into doctrine, training and leadership. Technology was an enabler, not a determinant of success.

Victory through Vigilance, Discipline and Moral Unity

Pakistan's strategic victory in 2025 also stemmed from qualities machines cannot emulate: vigilance, discipline, moral conviction and national unity. The military's cohesive doctrinal training, strong command culture and enduring civil-military synergy allowed it to sustain operations, absorb shocks and respond decisively. Pakistan framed its defensive campaign around strategic patience and calibrated retaliation, avoiding unnecessary escalation

³⁸ M. L. Cummings, "The Role of Humans in Autonomous Warfare," *Military Review* 101, no. 2 (2021): 54–63.

³⁹ S. Paul Kapur and Vipin Narang, *Technology, Strategy, and Stability in South Asia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024).

while preserving military initiative.⁴⁰

Furthermore, national resolve and public morale played a critical role. As the crisis unfolded, Pakistan's narrative of sovereignty, defense and national dignity galvanized public support. Civilian and military leadership remained aligned, reinforcing institutional confidence and ensuring logistical resilience. By contrast, India, despite apparently superior systems, suffered from a breakdown in morale, institutional overreach by technocratic elements and a public disillusioned by unmet expectations.⁴¹

Guardian of Strategic Stability

Ultimately, Pakistan's success reaffirmed its role as the guardian of strategic stability in South Asia. By defeating a technologically superior adversary through smart warfare, Pakistan demonstrated not only military capability but also strategic maturity. Its ability to integrate traditional doctrine with selective technological tools, while maintaining restraint under nuclear overhang, preserved regional deterrence equilibrium and deterred further escalation.

This lesson is not new but urgently relevant in the AI age: machines can assist war, but cannot wage it alone. Victory still belongs to the side with superior leadership, doctrinal clarity and the human will to adapt.

Conclusion

India's aggressive pursuit of AI and space-based militarization, encapsulated in its 2025 military doctrine, culminated not in dominance but in defeat. Despite possessing a formidable array of ISR satellites, AI-guided weapons and automated defense systems, India failed to appreciate a central tenet of strategic theory: technology is a force multiplier, not a force determinant.⁴² The 2025 conflict highlighted the vulnerabilities inherent in over-automation, including algorithmic rigidity, decision latency and the erosion of human accountability in warfare.

⁴⁰ Christopher Albin-Lackey, "Pakistan's Strategic Masterstroke," *Financial Times*, May 2025.

⁴¹ Ritu Sharma, "Emerging Technologies and the Future of Indian Warfare," *Journal of Defence Studies* 16, no. 2 (2022): 45-68.

⁴² Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

In stark contrast, Pakistan's triumph was rooted in resilience, doctrinal clarity and human excellence. Its armed forces demonstrated that disciplined leadership, adaptive tactics and moral conviction could outperform algorithmic warfare. Pakistan's operational doctrine, grounded in real-world experience and strategic restraint, enabled it to absorb the initial shock of India's high-tech offensive and mount a calibrated, multi-domain response, achieving decisive results without crossing red lines or triggering uncontrollable escalation.⁴³

More broadly, Pakistan's success in 2025 affirms a foundational lesson for 21st-century military strategy: victory in war still depends on the cognitive and moral strengths of human actors, not the sophistication of digital systems. As new technologies proliferate from quantum ISR platforms to autonomous weapons, states must resist the temptation to delegate critical decisions to machines. Instead, the integration of technology must be guided by sound doctrine, robust institutions and ethical command structures.⁴⁴

As South Asia enters a new era of militarized AI and dual-use space technologies, Pakistan's conduct in the 2025 crisis offers a model of strategic prudence under pressure. Far from engaging in technological arms-racing, Pakistan has emphasized defensive innovation, seeking to modernize its forces without sacrificing command responsibility or crisis stability. This approach reflects its consistent view that strategic deterrence and conventional readiness are mutually reinforcing, not mutually exclusive.⁴⁵

Pakistan's future posture will likely be defined by:

- (i) Selective modernization of AI, cyber and space capabilities within a doctrinal framework;
- (ii) Institutional investment in training and civil-military cohesion;
- (iii) Continued emphasis on strategic restraint under the nuclear threshold; and
- (iv) Active engagement in regional confidence-building measures and diplomatic initiatives to avoid unintentional escalation.

In doing so, Pakistan reaffirms its role as the responsible custodian of

⁴³ "Can Pakistan's Strategic Doctrine Withstand Indian Sabre Rattling?," *Pakistan Defence*, accessed June 2025.

⁴⁴ Michael C. Horowitz, Greg Allen, and Elsa Kania, *Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Warfare* (Washington, DC: CNAS, 2020).

⁴⁵ S. Paul Kapur and Vipin Narang, *Technology, Strategy, and Stability in South Asia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024).

South Asian strategic stability, a nuclear power committed not only to defending its sovereignty but also to preserving peace through balance, not brinkmanship.

The 2025 conflict offers enduring lessons for other regional and global powers:

- (i) Technological superiority does not equal strategic supremacy;
- (ii) Human leadership remains irreplaceable in war and peace;
- (iii) National unity, institutional discipline and doctrinal clarity are the true pillars of deterrence in the AI age.

The 2025 India-Pakistan conflict demonstrated the clash of two theoretical paradigms. India's strategy embodied technological determinism, a misplaced belief that AI and space superiority would dictate outcomes. Pakistan's strategy embodied social constructivism, where technology's role was defined by doctrine, leadership and national culture. In the shadow of this conflict, Pakistan emerges not only as the tactical victor but as the strategic adult in the room, capable of integrating innovation with restraint, strength with stability and power with responsibility.

Strategic Importance of the Wakhan Corridor: Navigating Interests of Afghanistan, Pakistan and China

Dr Zahid¹

Abstract

The Wakhan Corridor is a narrow strip of land in northeastern Afghanistan. Historically, it served as a “buffer zone” established by the “Tsarist Russia” and the “British Empire” during the “Great Game” competition to avoid direct conflict between the two superpowers. The ancient “Silk Route” passed through this Corridor until the mid-15th century, as it was the primary trade route between the East and the West. As Western powers discovered new sea and land routes, the Corridor lost its significance. However, in recent years, with the rise of new economic projects such as CPEC, BRI, oil and gas pipelines and power transmission lines, the Corridor has regained the interest of regional powers, which are seeking its revival. This research is based on a qualitative approach, relying on secondary sources. Data was collected from research papers, newspapers and internet sources. This paper explores the interests of Afghanistan, Pakistan and China in the Wakhan Corridor and examines its potential as a connectivity link between Central and South Asia. The study emphasizes that investment in this Corridor will foster economic prosperity in the region. A key finding of the study is that this project is likely to strengthen regional connectivity and open new avenues for economic cooperation with significant implications for the broader geopolitical landscape.

Keywords: Wakhan Corridor, Silk Route, BRI, CPEC, Pakistan, China, Afghanistan, Connectivity

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Introduction

A particular geographic place or space does not choose to become a strategic location. Instead, its position in a “hostile geopolitical environment” or its location between various ambitious and aggressive geopolitical entities increases its geopolitical and geostrategic importance.² Considering this, Wakhan enjoys a significant strategic location in the region. Historically, this narrow strip of land has served as an important transit route between China, Tibet, Persia, Central Asia and South Asia. The ancient Silk Route passed through this narrow strip and remained the primary passage for travelers and merchandise for a long time. This famous route was not only crucial for trade and commerce but also played a great role in the exchange of ideas and cultures between the eastern and western regions of the world.³

Furthermore, in ancient times, this route was used by Chinese pilgrims to visit Buddhist centers in Gandhara and Taxila. It was a popular pilgrimage route during the 5th and 6th centuries. In the seventh century, the Chinese monk Huan Tsang traveled through this route in search of Buddhist teaching. Marco Polo and Portuguese travelers used this route to reach China.⁴ Therefore, this Corridor remained an essential trade path to connect China, India, Balkh and Bukhara until the decline of the Mughal Empire in India. However, with the development of new sea routes to China and India in the late 15th century, the ancient Silk Route lost its significance as a major trade route from Rome to China.⁵

The modern geopolitical importance of Wakhan emerged in the 19th century during the “Great Game” era.⁶ During this time, Wakhan emerged as a “buffer zone” between the Tsarist Russia and the British Empire to prevent Russian advance toward British India and to avoid direct conflict between the

² D. K. Shahi, “Geopolitical and Geostrategic Significance of Wakhan Corridor.” *International Journal of Research in Social Science* 12, no. 7 (2022), 115 - 123. https://www.ijmr.us/2022ijrss_july.php

³ A. Ahmad, “The Wakhan Corridor.” *The Nation*. June 16, 2023. <https://www.nation.com.pk/16-Jun-2023/the-wakhan-Corridor>
D. K. Shahi, 2022.

⁵ Mirwais Parsa, “The Bridge to Connect Asia.” *Fair Observer*. November 20, 2017. https://www.fairobserver.com/region/central_south_asia/wakhan-Corridor-china-pakistan-afghanistan-tajikistan-world-trade-news-81661/#

⁶ Global-Gazette, “The History of the Wakhan Corridor: A Geopolitical Flashpoint,” *Global Gazette*, January 4, 2025. <https://www.global-gazette.com/post/the-history-of-the-wakhan-Corridor-a-geopolitical-flashpoint/>.

two powers.⁷ Hence, the Corridor was formed in 1895 after negotiations between British military explorer Francis Younghusband and his Russian counterpart, Colonel Yanov.⁸ Both officers delineated the southern and northern borders of the Corridor and announced that neither China nor Afghanistan would interfere in the area. However, later Russia conceded this area as part of Afghanistan under a pre-established agreement.⁹

During the Cold War, this area remained strategically significant due to its geographical proximity to the Soviet Union and Pakistan, especially after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.¹⁰ Following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) recognized its significance as an alternative supply route. In 2009, the United States approached Chinese authorities with a proposal to open Wakhjir Pass as an alternative supply route for NATO forces operating in Afghanistan. However, China declined the proposal due to its strategic interests and security concerns.¹¹

Today, Wakhan's proximity to China, Pakistan and Central Asia makes it a crucial focal point for regional powers, particularly in the context of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).¹² The BRI project aims to connect the Wakhan Corridor to the USD 62 billion mega-infrastructure project, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), due to its proximity to the Karakoram Highway. The Karakoram Highway was developed by the Chinese government to facilitate regional connectivity through pipelines, power transmission lines,

⁷ T. Maqbool, "Strategic importance of the Wakhan border for Pakistan: A gateway to Central Asia and China," *The Friday Times*, January 8, 2025.
<https://thefridaytimes.com/08-Jan-2025/strategic-importance-of-the-wakhan-border-for-pakistan-a-gateway-to-central-asia-and-china/>.

⁸ Anees Hafiz, "Should Pakistan Claim The Wakhan Corridor?" *Defence Journal*, July 8, 2024,
<https://defencejournal.com/2024/05/10/should-pakistan-claim-the-wakhan-Corridor-the-historical-factual-and-terrain-analysis/>.

⁹ M. A. Hamid Gul, "Strategic Importance of Wakhan Corridor for Pakistan," *Pakistan Observer*, January 18, 2024,
<https://pakobserver.net/strategic-importance-of-wakhan-Corridor-for-pakistan/>.

¹⁰ D. K. Shahi, 2022.

¹¹ I. Amir, "Geostrategic Importance of the Wakhan Corridor: Gateway to Regional Connectivity," *Pakistan Horizon* 76, no. 4 (2023), 85 - 101,
<https://www.pakistan-horizon.piia.org.pk/index.php/pakistan-horizon/article/view/323>.

¹² Global-Gazette, 2025.

and railway networks.¹³ The objective of this paper is to highlight the strategic importance of the Wakhan Corridor and the interest of Afghanistan, Pakistan and China in the development of this Corridor, particularly in terms of its geopolitical and geo-economic importance. This research paper is based on a qualitative method. The data has been collected from secondary sources, including articles, newspapers and credible internet sources.

Geographical Position

The Wakhan Corridor is typically characterized by high altitudes, rugged terrain, towering mountain ranges, expansive glaciers and harsh climatic environment. The Corridor is a long narrow strip of land in Badakhshan province, northeast of Afghanistan that has served as an important connecting point between South Asia, Central Asia and China. For centuries, it has been a vital passage for traders and pilgrims. The Corridor extends from the Ishkashim district in the north to the south by creating boundaries between several geopolitical entities. The Wakhan Corridor extends approximately 350 km in length, with its width ranging from 16 to 64 km.¹⁴ It covers an area of 10,300 km². On the southern side, it shares a 300 km border with Pakistan, while in the north and northeast, 260 km with Tajikistan and in the west, 74 km with China.¹⁵ Additionally, the Corridor encompasses several major mountain ranges, including the Pamir, Hindu Kush and Karakoram. These three ranges converge at what is commonly known as the Pamir Knot, while the open valley between these three ranges is called “Roof of the World” or (Bam-e-Dunya). The mountain passes in this region range from 5,000m to 6,500m above sea level.¹⁶ These rugged mountain ranges not only define the area’s topography but also reinforce the Corridor’s strategic importance. It serves as a key connecting point between Afghanistan and China’s Xinjiang province, while

¹³ M. A. Sadat, M. Hassan, and M. Zeb, “China – Afghanistan Trade & Strategic Importance of Wakhan Corridor: An appraisal,” *Asian journal of International Peace and Security* (AJIPS) 7, no. 2 (2023), 96 - 104, <https://www.ajips.fairlips.org/index.php/ajips/article/view/2023-vol-07-issue-2-china-afghanistan-trade/>.

¹⁴ The Spine Times, “Wakhan Corridor: A Historical and Geographical Overview,” *The Spine Times*, January 9, 2025, <https://spinetimes.pk/wakhan-Corridor-a-historical-and-geographical-overview/>.

¹⁵ D. K. Shahi, 2022.

¹⁶ M. S. Ahmad, M. A., and M. S. Malik, “Buffered Border Corridor: The Geo-Political and Strategic Significance of the Wakhan Corridor,” *Buffered Border Corridor: The Geo-Political and Strategic Significance of the Wakhan Corridor* 6, no. 3 (2021), 27 - 34, [https://doi.org/10.31703/gpr.2021\(VI-III\).03/](https://doi.org/10.31703/gpr.2021(VI-III).03/).

separating Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region from northern Pakistan.¹⁷

The Corridor is divided into two regions: The Upper Wakhan and the Lower Wakhan. The upper Wakhan lies to the eastern side of the Pamir River, while the lower Wakhan is situated on the western side, covering the Panj River valley and Wakhan Valley.¹⁸ Geographically, this region is divided into three sections: the main Wakhan strip between Pamir Knot, Qala Panj and Ishkesham; the great Pamir, also known as Pamir-e-Kalan, consists of the highest mountains in the knot. This mountain divides the Tajik Pamir across the deep valley of the Pamir River. The last section is little Pamir, known as "Pamir Khord", located in the southern and eastern block of mountains, determined by the upper valley and upper ridge of the Wakhan Valley.¹⁹ To be precise, the Wakhan Corridor is spread between 71°50' to 74°50' degrees east longitude, 36°35' to 37°30' degrees north latitude. Access to this region is restricted by terrain.²⁰

Geomorphologically, the Corridor is divided into two distinct parts: The Wakhan Corridor and the Afghan Pamir. The Wakhan Corridor lies at an elevation higher than 2000m and the Afghan Pamir lies above 3500m. This challenging topography contributes to the region's remoteness, making it one of the most isolated areas within the Hindu Kush-Karakoram region. Access to this region is possible through Dawan, Jaman Shur on the north, Wakhjir on the east and Broghil, Darwazo, Kankhen, Ochili and Shahgologh on the south.²¹ Additionally, this narrow strip of land has numerous routes to connect with neighboring countries. The Northern route connects it with Tajikistan, passing along the Panj Rivers. The Southern route reaches China through Wakhjir Pass, but this route is closed for more than half of the year due to snowfall. The third is the Central route, connecting both the Northern and Southern routes in Wakhan and leading to China through Tegermansu mountain pass at an altitude of 4,827m.²² The fourth route links the Afghan Tongue with the Karakoram Highway, located in the southeast from Sarhad-e-Wakhan to Hunza and Gilgit

¹⁷ Anees Hafiz, 2024.

¹⁸ M. A. Sadat, M. Hassan, and M. Zeb, 2023.

¹⁹ M. S. Ahmad, M. A., and M. S. Malik, 2021.

²⁰ D. K. Shahi, 2022.

²¹ D. K. Shahi, 2022.

²² M. E. Yawar, "Investigating the Political, Economic, and Geopolitical Role of Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor in China's Belt and Road Initiative." *Law and Humanities Quarterly Reviews* 3, no. 1 (2024), 39 - 53, DOI: 10.31014/aior.1996.03.01.101.

regions of Pakistan. The fifth route is located in the south, connecting Sarhad-e-Wakhan to Gilgit and Chitral regions. Other roads also link Wakhan to Chitral.²³ Furthermore, the main passes of the Wakhan Corridor are Broghli (3882m), Darwazaa to Chitral (4288m), Irshad Uween (4979m) and Dilisan (5290m) to Gojal and Khodarg Werth to Ishkuman.²⁴ The region is known for its snowy peaks, deep valleys, glaciers, lakes, rugged and rocky terrains and hot springs.

The Oxus River (Amu Darya), one of Central Asia's major rivers that ultimately flows into the Aral Sea, originates in the highlands of this region.²⁵ The two main tributaries of this river are the Panj and Pamir Rivers, which originate from the heights of Pamir and Hindukush. The joining of these two rivers forms the Amu River.²⁶

Socio-Cultural Diversity of the Wakhan Corridor

The Wakhan Corridor is a unique region with diverse customs, rituals and various ethnic groups living in this area.²⁷ Wakhan has a population of 17000 people, consisting of Wakhis and Kyrgyz,²⁸ who have been living in this region for centuries. The Kyrgyz and Wakhis are followers of the Ismaili sect of Islam and their language is Wakhi. The Wakhis live in the border areas of Tajikistan, China and Pakistan at altitudes of 2000m to 3000m. The Kyrgyz live in the eastern part of the Wakhan Corridor, which includes mountains and snow-covered lakes.²⁹

The common religion, language, climate and environment have fostered similar cultures among the Wakhis and Kyrgyz.³⁰ Despite these

²³ T. U. Hassan, A. Khan, and M. Ismail, "Geo-Strategic Significance of Wakhan Corridor for Pakistan," *Global International Relations Review* 6, no. 2 (2023), 8 - 17, [http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/girr.2023\(VI-II\).02/](http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/girr.2023(VI-II).02/).

²⁴ M. S. Ahmad, M. A., and M. S. Malik, 2021.

²⁵ A. Ahmad, 2023.

²⁶ Inam U. Haque, "The Geopolitics of Wakhan," *The Express Tribune*, January 16, 2025, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2522367/the-geopolitics-of-wakhan/>.

²⁷ I. Amir, "Geostrategic Importance of the Wakhan Corridor: Gateway to Regional Connectivity," *Pakistan Horizon* 76, no. 4 (2023), 85 - 101, <https://www.pakistan-horizon.piia.org.pk/index.php/pakistan-horizon/article/view/323/>.

²⁸ Inam U. Haque, 2025.

²⁹ M. E. Yawar, "Investigating the Political, Economic, and Geopolitical Role of Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor in China's Belt and Road Initiative," *Law and Humanities Quarterly Reviews* 3, no. 1 (2024), 39 - 53, DOI: 10.31014/aior.1996.03.01.101/.

³⁰ H. Y. Malik, "Geo-political Significance of the Wakhan Corridor for China," *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 7, no. 2 (2014), 307 - 323, DOI 10.1007/s40647-014-0017-z/.

commonalities, sometimes territorial disputes, historical grievances and competing interests among these groups lead to tension and conflict.³¹ Owing to the extremely rugged terrain, harsh climatic conditions and geographic isolation, the people of Wakhan face significant challenges, including limited access to education, food insecurity, widespread poverty, inadequate healthcare and a high prevalence of opium addiction.³² The absence of education and development standards has kept them behind the world.³³

Currently, the livelihood of the Wakhan people primarily depends on livestock husbandry and, to some extent, agriculture.³⁴ The people of Wakhan live in tents and follow a nomadic lifestyle. In the summer season, they move to higher elevations, while in winter, they go downhill to their pastures to avoid the extreme cold and facilitate grazing for their animals.³⁵ Festivities in Wakhan include the celebration of Nowruz (Persian New Year), Eid ul-Fitr and Eid ul-Adha, along with the observance of local traditions and cultural practices.

Afghanistan's Interest

The Wakhan Corridor is often described as the “head” of Afghanistan due to its distinctive shape and location. In ancient times, this region held a significant position as a trade route between the East and West. However, in the modern era, it has lost its importance due to modern developments, rugged terrain and lack of infrastructure.³⁶ But in recent years, the discovery of hydrocarbons in Central Asia and the emergence of new economic projects like CPEC, BRI and other ventures, including gas and oil pipelines and electric transmission lines like CASA-1000, have highlighted the geopolitical and

³¹ T. U. Hassan, A. Khan, and M. Ismail. “Geo-Strategic Significance of Wakhan Corridor for Pakistan,” *Global International Relations Review* 6, no. 2 (2023), 8 - 17, [http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/girr.2023\(VI-II\).02/](http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/girr.2023(VI-II).02/).

³² S. K. Bazai, “Geostrategic significance of Wakhan Corridor: Opportunities and implications for region,” *Eurasia Review*. Last modified October 16, 2022, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/16102022-geostrategic-significance-of-wakhan-Corridor-opportunities-and-implications-for-region-oped/>

³³ H. Y. Malik, 2014.

³⁴ Mirwais Parsa, “The Bridge to Connect Asia,” *Fair Observer*, November 20, 2017, https://www.fairobserver.com/region/central_south_asia/wakhan-Corridor-china-pakistan-afghanistan-tajikistan-world-trade-news-81661/#.

³⁵ H. Y. Malik, 2014.

³⁶ Mushtaq A. Mahindro, “What is the Significance of the Wakhan Corridor, and How Has Its Historical Development Shaped Its role over time” *Medium*, January 8, 2025. <https://medium.com/@mushtaqahmadmahindro/what-is-the-significance-of-the-wakhan-Corridor-and-how-has-its-historical-development-shaped-its-72f3dbca0660/>.

geo-economic importance of this Corridor.³⁷ With the rise of these projects, the Wakhan Corridor has once again attracted the attention of neighboring countries. It appears that the Corridor is regaining its historical significance after centuries of neglect. The revival of Wakhan is expected to increase Afghanistan's political and economic significance as a transit hub.

Afghanistan has served as a link between East and West due to its strategic location as a transit point for commercial exchanges in ancient times. Its geographical position offers a unique opportunity to transform the country into a commercial and economic Corridor. The Wakhan Corridor, in particular, holds significant potential to connect regional countries including Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and the Central Asian states.³⁸ This Corridor holds strategic significance for Afghanistan, as it could facilitate strong relations with neighboring countries and enhance its global trade through the Indian Ocean. Moreover, its proximity with the "resource-abundant" Central Asian states and Pakistan, offers opportunities for trade partnership, resource exchange and cross-border commerce.³⁹

Establishing communication and commercial infrastructure in Wakhan will contribute to the economic development of Afghanistan, particularly benefiting the Northern provinces.⁴⁰ By developing this Corridor, Afghanistan can transport its products to China easily and affordably, while simultaneously reaping economic and commercial benefits in return.⁴¹ It would enhance Afghanistan's political leverage and help the country to balance its relations with regional powers. In addition, the development of infrastructure in Wakhan would improve the government's access to the region, promote economic growth and uplift the living standard of local people.⁴²

³⁷ M. E. Yawar, "Investigating the Political, Economic, and Geopolitical Role of Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor in China's Belt and Road Initiative," *Law and Humanities Quarterly Reviews* 3, no. 1 (2024), 39 - 53, DOI: 10.31014/aior.1996.03.01.101/.

³⁸ "Importance of Wakhan Corridor for Afghanistan," *Hurriyat Radio*, <https://hurriyat.net/analysis/125/analysis/Importance%20of%20Wakhan%20Corridor%20for%20Afghanistan>.

³⁹ I. Amir, "Geostrategic Importance of the Wakhan Corridor: Gateway to Regional Connectivity," *Pakistan Horizon* 76, no. 4 (2023), 85 - 101, <https://www.pakistan-horizon.piia.org.pk/index.php/pakistan-horizon/article/view/323/>.

⁴⁰ "Will the Taliban hand over the Wakhan Corridor to Pakistan?" *Harici*, January 14, 2025, <https://harici.com.tr/en/will-the-taliban-hand-over-the-wakhan-Corridor-to-pakistan/>

⁴¹ "Importance of Wakhan Corridor for Afghanistan," *Hurriyat Radio*, <https://hurriyat.net/analysis/125/analysis/Importance%20of%20Wakhan%20Corridor%20for%20Afghanistan>.

⁴² S. K. Bazai, "Geostrategic significance of Wakhan Corridor: Opportunities and implications for region," *Eurasia Review*, Last modified October 16, 2022, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/16102022-geostrategic-significance-of-wakhan-Corridor-opportunities-and-implications-for-region-oped/>.

China's BRI project further underscores the significance of this Corridor.⁴³ By joining BRI, Afghanistan can serve as a regional hub and enter into a new era of economic and political cooperation at the regional level. The development of the Wakhan Corridor represents a crucial step toward Afghanistan's economic and political growth.⁴⁴ Afghanistan stands to benefit significantly from becoming part of BRI, as this project would connect to both North-East Asian and South-West Asian nations. By integrating into this project, Afghanistan could achieve political and economic relevance and establish itself as a key global transit hub. Opening the Wakhan Corridor would increase Afghanistan's strategic importance by offering an alternative route to the Indian Ocean through Pakistan,⁴⁵ a development that holds particular significance for China. Therefore, China is investing in infrastructure projects in Wakhan region. The three key ranges, Tegermansu, the Big Pamir or Pamir Kalan and Wakhjir valley, have been identified as potential sites for development. The development of these ranges would provide Afghanistan with new economic prospects.⁴⁶

The opening of this Corridor would significantly enhance Afghanistan's geopolitical importance, positioning it as a supplementary route for regional connectivity. By integrating with the Karakoram Highway, it would provide direct and shortest access to the Arabian Sea.⁴⁷ Afghanistan could benefit substantially from this Corridor by generating revenue through taxation and creating thousands of direct and indirect job opportunities. Trade cannot flourish without security, therefore, realizing the full benefits of this Corridor is contingent upon stability in Afghanistan.

⁴³ A. Ahmad, "The Wakhan Corridor," *The Nation*, Last modified June 16, 2023, <https://www.nation.com.pk/16-Jun-2023/the-wakhan-corridor/>.

⁴⁴ "Importance of Wakhan Corridor for Afghanistan," *Hurriyat Radio*, <https://hurriyat.net/analysis/125/analysis/Importance%20of%20Wakhan%20Corridor%20for%20Afghanistan>.

⁴⁵ M. A. Sadat, M. Hassan, and M. Zeb. "China – Afghanistan Trade & Strategic Importance of Wakhan Corridor: An appraisal," *Asian journal of International Peace and Security* (AJIPS) 7, no. 2 (2023), 96 - 104, <https://www.ajips.fairlips.org/index.php/ajips/article/view/2023-vol-07-issue-2-china-afghanistan-trade/>.

⁴⁶ M. A. Sadat, M. Hassan, and M. Zeb. "China – Afghanistan Trade & Strategic Importance of Wakhan Corridor: An appraisal," *Asian journal of International Peace and Security* (AJIPS) 7, no. 2 (2023), 96 - 104, <https://www.ajips.fairlips.org/index.php/ajips/article/view/2023-vol-07-issue-2-china-afghanistan-trade/>.

⁴⁷ D. K. Shahi, "Geopolitical and Geostrategic Significance of Wakhan Corridor," *International Journal of Research in Social Science* 12, no. 7 (2022), 115 - 123, https://www.ijmra.us/2022ijrss_july.php.

China's Interest

China has started efforts to revitalize the ancient Silk Road as part of the BRI project. The initiative includes two major components: (i) Silk Road Economic Belt and (ii) Maritime Silk Road. This plan aims to connect the continents of Asia, Europe and Africa and integrate China with the rest of the world through land, sea and air. This project contains an estimated USD 5 trillion investment in infrastructure building across 65 countries.⁴⁸

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

A major BRI project in South Asia is CPEC, with an investment of USD 62 billion.⁴⁹ This project connects the city of Kashgar in China's Xinjiang province to Pakistan's Gwadar port. An important part of CPEC is the reconstruction and upgrading of the Karakoram Highway, which links Kashgar to Abbottabad. This highway was opened in 1986 as a trade and transit route between China and Pakistan. The construction of this highway significantly reduced the travel distance. Notably, it has shortened the distance between China and the Middle-East from 15,900 km via the Malacca Strait to 3,700 km through the Khunjerab pass.⁵⁰

Importantly, the Karakoram Highway runs close to the Wakhan Corridor, a crucial component of BRI. Strategically positioned at the crossroads of Central Asia and South Asia, this Corridor provides China access to new economic markets, natural resources and energy reserves in Central Asia.⁵¹ The construction of roads in this Corridor would integrate Afghanistan's road network with the Karakoram Highway.⁵² Additionally, the Corridor could provide a direct link between China's Xinjiang province and Central Asian countries. Moreover, the Corridor may facilitate easier trade and energy supply networks between China and its partners. It can potentially deepen China's

⁴⁸ Parsa Mirwais, 2017.

⁴⁹ S. Rasool, "Geo-economic dimension of the china Pakistan economic Corridor and its regional implications," *Journal of Pakistan - China Studies* 1, no. 1 (2020), 1 - 22. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55733/jpcs.v1i1.28/>.

⁵⁰ Parsa Mirwais, 2017.

⁵¹ H. Sarbiland, and I. U. Stanikzai. "China-Afghanistan Relations and the Wakhan Corridor: Assessing Economic Interests, Infrastructural Development, and Geopolitical Implications," *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice* 30, no. 6 (2024), 3515 - 3520, <https://doi.org/10.53555/kuey.v30i6.5097/>.

⁵² M. Chouhan, "Geo-political significance of Wakhan Corridor," *CeSCube*, April 6, 2021, <https://www.cescube.com/vp-geo-political-significance-of-wakhan-Corridor/>.

economic and strategic position in the region. This underscores the Wakhan's role as a vital link in the broader regional geopolitical and economic landscape.⁵³

The Karakoram Highway has the potential to connect CPEC with the Wakhan Corridor to expand the infrastructure projects between South Asia and Central Asia. Investing in this project would provide China with a shorter trade route to Central Asia and beyond.⁵⁴ The Wakhan Corridor is particularly significant as it is the only transit passage in the region that is close to China, West-Asia, the Persian Gulf, Caspian Sea and Europe.⁵⁵ More importantly, 60% of China's trade with the Western and Middle Eastern countries passes through the Strait of Malacca, a vital maritime checkpoint under the strategic influence of United States of America, China's main global competitor.⁵⁶ Considering this geopolitical challenge, the opening of the Wakhan Corridor and its connection with Central Asia could provide an alternative route for oil and gas pipelines, ensuring a more secure energy supply for China.⁵⁷

The construction of alternative land-based trade routes in western regions of China is a strategic requirement for its commercial and economic security.⁵⁸ Investment in Wakhan not only offers China an alternate transit route but also facilitates its access to Afghanistan's natural resources, like lithium, copper and rare earth minerals, which are important for China's industrial and technological development.⁵⁹ Geological surveys estimate that Afghanistan holds mineral resources worth USD 1 trillion. Therefore, China has already invested in the Mes Aynak copper mine, the world's second-largest copper deposit and in the hydrocarbon reserves of the Amu Darya Basin in Sar-e-Pol and Faryab provinces.⁶⁰

⁵³ T. Maqbool, "Strategic importance of the Wakhan border for Pakistan: A gateway to Central Asia and China," *The Friday Times*, January 8, 2025, <https://thefridaytimes.com/08-Jan-2025/strategic-importance-of-the-wakhan-border-for-pakistan-a-gateway-to-central-asia-and-china/>.

⁵⁴ I. Amir, "Geostrategic Importance of the Wakhan Corridor: Gateway to Regional Connectivity," *Pakistan Horizon* 76, no. 4 (2023), 85 - 101, <https://www.pakistan-horizon.piia.org.pk/index.php/pakistan-horizon/article/view/323/>.

⁵⁵ M. E. Yawar, 2024.

⁵⁶ M. E. Yawar, 2024.

⁵⁷ M. Chouhan, "Geo-political significance of Wakhan Corridor." CeSCube. April 6, 2021. <https://www.cescube.com/vp-geo-political-significance-of-wakhan-Corridor/>.

⁵⁸ M. E. Yawar, 2024.

⁵⁹ H. Sarbiland, and I. U. Stanikzai. "China-Afghanistan Relations and the Wakhan Corridor: Assessing Economic Interests, Infrastructural Development, and Geopolitical Implications." *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice* 30, no. 6 (2024), 3515 - 3520. <https://doi.org/10.53555/kuey.v30i6.5097/>.

⁶⁰ Mirwais Parsa, 2017.

Afghanistan's recent inclusion in CPEC highlights the growing geopolitical importance of the Wakhan Corridor. In May 2025, China, Pakistan and Afghanistan agreed in Beijing to formally extend the CPEC into Afghanistan's territory and to hold the next trilateral meeting in Kabul, a move reflecting Beijing's strategy to integrate Afghanistan into BRI frameworks and promote regional connectivity.⁶¹ This offers Afghanistan unprecedented access to Pakistan's ports and regional trade networks, while simultaneously providing China with overland alternatives to traditional maritime routes vulnerable to strategic competition.⁶²

Beyond its economic benefits, the construction of road through the Wakhan Corridor would significantly strengthen China's strategic foothold in the region.⁶³ For China, the project could serve three key strategic objectives. First, it would expand trade networks with Central Asian countries to the north. Second, it would improve connectivity with Pakistan's Gwadar Port to the south, a cornerstone of the CPEC. Third, it would provide China with direct access to Afghanistan.⁶⁴

Pakistan's Interest

The Wakhan Corridor offers the shortest and most efficient trade route for Pakistan to enhance economic and commercial relations with Central Asian states. It also provides easy access at the lowest cost via Pakistan's northern highland and Chitral region.⁶⁵ The Corridor could facilitate trade in minerals, textiles, agricultural products, manufactured goods, oil, gas and electric transmission lines.⁶⁶ At the same time, the Wakhan Corridor could function as a crucial transit route for Central Asian states to have direct access to the

⁶¹ "China, Pakistan, Taliban Agree To Extend CPEC Into Afghanistan," *Afghanistan International*, May 21, 2025.

⁶² XU Weiwei, "Experts Commend CPEC Expansion to Afghanistan," *China Daily*, June 4, 2025.

⁶³ Shahana Naseer, "Why Wakhan Corridor is Significant for China?" *Matrix Mag.* January 17, 2025. <https://matrixmag.com/why-wakhan-corridor-is-significant-for-china/>.

⁶⁴ "The new road to conflict: Geopolitics of the Wakhan Corridor." *Harvard International Review*, December 8, 2019. <https://hir.harvard.edu/wakhanCorridor/>.

⁶⁵ S. K. Bazai, "Geostrategic significance of Wakhan Corridor: Opportunities and implications for region" *Eurasia Review*, October 16, 2022, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/16102022-geostrategic-significance-of-wakhan-corridor-opportunities-and-implications-for-region-oped/>.

⁶⁶ Qamar Bashir, "Wakhan Might Turn Things Upside Down." *DAWN*, May 19, 2024. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1834396/>.

international markets through Gwadar Port. Gwadar holds strategic significance due to its location at the mouth of the Strait of Hormuz, a key maritime chokepoint.⁶⁷

Geographically, Wakhan connects Pakistan's Hunza and Chitral regions, with vital crossing points including Broghil, Irshad and Dilisang passes. Among these passes, Broghil pass is the most significant doorway connecting Pakistan to the Wakhan Corridor.⁶⁸ Gupsi and Yasin serve as important joining points, connecting the Wakhan Corridor with Pakistan's Ghizar and Hunza districts in Gilgit Baltistan.⁶⁹ Indeed, this Corridor serves as a bridge between Pakistan and Central Asia, significantly reducing the distance between the two regions to just 13 km.⁷⁰ The opening of the Wakhan Corridor would offer Pakistan another trading route with Afghanistan. Pakistan could exploit the Wakhan Corridor as a more efficient and economical route for importing oil and gas from Central Asia and Russia.⁷¹

A train link from Tajikistan through the Wakhan Corridor could connect to the planned Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan railway line. Pakistan views the Wakhan Corridor not only as a strategic access point to Central Asia but also as a potential source of significant employment opportunities for Pakistani citizens. In addition to facilitating trade expansion through Gwadar port, the Corridor would also enhance Pakistan's economic ties with China and Central Asian countries. However, the importance of Wakhan for Pakistan extends beyond trade. The Corridor carries political significance, especially in the context of Pakistan's policy focus on enhancing relations with Central Asian states.

Pakistan's National Security Policy 2022-2026

Pakistan's National Security Policy (NSP) 2022-2026 recognizes Afghanistan's potential as a strategic gateway for enhanced economic connectivity with the Central Asian Republics (CARs). Central to this is the "Vision Central Asia," emphasizing five core pillars: political relations, trade

⁶⁷ Qamar Bashir, 2024.

⁶⁸ D. K. Shahi, 2022

⁶⁹ Anees Hafiz, 2024.

⁷⁰ "Will the Taliban hand over the Wakhan Corridor to Pakistan?" *Harici*, January 14, 2025. <https://harici.com.tr/en/will-the-taliban-hand-over-the-wakhan-corridor-to-pakistan/>.

⁷¹ M. Ismail, and R. S. Fitriani. "Future Impact on Pakistan Economy in the 21st Century Shifting of Global Power." *Proceeding of The International Conference on Economics and Business* 1, no. 2 (2022), 167 - 181. DOI: 10.55606/iceb.v1i2.121/.

and investment, energy and connectivity, security and defense and people-to-people contacts.⁷² The NSP marks a deliberate strategic pivot to geo-economics, prioritizing the expansion of trade and economic linkages with CARs through robust connectivity. Afghanistan plays a pivotal role in advancing Pakistan's "Vision Central Asia" initiative. In alignment with Islamabad's geo-economic priorities, the Wakhan Corridor would further facilitate trade expansion and energy projects in the region.

Shanghai Cooperation Organization

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is a pivotal multilateral organization that plays a significant role in shaping the geopolitical and economic landscape of Central and South Asia, directly impacting the relevance of the Wakhan Corridor. Since its establishment in 2001, the SCO has prioritized regional stability, security cooperation and economic integration among its member states, which include China, Russia, Pakistan, Iran, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Belarus. The organization's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) has notably enhanced intelligence sharing and operational coordination, thereby strengthening collective efforts against terrorism, extremism and separatism. The SCO's commitment to fostering mutual trust, expanding multilateral dialogue and promoting good neighborliness has provided a crucial platform for addressing common security concerns, which is essential for the stability required to operationalize strategic routes like the Wakhan Corridor.⁷³

Beyond security, the SCO is increasingly focused on economic cooperation and connectivity, which aligns closely with the objectives of major initiatives such as the BRI and the CPEC. The Wakhan Corridor holds the potential to become a vital trade and transit route connecting Central Asia with South Asia.⁷⁴ The SCO's agenda to deepen trade ties, expand infrastructure and

⁷² "Joint Communiqué on Official Visit of President of the Republic of Tajikistan, H.E. Emomali Rahmon to Islamic Republic of Pakistan – Ministry of Foreign Affairs." n.d. Accessed June 12, 2023.
<https://mofa.gov.pk/joint-communicue-on-official-visit-of-president-of-the-republic-of-tajikistan-h-e-emomali-rahmon-to-islamic-republic-of-pakistan/>.

⁷³ Gulnar Shaimergenova, "Guest Opinion: SCO Plays Pivotal Role in Promoting Regional Stability, Development," *Xinhua*, July 6, 2024,
<https://english.news.cn/20240706/3d3b581ef9234bf4bd0a252baa53de44/c.html>.

⁷⁴ Qamar Bashir, "Wakhan Corridor: Vital for CPEC and BRI," *Pakistan Today*, April 25, 2024,
<https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2024/04/25/wakhan-Corridor-vital-for-cpec-and-bri/>

harmonize regulations among its members directly supports the development of such Corridors, facilitating access to new markets and resources. By synergizing the BRI and CPEC with the SCO's broader regional vision, the organization is positioned to inject new momentum into cross-border economic collaboration, permanently transforming the region's connectivity and economic prospects. In this context, the SCO's role is not only to ensure a secure environment for such projects but also to provide the institutional framework for sustainable and inclusive regional development.

Economic Cooperation Organization

The Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), originally established as the Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD) in 1964 by Pakistan, Iran and Türkiye, was transformed in 1985 into a broader economic bloc. Its expansion in 1992 to include Afghanistan, five Central Asian republics and Azerbaijan significantly enhanced the organization's strategic capacity for regional integration.⁷⁵ Today, the ECO spans approximately eight million square kilometers, nearly double the size of the European Union and encompasses around 500 million people. Its objectives focus on facilitating trade, infrastructure development and energy cooperation across Eurasia, positioning it as a potential framework for linking landlocked Central Asian states with global markets through Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and Türkiye.⁷⁶ In this context, the Wakhan Corridor can play a significant role in further enhancing trade and economic cooperation among ECO members.

Challenges

Historically, Wakhan's natural isolation has kept this area away from direct conflict. Nevertheless, its position along the Durand Line and its geographic proximity with China and Tajikistan renders it a significant area in the region. The Corridor offers access to trade routes, energy resources and economic cooperation with Central Asia, South Asia and China. As a result, Wakhan remains an important component in the geopolitical landscape of the region.⁷⁷ Despite its strategic significance, the opening of the Corridor faces several critical challenges.

⁷⁵ "History – Economic Cooperation Organization." n.d. Accessed February 28, 2024. <https://eco.int/history/>.

⁷⁶ Ameer Khan, Osama Ameer, and Khan, "Reviving Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) for Regional Connectivity" 3, no. 1: 2022, accessed January 3, 2024, <https://journals.pakistanreview.com/index.php/JGPSS/article/download/137/93/>.

⁷⁷ T. Maqbool, 2025.

Geographical Complexity

Geographically, the region experiences extremely low temperatures, remains snow-covered for over six months in a year and is characterized by rugged mountainous terrain. Given these geographical conditions, the construction of infrastructure such as roads and tunnels presents significant technical and financial challenges. Nevertheless, comparable projects have been successfully completed in similar or even more geologically complex environments. A notable example is the Karakoram Highway, constructed through the formidable Karakoram mountains. The Pamir Mountains, where the Wakhan Corridor is located, exhibit similarly challenging topography.⁷⁸ Given these considerations, the construction of roads and tunnels in the Wakhan Corridor is feasible with the technological capabilities of China. From this perspective, geography does not constitute the primary obstacle to the development and opening of the Corridor. Instead, the principal challenges stem from terrorism originating in Afghanistan, political instability in the country and the prevalence of drug trafficking across the region.

Threat of Terrorism

Decades of conflict and instability in Afghanistan, as well as destruction caused by foreign forces, have created an environment conducive to the presence and operation of various terrorist organizations. The terrorist groups often exploit the country's ungoverned spaces and porous borders, particularly around the Wakhan Corridor, to establish bases and stage activities targeting neighboring regions, including Pakistan, Central Asia and China.⁷⁹ The use of Afghanistan's territory as a launchpad for cross-border terrorism has raised serious security concerns among regional states. China and Central Asian countries, in particular, view the security situation as a major obstacle to regional connectivity.⁸⁰ Due to persistent terrorist threats, China has long been reluctant to open or develop the Wakhan Corridor, keeping its border with Afghanistan effectively sealed for decades.⁸¹ In the light of these concerns, terrorism in Afghanistan continues to pose a significant threat to the security and stability of Pakistan, Central Asia and China. As long as the region remains insecure, the operationalization of the Wakhan Corridor will remain uncertain. Therefore, security and political stability in Afghanistan are essential

⁷⁸ Mirwais Parsa, 2017.

⁷⁹ I. Amir, 2023

⁸⁰ M. A. Sadat, M. Hassan, and M. Zeb, 2023.

⁸¹ D. K. Shahi, 2022.

prerequisites for the Corridor's development and opening.

Drug Trafficking

Afghanistan is the world's leading producer of opium. And one of the transit routes for this drug is Wakhan Corridor, which links Afghanistan to neighboring countries of China, Tajikistan and Pakistan. This connectivity not only contributes to the increase in the regional drug trade but also provides considerable funding for terrorist groups in Afghanistan. In 2020 alone, the volume of opium sold through this Corridor was 8.3 thousand tons, with an estimated value of USD 350 million.⁸² Due to lack of infrastructure in Wakhan, China has remained shielded from drug trafficking originating in Afghanistan. The construction of roads and other means in Wakhan could facilitate drug trafficking, turning the Corridor into a direct transit route for drug trafficking. Drug trafficking remains a key concern for regional countries to develop the Corridor. The continued drug trafficking poses a significant threat to the stability and security of Wakhan and its neighboring countries. Therefore, it is necessary to take serious steps to prevent drug trafficking in this region.⁸³ However, this problem is not insurmountable and can be tackled by close cooperation among the anti-narcotics forces of Pakistan, China, Tajikistan and Afghanistan through concerted efforts.

Conclusion

The Wakhan Corridor holds significant geo-economic and geostrategic importance for China, Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, its development has consistently faced challenges due to geopolitical issues, including the 19th-century "Great Game" between Russia and the British, the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan (1979-1989), the Afghanistan Civil War (1992-2001), NATO intervention (2001-2021) and the current instability in Afghanistan.

Building roads and tunnels across Wakhan will enhance trade activities in the region. This Corridor will provide a shorter route to access Central Asia and, vice versa, will enable Central Asian countries to more easily reach Pakistan's Gwadar and Karachi ports. It will also ease China's access to Afghanistan and strengthen the link between CPEC and the broader region, which is a key component of BRI. In a recent development, Afghanistan has been included in the CPEC. Its inclusion is expected to accelerate investment

⁸² I. Amir, 2023.

and construction activities along the Corridor. The operationalization of this Corridor will not only enhance regional connectivity but also open new paths for economic cooperation and infrastructure development. In this context, it will provide researchers with a valuable opportunity to study the broader potential geopolitical impact of the Corridor at both regional and global levels.

The connectivity is expected to foster peace, security, political stability and shared prosperity for all the countries in the region. In particular, it holds the potential to lift the people of Afghanistan out of poverty and diminish the impact of current humanitarian crisis.

Impact of India's Strategic Autonomy on its Quad Membership

Azfar Bilal Qureshi¹, Rubia Shoukat²

Abstract

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), comprising the United States (US), Australia, India and Japan, evolved in the wake of the Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004. It was revitalized in 2017 as a strategic alliance addressing a range of security and economic issues. The collaboration within the Quad intensified in response to China's growing influence in the Asia-Pacific region, later renamed "Indo-Pacific" by the US with the release of the "Indo-Pacific Strategy" in February 2022. However, India's role within the Quad adds to the complexities due to its strategic relations with Russia, economic compulsions vis-à-vis China, membership of SCO and BRICS, and internal socio-economic challenges. India heavily relies on Russian defence equipment, from which it cannot decouple anytime soon. It has also become the largest importer of Russian oil after the Ukraine crisis. India is increasingly perceived as an unreliable Quad partner due to its preference for strategic autonomy, rather than aligning with the US policy. The US has therefore been focusing on alternative alliances, such as the Squad, to use it as a bulwark against China. President Trump's slogan of "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) and imposition of tariffs on friends as well as foes have not only raised questions about the future of the Quad and other minilateral alliances in the Asia-Pacific but also about the relevance of India as a US ally in the region. This paper examines the dynamics of the Quad, highlighting the paradox of India's role as a "net security provider" in South Asia assigned by the US and its incapability to perform this role. Using a realist theoretical framework, the analysis highlights the strategic factors influencing the behaviour of the Quad member states, the challenges arising from India's duplicitous position in the regional security architecture and the impact on stability in South Asia.

Keywords: India, The Quad, China's Influence, The Squad, South Asia, Strategic Autonomy

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Theoretical Framework

Realism serves as an important framework for analyzing the dynamics of the Quad. Central to Realism is the idea that the international system is anarchic. States operate in a self-help environment focused on survival. India's role in the Quad exemplifies this concept.

Realism posits that states act primarily in pursuit of their national interests, often leading to alliances based on shared strategic goals rather than ideological similarities. In the case of the Quad, the unstated primary objective has been to counter China's rise in the "Indo-Pacific" region. The member states have formed a coordinated front, exemplified by joint military exercises such as Malabar and the Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC), aimed at enhancing regional security and maintaining the balance of power.

However, India's position within this framework is plagued by contradictions. With the role of a "net security provider" assigned to it by the US under its so-called Indo-Pacific Strategy, its simultaneous engagement with China and Russia has raised questions about its reliability as a Quad partner. This dichotomy underscores the realist assertion that alliances are often precarious and contingent upon the alignment of national interests.

Besides national security and power politics of a state, the balance of power is a core concept in Realism, suggesting that stability is achieved when military capabilities are distributed among states in a way that no single entity can dominate. The Quad aims to create such a balance of power to contain China's growing regional influence and maintain the dominant status of the US in the Asia Pacific region.

The theory also emphasizes that states often face a security dilemma, where action taken by one state to enhance security leads to increased tension and insecurity for others. India's military confrontation with China, particularly the Galwan Valley clash in 2020, illustrates this dilemma. India's history of conflicts with its neighbours, coupled with its territorial disputes and internal socio-economic issues, has degraded its capacity to engage constructively in any regional security architecture. Hence, India's commitment to the Quad's objectives, which are primarily aimed at containing China, is held back by its assertion of strategic autonomy.

India's abstention on the UN resolutions against Russia in the context of the Ukraine crisis, along with its deepening ties with Moscow amid Western sanctions, highlights the complexities of its foreign policy and the resulting implications for the Quad's coherence. This behaviour is reflective of the realist view that states will prioritize their strategic interests, sometimes at the expense of collective goals.

The geographical and strategic context in which the Quad operates further emphasizes the theory's focus on power and security. The Quad members are aligned in their interests in the "Indo-Pacific" but India's geographical limitations place it at a distinct disadvantage. While the US, Australia and Japan pursue a coordinated naval strategy, India's location in South Asia complicates its involvement. This disconnect suggests that the Quad may operate in "two distinct theatres of war," potentially benefiting China by allowing it to engage on Interior Lines of Operation during a conflict.

India's dual engagement with both the Quad and its relationship with China and Russia support the realist perspective that alliances can be fragile and state behaviour is often driven by immediate strategic considerations rather than long-term commitments. The agreement between China and India on 21 October 2024 on easing the prevailing tension along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) on the eve of the BRICS Summit held in Kazan (Russia), aims at the disengagement of troops and the resumption of patrolling along LAC. On the one hand, the agreement created diplomatic space for India to work harmoniously as a BRICS and SCO member state, while, on the other hand, effectively eliminated one of the strong arguments for India inclining towards the US-led Quad. Ultimately, this changing scenario will lessen India's interest in confrontation with China. This rapprochement has created difficulty for the US and other Quad members, especially in the context of the US "Indo-Pacific Strategy."

By applying the theoretical framework of Realism to the analysis of the Quad, it becomes evident that the dynamics of this coalition are shaped by the interplay of national interests, the balance of power and the security dilemma faced by its members. India's position within the Quad raises questions about its reliability and effectiveness, reflecting the broader Realist assertion that states navigate a world of competing interests, often leading to tensions and

contradictions within alliances.³ The research paper employs qualitative analysis to explore the underlying concerns related to India's Quad membership in the context of New Delhi's policy of strategic autonomy. It also examines alternative options available to the other Quad members and their effectiveness in pursuing its strategic objectives.

Introduction

The Quad, officially known as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, comprises the US, Australia, India and Japan. Initially focused on maritime cooperation following the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, it remained dormant except for one summit meeting in 2007. Finally, converging interests brought the Quad members to the table once again in 2017. It has since expanded its agenda to encompass security, economic and health issues. By 2021, the member countries, all democracies with robust economies, had intensified collaboration, particularly in response to the rise of China. Notably, they conducted their first joint naval exercise, Malabar, in over a decade in November 2020. In March 2021, US President Joe Biden held a virtual meeting with the Quad leaders of all four countries, during which they formed working groups to tackle issues related to COVID-19 vaccines, climate change, technological advancements and supply chains. The most recent Quad summit took place in Delaware, USA, on 21 September 2024.⁴

Lately, the composition of the Quad has come into question, reflecting specifically on India's viability as a reliable partner.⁵ The doubts raised are not rhetorical or unfounded. The concerns are based on facts and the track record of India. When compared with the remaining the Quad members, India's policy is characterized by its acceptance of the role as "net security provider" in the region as part of the US "Indo-Pacific Strategy" while maintaining intimate trade and strategic ties with China and Russia, respectively. Simultaneously, India has been involved in state-sponsored acts of terrorism within and outside the state, including the US, Canada and Pakistan, subjecting it to criticism and raising doubts about it being a credible partner.

³ Hunter S Marston, "Navigating Great Power Competition: A Neoclassical Realist View of Hedging," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 24, no. 1 (February 16, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcad001>.

⁴ U.S. Mission India, "Fact Sheet: 2024 Quad Leaders' Summit," U.S. Embassy & Consulates in India, September 23, 2024, <https://in.usembassy.gov/fact-sheet-2024-quad-leaders-summit/>.

⁵ Grossman, Derek. n.d. "India Is the Weakest Link in the Quad." *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/07/23/india-is-the-weakest-link-in-the-quad/>.

When considering the strategic interests of the like-minded countries that brought them together, it is important also to recognize the differences that set them apart and how they affect the Quad.

Quad's Anomaly

Though economically all members of the Quad stand on sound footings, India is still decades away from being declared as a “Developed State”, a status already attained long ago by the other three members. Poverty and a large population are afflicting India, hampering its rise. According to a 2024 report of the World Bank, India continued to be a “lower-middle-income” country. It faced serious obstacles that hindered its efforts to become a high-income country for at least the next two decades.⁶ It further restricts India's capacity to be at par with the other members of the Quad, who fall in the high-income category. Its commercial potential and foreign exchange reserves of over USD 600 billion are undone by the sheer size of its impoverished population.⁷

There is a distinct dichotomy in the geopolitical and geo-economic interests of the Quad states. Their geopolitical convergence belies the fact that China happens to be their major trading partner. Any economic strangulation of China will be at the cost of their own economic well-being, as evident from the Sino-US trade war during the Trump presidency (2016-2020).⁸

According to a recent study by the Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI), a Delhi-based think tank, China was India's biggest source of major industrial products in 2023, accounting for around 30 percent in categories such as electronics, machinery, cars, chemicals and textiles.⁹ Beijing was the largest trade partner of New Delhi, with bilateral trade volume reaching USD 113.83 billion in 2023, surpassing the US. Trade with China crossed the mammoth

⁶ World Bank Group, “‘Middle-Income Trap’ Hinders Progress in 108 Developing Countries,” *World Bank*, August 2024, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2024/07/22/-middle-income-trap-hinders-progress-in-108-developing-countries>.

⁷ “India's Real and Nominal GDP Are Expected to Grow at 6.4% and 9.7% Respectively in FY25 as per 1st Advanced Estimates,” *Pib.gov.in*, 2024, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=2098357>.

⁸ Wong, Dorcas, and Alexander Chipman Koty. 2020. “The US-China Trade War: A Timeline - China Briefing News.” *China Briefing News*, August 25, 2020. <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/the-us-china-trade-war-a-timeline/>.

⁹ The Economist, “The Epic Bust-up between China and India Could Be Ending,” *The Economist*, July 18, 2024, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2024/07/18/the-epic-bust-up-between-china-and-india-could-be-ending>.

USD 100 billion mark, driven by a 21 percent rise in imports from China into India.¹⁰

From the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands contested by China and Japan to the US and Australia's concern of maintaining dominance in the Western Pacific and Indian Oceans with uninterrupted Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC), there are several dimensions to this contestation. In this context, the regional countries of ASEAN and Pacific Island states have assumed immense significance and there is a race to win over these strategically placed island nations in the Oceania region.

The Solomon Islands, situated 1,200 nautical miles to the northeast of Australia, entered into a bilateral security pact with China in April 2022, which has significantly influenced the geopolitical dynamics of the Pacific Island nations and Oceania.¹¹ This bilateral security deal marks China's first recognized agreement in the region and provides Beijing with the option to deploy Chinese forces close to crucial shipping routes. Reports indicate that the arrangement permits the Solomon Islands to seek assistance from China, including support from police, military personnel and other law enforcement bodies.¹² Similarly, China has signed a Comprehensive Strategic Agreement with Timor-Leste, which is situated 1085 nautical miles due North of Australia.¹³

These Chinese moves led to Australian attempts to sign an agreement of cooperation with Vanuatu. However, it is likely to face strong resistance from

¹⁰ "Exploring India China Trade and Economic Relations | IBEF," India Brand Equity Foundation, March 2024, <https://www.ibef.org/indian-exports/india-china-trade>.

¹¹ Joseph Hammond, "China's Security Agreement with the Solomon Islands: Wider Implications for Geopolitics in the South Pacific," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs Article Display*, (2023), <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/3588465/chinas-security-agreement-with-the-solomon-islands-wider-implications-for-geopo/>.

¹² "China's Security Agreement with the Solomon Islands: Wider Implications for Geopolitics In," *Air University (AU)*, November 15, 2023, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/3588465/chinas-security-agreement-with-the-solomon-islands-wider-implications-for-geopo/>.

¹³ "Why Did Timor-Leste Sign a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with China?," *The Diplomat*, n.d., <https://thediplomat.com/2023/10/what-did-timor-leste-sign-a-comprehensive-strategic-partnership-with-china/>.

the opposition in the Island's parliament.¹⁴ The US, on its part, scrambled to establish its embassy in the Solomon Islands to counter growing Chinese influence there. Papua New Guinea's autonomous region, Bougainville, is poised to assume independence by 2027 if the referendum on the issue carried out in July 2021 is ratified by the parliament of Papua New Guinea. The ratification is pending. However, the independence of Bougainville, if it comes about, is likely to create a domino effect, creating more independent states in the region.¹⁵ The Oceania region is therefore seen as the next area of contestation between the US and China. It is pertinent to note that while the southern edge of the Oceania region rests on Australia, its northern and northwestern limits are bound by the islands of Guam (US) and the Philippines, respectively.

Reliability of India as a Quad Partner

The inherent geographical limitation of Quad and its likely outcome raise serious doubts about this conjoined "Indo-Pacific Strategy" when seen in conjunction with other factors affecting India's viability, as explained below. These factors do not plague other Quad members.

Despite an agreement leading to a détente in the Galwan Valley along the LAC, the Sino-Indian border dispute persists. However, India is unlikely to confront China for several significant reasons: Firstly, it suffered a humiliating defeat in the Galwan Valley in 2020. Secondly, it lacks comparative capabilities to match China militarily. Thirdly, the inhospitable mountainous terrain of LAC restricts force projection and sustenance. Lastly, it has significant economic and trade interests with China. The recent détente between China and India along the LAC is the outcome of these Indian limitations.

At the same time, India's abstention from the UN resolutions against Russia and its role as a conduit for discounted Russian oil to EU countries have further accentuated the unreliability of India, raising concerns in the

¹⁴ Australian Associated Press, "New Vanuatu Prime Minister Wants to 'Revisit' Security Pact with Australia," *The Guardian*, September 5, 2023, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/05/new-vanuatu-prime-minister-wants-to-revisit-security-pact-with-australia>

¹⁵ Catherine Wilson, "Political Deadlock Frustrates Bougainville's Aspirations of Independence," *Al Jazeera*, June 27, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/6/27/political-deadlock-frustrates-bougainvilles-aspirations-of-independence>.

international community.¹⁶ Indian External Affairs Minister (EAM) Jaishankar's visit to Moscow in December 2023 was indicative of India's geopolitical priorities, where he called India's relations with Russia "the only constant in global politics." Both sides also agreed to expand their partnership in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).¹⁷ Jaishankar, in a Joint Panel discussion with Antony Blinken and German Foreign Minister Ms Baerbock during the 60th Munich Security Conference (16-18 February 2024), stressed that India had multiple options, asserting its freedom and right of choice.¹⁸

Despite Western pressure, India is unlikely to part ways with Russia anytime soon, as it has profited in multiple ways, especially after the Ukraine crisis, in terms of crude oil, trade and technology. Similarly, Russia, despite Western sanctions, remains the biggest oil exporter to India. The trade turnover between Russia and India increased from about USD 13 billion in 2021 to USD 49 billion in 2022 and over USD 65 billion in 2024, driven largely by India's purchase of Russian oil.¹⁹ During the same period, India's oil exports to Western European countries increased significantly. This suggests that India helped Western countries in bypassing their self-imposed trade ban on Russia.²⁰

India is a prominent member of the BRICS, which includes Russia and China as key members besides Brazil and South Africa. This dual membership underscores India's strategic maneuvering, as it engages with both Quad and

¹⁶ Shubhangi Mathur, "Oil Is Well! India's Refined Fuel Exports to Europe Soar, Hit an All-Time High in Nov," *Money control*, November 11, 2024, <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/business/oil-is-well-indias-refined-fuel-exports-to-europe-soar-hit-an-all-time-high-in-nov-12862999.html>.

¹⁷ "'India-Russia Ties the Only Constant in World Politics', Says EAM Jaishankar," *Hindustan Times*, December 26, 2023, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/indiarussia-ties-the-only-constant-in-world-politics-says-eam-jaishankar-101703614878217.html>.

¹⁸ "Secretary Antony J. Blinken, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, and Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar at the Munich Security Conference," *United States Department of State*, February 17, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-german-foreign-minister-annalena-baerbock-and-indian-external-affairs-minister-subrahmanyam-jaishankar-at-the-munich-security-conference/>.

¹⁹ "India-Russia Trade Hits USD 66bn in 2024; Target of USD 100bn by 2030 on Track: Russian Envoy," *The Economic Times*, November 27, 2024, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/india-russia-trade-hits-usd-66bn-in-2024-target-of-usd-100bn-by-2030-on-track-russian-envoy/articleshow/115734758.cms?from=mdr>.

²⁰ Kazim Alam, "How India Is Circumventing US Sanctions to Grow Trade with Russia," *TRT WORLD*, September 5, 2024, <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/how-india-is-circumventing-us-sanctions-to-grow-trade-with-russia-18204147>.

BRICS to maximize its geopolitical influence and economic interests. BRICS serves as a platform to contest the prevailing economic and political hegemony of Western nations. The group prioritises collaborative initiatives and engages in discussions aimed at redefining global governance structures that have historically favored Western powers. A central view uniting the BRICS nations is their collective disillusionment with Western-led institutions, particularly those related to financial issues. BRICS members have articulated a desire to reduce their reliance on the US dollar, which has long served as the dominant currency in international trade. This desire has further strengthened in the wake of the Kazan BRICS Summit.²¹ Additionally, there is a concerted effort to move away from the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications (SWIFT) system, an international messaging network to facilitate financial transactions that was notably leveraged to isolate Russian banks in 2022.²² Following the US President Donald Trump's threats of a 100 percent tariff on imports from the bloc, India, while reaffirming its commitment to BRICS, has distanced itself from any initiative to weaken the dollar or introduce a common BRICS currency.²³

India is also a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), another significant multilateral entity that includes China and Russia. This Organisation is often perceived as countering Western interests, with both China and Russia regarded as adversaries by the US. The primary objectives of the SCO include enhancing economic collaboration and fostering security cooperation among its member states.

With concurrent membership of BRICS, SCO and Quad, India is pursuing a policy of strategic autonomy and trying to navigate smoothly in a

²¹ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "Russia Whole Heartedly Welcomes Modi-Xi Meeting in Kazan Which Is Important for Eurasian Stability: Envoy," *The Economic Times*, October 28, 2024,

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/russia-whole-heartedly-welcomes-modi-xi-meeting-in-kazan-which-is-important-for-eurasian-stability-envoy/articleshow/114694363.cms?from=mdr>.

²² Christian Perez, "What Does Russia's Removal from SWIFT Mean for the Future of Global Commerce?," *Foreign Policy*, March 8, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/08/swift-sanctions-ukraine-russia-nato-putin-war-global-finance/>.

²³ ET Online. "Reliance on Dollar Not Weakened: India Steers Clear of Any BRICS Currency Move amid Trump's Big Warning." *The Economic Times*, March 22, 2025. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/policy/reliance-on-dollar-not-weakened-india-steers-clear-of-any-brics-currency-move-amid-trumps-big-warning/articleshow/119328362.cms?from=mdr>.

complex geopolitical landscape by aligning itself with key global players in pursuit of its national interest. However, two days after Modi's July 2024 visit to Moscow, the US ambassador to India stated, "In times of conflict, there is no such thing as strategic autonomy; we will, in crisis moments, need to know each other." President Joe Biden's National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan on 13 July 2024 suggested that India's bet on Russia as a long-term reliable partner was not a good bet. Russia would side with China over India any day of the week.²⁴

Western Vulnerabilities

India has been taking full advantage of the West's vulnerabilities and its strategic and economic interests vis-à-vis China and Russia. India has conveyed its policy through various statements that its economic interests are not directly or entirely dependent on the West. At the same time, it has expressed its desire to avoid entering a war in the "Indo-Pacific" region, as its major economic interests are linked with Russia and China. The Economic Times, in its article titled "Congress Calls EAM S. Jaishankar a Failed Foreign Minister" (February 2023), mentioned Jaishankar's statement that India cannot engage in a conflict with China due to its larger economy.²⁵ He also reiterated that India should engage with China based on realism. In 2023-24, China remained India's major trading partner and India's membership in the SCO and BRICS further complicates its position as a "net security provider" under the US "Indo-Pacific Strategy."²⁶

US diplomat of Indian origin, Ashely J. Tellis, in his article, "America's Bad Bet on India," published in Foreign Affairs Magazine (May 2023), asserted that India sought the US support in addressing its tensions with China, while simultaneously aiming to avoid getting involved in any confrontation between the US and China that does not directly threaten its national interests.²⁷

²⁴ Stanly Johny. "India and a Case for Strategic Autonomy." *The Hindu*. July 18, 2024. <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/india-and-a-case-for-strategic-autonomy/article68418840.ece>.

²⁵ ET Bureau, "Congress Calls EAM S Jaishankar a 'Failed' Foreign Minister; BJP Hits out at Opposition Party," *The Economic Times*, February 22, 2023, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/congress-calls-eam-s-jais-hankar-a-failed-foreign-minister/articleshow/98153089.cms?from=mdr>.

²⁶ "China Largest Trading Partner of India in FY24 with USD 118.4 Bn; US Second with USD 118.3 Bn," *Hindustan Times*, May 12, 2024, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/us-news/china-largest-trading-partner-of-india-in-fy24-with-usd-118-4-bn-us-second-with-usd-118-3-bn-101715490778809.html>.

²⁷ Ashley Tellis, "America's Bad Bet on India," *Foreign Affairs*, May 1, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/india/americas-bad-bet-india-modi>.

Furthermore, Ashley Tellis, in his article “India’s Great-Power Delusions. How New Delhi’s Grand Strategy Thwarts Its Grand Ambitions” published in *Foreign Affairs* on 17 June 2025, states that “Indian economy is unlikely to match its Chinese counterpart before the middle of the century, if at all. By 2050, in all probability, Chinese economy will be closer to three times as large as that of India”. Furthermore, repudiating India’s aspirations to become a Great-Power, he writes, “India should not delude itself that it can contain China on its own, and even by the middle of 21st century, India may still have to rely on foreign partners.”²⁸

Impact of the US Policy Shift from Geopolitics to Geo-economics

The policy shift under the US President Donald Trump’s administration from geopolitical interests to economic interests has further tarnished India’s image. Prior to assumption of office by Trump, India had been enjoying unlimited access to the US corporate world and academic institutions, with a Foreign Policy that distinctly reflected India’s desire to pursue its interests with total disregard of the US sensitivities and interests. Washington’s shift from geopolitics to geo-economics has raised concerns about India’s nearly USD 46 billion trade surplus with the US in 2024.²⁹ The lopsided Indian trade policy favoring itself vis-à-vis the US and assertion of strategic autonomy have led to the imposition of punitive tariffs on India by the US. The Trump administration, despite having longstanding strategic relationship with European countries, historically close relations with countries such as Japan and South Korea, and membership of alliances such as NATO and AUKUS, has imposed tariffs on all countries that have enjoyed trade surplus with the US. The imposition of tariffs by the US on its key allies has underscored that India does not qualify for any preferential treatment as a member of the Quad.

India’s Internal Dynamics

Internal dynamics of India are increasingly driven by the extremist ideology of “Hindutva” and “Akhand Bharat”. According to the Indian government report presented in the parliament on 29 March 2022, India witnessed 3,399 cases of communal or religious riots during the period

²⁸ Ashley J. Tellis, “India’s Great-Power Delusions, How New Delhi’s Grand Strategy Thwarts Its Grand Ambition,” *Foreign Affairs*, June 17, 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/india/indias-great-power-delusions>.

²⁹ Office of the United States Trade Representative report on India, <https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/south-central-asia/india>

2016-2020.³⁰ The US State Department Annual Report on Religious Freedom 2025³¹, particularly mentions severe violations of religious freedom and the use of misinformation and disinformation, including hate speech, by Indian government officials to incite violent attacks against religious minorities and their places of worship. The report also describes changes made in India's legal framework since 2008, and specially under ten-year rule of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), to target and disenfranchise religious minorities, including the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) and several state-level anti-conversion, cow slaughter laws and their enforcement.

India's claim to be the world's largest democracy is not commensurate with its internal policies.³² According to Sweden's V-Dem Institute 2025 democracy report, India is categorized as an "Electoral Autocracy". The report states that India's autocratization started from 2008 with the slow but systematic dismantling of democratic institutions. The ruling anti-pluralist, Hindu-nationalist BJP and Prime Minister Modi's derailing of democracy is thoroughly documented, including deterioration in freedom of expression and independence of the media, harassment of journalists critical of the government, attacks on civil society and the opposition using laws on sedition, defamation and counterterrorism. The elections in June 2024 were a setback for the BJP, forcing it to govern in a coalition. 2024 was the first year since 2008 with no deterioration in democracy level for India but it has continued to remain an electoral autocracy since 2017.³³

State-Sponsored Terrorism by India

Canada and the US have presented undeniable evidence against India relating to the assassination and attempts to assassinate Sikh nationalist leaders in the two countries. On 14 October 2024, Canada announced the expulsion of six Indian diplomats, including the High Commissioner, following police

³⁰ "India Witnessed 3,399 Cases of Communal or Religious Rioting between 2016 and 2020." *The Wire*. March 29, 2022.

<https://thewire.in/government/india-communal-religious-riots-2016-2020>.

³¹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *2025 Annual Report* (Washington, D.C.: USCIRF, March 2025),

<https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2025-03/2025%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report.pdf>

³² Moisés Naím, *The Revenge of Power: How Autocrats Are Reinventing Politics for the 21st Century* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2022), 9, 22, 228.

³³ V-Dem Institute, *Democracy Report 2025*

(https://www.v-dem.net/documents/60/V-dem-dr__2025_lowres.pdf), accessed on April 15, 2023.

investigation that Indian government agents were connected to murders, intimidation and other “acts of violence” targeting Sikhs in Canada. Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Mélanie Joly stated that the choice to expel the diplomats “was taken after thorough deliberation and only after Canadian police collected sufficient, clear and solid evidence that identified six individuals as persons of interest in the Nijjar case”.³⁴

Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh, in a televised interview on 5 April 2024, admitted that India orchestrated the killing of Sikh and Kashmiri leaders in Pakistan. It has exposed the real face of India and its murderous intelligence agency, Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), operating under the diplomatic cover of its Embassies and Consulates.³⁵

The ruling BJP in December 2024 accused the US State Department and “deep state” elements in the US of trying to destabilize India with the support of the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), a group of investigative journalists and Indian opposition leader Rahul Gandhi.³⁶ The OCCRP report accused Indian PM Modi of having close ties with billionaire Gautam Adani, who was involved in a USD 250 million scam to bribe Indian officials and Indian state-sponsored hackers for using Israeli-made Pegasus spyware to target government critics.³⁷

The State Department expressed its disappointment with the Indian accusation and stated that the US supports freedom of the Press. The US also charged Nikhil Gupta and Vikash Yadav, two Indian officials working for RAW in the murder plot of Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, a dual US-Canadian citizen.³⁸ The US government is taking this criminal act very seriously. While criticizing

³⁴ Hanna Ziady, Paula Newton, and Tara John, “Canada Expels Indian Diplomats after Tying Government Agents to ‘Serious Criminal Activity,’” *CNN*, October 14, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/10/14/americas/canada-expels-indian-diplomats-intl-latam/index.html>.

³⁵ Steve Scherer and David Ljunggren, “Canada, US Worked Closely on Possible India Link to Hardeep Singh Nijjar Killing,” *Reuters*, September 15, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/canada-worked-closely-with-us-indias-possible-link-killing-source-2023-09-19/>.

³⁶ “Modi’s BJP says US State Department targeting India” *Dawn*, December 2024. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1877081>.

³⁷ Natalie Sherman, “US Charges Indian Billionaire Gautam Adani with Fraud,” *BBC*, November 20, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c78dkgm9e7ro>.

³⁸ Kanishka Singh, “US Charges Ex-Indian Intelligence Official in Foiled Sikh Separatist Murder Plot,” *Reuters*, October 18, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/legal/us-charges-ex-indian-intelligence-official-foiled-sikh-murder-plot-washington-2024-10-17/>.

New Delhi's plot to kill the prominent Sikh leader in New York, the US Ambassador to India stated in April 2024 that any government's involvement in assassination attempts on foreign soil crosses "an unacceptable red line".³⁹

Overhyped Military Prowess

Notwithstanding its unrelenting procurement of latest weapon systems to modernize its Armed Forces, India's inability to undertake military operations in a modern battlefield environment was exposed during Pakistan Air Force's counter-strikes on 27 February 2019, in response to the Indian attack on Balakot a day earlier. Pakistan Air Force (PAF) shot down two Indian fighter aircraft and captured one Indian pilot, Wing Commander Abhinandan. He was later handed over to Indian authorities at the Wagah border as a gesture of goodwill.

India's dismal military capability and the lack of dynamic professionalism of its armed forces for operating in a modern battlefield environment, were further exposed in the wake of the Pahalgam false flag operation, when the Indian Air Force (IAF) launched a massive attack on Pakistan on the night of 6–7 May 2025. A major aerial battle was fought between 72 Indian and 42 PAF fighter aircraft. Pakistan's befitting yet measured response under operation "Bunyanum Marsoos" during the IAF attack, and to the Indian attacks on its territory during the ensuing four-day war fought from 7–10 May 2025, resulted in India losing six frontline IAF aircraft, including four Rafale, and 78 drones of Israeli origin, including a Heron combat drone. In addition, Pakistan destroyed 26 Indian military installations, including two BrahMos missile depots and two batteries of S-400 missile defence system. Pakistan achieved the success without loss of even a single fighter jet or a high-value military asset.⁴⁰

Throughout the crisis, Pakistan maintained escalation dominance. Despite India's recklessness in not taking into account that both Pakistan and India are nuclear-armed states, the nuclear deterrence was at play. The controlled and calibrated "Quid-Pro-Quo Plus" response by Pakistan has

³⁹ Arpan Rai, "US Ambassador Tells India Government-Sponsored Assassination Plots Cross 'Red Line.'" *The Independent*, April 2024.
<https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/india/eric-garcetti-pannun-india-assassination-plot-b2521555.html>.

⁴⁰ "Tri Services Joint Press Conference" *ISPR Pakistan*, May 9, 2025,
["https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ax0FBm8jzjs."](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ax0FBm8jzjs)

established conventional deterrence against India. Indian leaders miscalculated Pakistan's conventional military power and the resolve to protect its sovereignty. It has also dispelled any notion of India's conventional military dominance.

The Indian miscalculations about its significance, the belief that in a prevailing international environment it could still sell its worn-out mantra of victimhood of terrorism and get away with attacking an independent nation, that too a nuclear power, have placed it in an embarrassing position. In doing so, India has exposed itself internationally as a paper tiger that could not live up to the image it had created about its dominance and invincibility in South Asia.

India is finding it hard to swallow its pride and digest its defeat during the four-day mini-war. Significantly, in less than two months after India's humiliating defeat, the Indian military started blaming political leadership for the failure. Indian Defence Attache in Indonesia, Captain Shiv Kumar, during a Seminar explicitly blamed the Indian political leadership for the losses suffered by the IAF.⁴¹ The Indian Deputy Chief of Defence Staff has blamed the close support provided to Pakistan by China and Türkiye as the cause of heavy military losses and defeat suffered by India.⁴²

On both occasions, in February 2019 and May 2025, Washington intervened at India's request to de-escalate the situation resulting from Indian aggression. However, India has refused to acknowledge the role played by the Trump administration in brokering a ceasefire between the two nuclear-armed states on 10 May 2025.

India's defeat during the Galwan Valley clash, where it lost 2000 sq km of territory and 20 soldiers, also shattered the myth of Indian military might.⁴³ It raises serious questions about India's ability as a dependable partner of the US in any future military confrontation with China and to act as "net security provider" in the region. The bulk of Indian military equipment is of Russian

⁴¹ "IAF Lost Fighter Jets Because of Political Leadership Constraints" *The Wire Staff Report* June 29, 2025, <https://m.thewire.in/security/iaf-lost-fighter-jets-to-pak-because-of-political-leaderships-constraints--indian-defence-attache>

⁴² "China Helped Pakistan with live inputs in conflict with India, claims Indian Army Official" *Geo TV Report*, July 4, 2025, <https://www.geo.tv/latest/612409>

⁴³ Siddiqui & Imran Ahmed, "Subjugation and surrender": Military veterans slam Modi government's continuing silence on Galwan". *Telegraph India*, June 16, 2023, <http://www.telegraphindia.com/india/subjugation-and-surrender-military-veterans-slam-modi-governments-continuing-silence-on-galwan/cid/1945450>.

origin and its incompatibility with Quad partners is a foregone conclusion. It is practically impossible for India to meet the operational parameters desired by Quad. Thus, for Quad to pitch India, a regional power, against China, a global power, in hostile Himalayan heights is a recipe for disaster for India. On the military front, India's misery does not end there. In any future conflict with China, it will always be conscious of the strong Pakistan military poised on one of its flanks, further curtailing the options and capacity it possesses. India has also suffered setbacks in its relations with its other neighbours that have further diminished its prospects of achieving regional dominance.

Recent developments in Bangladesh and Maldives have proved detrimental to India's aspirations for dominance in South Asia. With the unceremonious ouster of former pro-India Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in August 2024, India has lost its 53-year-long effort to keep Bangladesh as a compliant state.⁴⁴ The election of right-wing People's National Congress candidate Mohamed Muizzu as President of Maldives in November 2023 was another setback for India. Maldives was quick to order India to remove its military personnel from the country.

Despite the Nepal and India Friendship Treaty of 1950 and the open borders policy, there have been persistent border disputes between the two countries. These areas include the Kalapani-Limpiyadhur, which is the largest Indian encroachment of 370 km² at the tri-junction of China, Nepal and India borders. The Susta encroachment comprises 24 km² and various small territories of around 15 km² in the region. In all, there are around 71 territorial disputes between India and Nepal covering a total of 606 km².⁴⁵

Assessment of Indian Membership of Quad

India sees Quad as an opportunity to play in the big league at the global level, punching above its weight, casting aside its stigma of regional power and an opportunity to settle score with China. Secondly, India is using Quad to gain access to advanced Western technologies and expand its economic ingress in the capitalist West, only to back out when the chips are down. India has already

⁴⁴ Kanak Mani Dixit, "Bangladesh: Modi Government's Diplomacy Debacle," *Frontline*, September 3, 2024,

<https://frontline.thehindu.com/world-affairs/bangladesh-india-relations-sheikh-hasina-narendra-modi-neighbourhood-first-policy-south-asia-diplomacy-debacle/article68580081.ece>.

⁴⁵ Buddhi N. Shrestha, "The Natural environments and the Shifting Borders of Nepal".

<https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-and-nepals-kalapani-border-dispute-an-explainer-65354>.

done it in the case of purchase of discounted Russian crude oil and weapons like the S-400 missile defense system, where India brushed aside all Western objections.⁴⁶

India's involvement in the Quad is often justified as a strategic measure to counterbalance China's growing influence in the "Indo-Pacific" region. However, India's participation in the Quad is not essential for achieving this objective. The strategic chokepoints, particularly the Strait of Malacca, a strategic maritime corridor, present a more operationally viable and rational approach to Western countries for containing Chinese maritime trade and influence. However, China, in a display of wisdom, has prioritized the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as the flagship project of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to counter such a possibility.

India is also wary of the US due to its exclusion from the AUKUS and the resulting relegation of its status vis-à-vis Australia. The complexities of its foreign relations and state-sponsored terrorism further undermine India's ambitions and its utility in the evolving new world order. These ground realities indicate that India neither has the requisite capability to act as a "net security provider" in the "Indo-Pacific" region nor can it be trusted to do so. India only wants to accrue all the benefits that come with the status of "net security provider" but has articulated no real intention of taking on the responsibilities and risks associated with it.

While India's inclusion in the Quad may be seen as a strategic countermeasure against China, it is not aimed at stifling China economically. Instead, in any kinetic operation, India will be employed as a diversionary belligerent to dilute Chinese capability in the Western Pacific. In other words, the Indian Army will be used as 'Cannon Fodder' to alleviate the threat to the US and its allies in the Pacific. The recent Sino-Indian LAC agreement has effectively checkmated this US desire, which is now scrambling to keep the feud alive somehow.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Aftab Ahmed, Manoj Kumar, and Krishna N. Das, "As West Shuns Moscow, Officials Say India Eyes More Cheap Russian Oil," *Reuters*, March 14, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/india-considers-buying-discounted-russian-oil-commodities-officials-say-2022-03-14/f>.

⁴⁷ Andrew Scobell, Sameer Lalwani, and Daniel Markey, "How the India-China Border Deal Impacts Their Ties and the U.S.," *United States Institute of Peace*, October 31, 2024, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/10/how-india-china-border-deal-impacts-their-ties-and-us>.

The Squad

Derek Grossman, a senior defence analyst at Rand Corporation, mentioned on the social media platform X in 2024 that India's support for the Quad in countering China in the South China Sea will have its limits, highlighting that "New Delhi's primary concentration is on its immediate surroundings, which has created a necessity for a substitute to the Quad."⁴⁸ The US seems to agree with this assessment, as former US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin announced at a press conference on 2 May 2024 the formation of a new strategic quadrilateral group called the "Squad," comprising the United States, Australia, Japan and the Philippines.⁴⁹ The first informal meeting of the Squad's Defence Chiefs took place during the Shangri-La Security Dialogue in June 2023 in Singapore.⁵⁰ Considering the growing focus on the Oceania region, the significance of the Philippines is accentuated, making it the obvious choice for the Squad membership for two reasons: (i) its geographical location on the Northwestern limit of Oceania, close to the Chinese Nine-dash Line region; and (ii) because of the historically close ties between the US and the Philippines.

The latest meeting of the Squad Defence Chiefs was held in May 2024 in Hawaii.⁵¹ It was followed by cooperative marine patrols conducted in the Philippines' exclusive economic zone in September 2024.⁵² This alliance aims to address growing tensions and security challenges in the Pacific, particularly due to the rise of China and conflicting territorial claims. The coalition leverages the substantial naval and defence resources of the US, Australia and Japan, and the strategic geographic significance of the Philippines. The rise of informal alliances such as the Squad, besides the Quad and AUKUS, highlights a shift towards more flexible and adaptive security frameworks to address modern challenges. This trend aligns with the concept of a "ring of informal

⁴⁸ Maria Siow, "Manila Seeks Its Lift from SQUAD Group," *South China Morning Post*, 2024.

⁴⁹ Esha Banerjee, "How 'Squad' Is Neither Replacement for Quad nor Setback for India," *Firstpost*, May 12, 2024, <https://www.firstpost.com/opinion/how-squad-is-neither-replacement-for-quad-nor-setback-for-india-13770013.html>

⁵⁰ Oorja Tapan, "The Squad: Adding an 'S' for Security," *The Diplomat*, May 11, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/05/the-squad-adding-an-s-for-security/>.

⁵¹ Oorja, (2024).

⁵² Aaron-Matthew Lariosa, "Warships from the Philippines, Australia, New Zealand, U.S. and Japan Sail in Joint South China Sea Patrol," September 29, 2024, <https://news.usni.org/2024/09/29/warships-from-the-philippines-australia-new-zealand-u-s-and-japan-sail-in-joint-south-china-sea-patrol/>.

alliances,” focusing on cooperation among like-minded nations in the “Indo-Pacific” region. The Philippines is not replacing India in the Quad, but India’s hesitancy towards meeting the objectives of the “Indo-Pacific Strategy” with efforts to refrain from aggressive engagement with China dilutes the Quad’s focus.⁵³ The Squad grouping is meant to pose a more focused challenge to Beijing, which India seems unable to provide to the US.

Conclusion

India’s pursuit of “Strategic Autonomy” amid a high-stakes power play of global powers in the Asia-Pacific region and its efforts to act as a key player, both for the West and Russia as a member of the SCO and BRICS, make it an unreliable partner. Both sides understand that India will not take a firm position in favour of one side against the other as long as it serves its interests.

India’s participation in the Quad as an opportunist partner and its foot-dragging have led to the creation of the Squad. If India continues to show blatant disregard for the objectives of the Quad while enjoying the benefits of the West’s pro-India policies, it could ultimately be replaced by South Korea as the fourth member of the Quad. This explains why India is keeping its options open by participating in the Quad, BRICS and SCO initiatives to serve its interests, and using the uncertainty thus created as a bargaining chip, as both Russia and the US may be wary of India’s attitude, yet neither wants New Delhi to be in the other’s camp.

In the regional framework, South Asia has remained in a near-perpetual state of instability due to India’s aggressive policy towards regional states vis-à-vis its relationship with global powers and desire to act as a regional hegemon. The four-day war initiated by India against Pakistan and fought from 6 to 10 May 2025, has redrawn the politico-military map of South Asia and shattered India’s myth of dominance in conventional military power. The role of “net security provider” assigned to India under the US “Indo-Pacific Strategy” is now raising questions on the ability of India to successfully fulfil the role, as India is not even able to match Pakistan Military’s superior technology and fighting skills. This has led to reassessment of India’s relevance for the achievement of the US strategic objectives in the “Indo-Pacific”.

⁵³ Oorja, (2024).

The trustworthiness of India as a reliable member of the Quad continues to diminish, as the remaining three Quad members move towards more viable security arrangements to address their security concerns. India's participation in the Quad reflects its pursuit of regional dominance and aspiration to be a global power, though its desire to match China is nothing more than a dream. India's policy to exercise Strategic Autonomy while not entering a formal alliance will make it an unreliable partner and make its desire to become a Great Power unattainable. Resultantly, due to the volatility created by India, the potential for conflict in the region will remain high amid the broader challenges posed by regional and global power dynamics.

Climate Change and the Arctic Ocean: Exploring Geopolitical Shifts and Strategic Interests in the Region

Shereen Hashum¹

Abstract

Climate change is constantly transforming the Arctic region. The melting of its ice cap creates many opportunities for states, which rather results in competition among major powers than cooperation. The Arctic has been a significant political topic since the Cold War, transitioning from a potential conflict zone to an area of collaboration in the post-Cold War era. However, the evolving landscape of the Arctic is renewing the geopolitical dynamics and strategic interests among major powers, especially the US, China and Russia. Recognizing the Arctic's growing strategic importance, both Arctic and non-Arctic states are redefining their regional policies with a shift from cooperation to competitiveness and strategic assertion. This article explores the evolving geopolitical and strategic landscape of the Arctic, focusing on how climate-induced accessibility and resource abundance are transforming the region into a potential zone of conflict. It will analyze the implications of vast untapped natural resources and emerging shipping routes for global power dynamics. Furthermore, the study aims to assess how heightened competition and assertive national policies are shaping new geopolitical alignments in the region, undermining the existing Arctic governance mechanism, in particular posing challenges to the Arctic Council and the UNCLOS.

Keywords: Arctic Region, Climate Change, Geopolitical Competition, Strategic Interests, Mineral Resources, Governance Mechanism

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Introduction

Climate change is a pressing global issue that poses serious environmental concerns and has far-reaching geopolitical and strategic ramifications in international relations. One of the most visibly affected regions is the Arctic, where the rising global temperature is causing dramatic environmental transformations, particularly accelerating the sea ice sheet melting of the Arctic Ocean. The Arctic region, long known for its expansive ice sheets, is now in a constant state of change due to these climate-induced phenomena.²

The most discernible reduction in Arctic sea ice began in the 20th century and further accelerated in the 2000s, with changes becoming increasingly visible through satellite imagery. According to a 2024 NASA report, the sea ice of the Arctic reached its seventh-lowest extent on record in summer, covering approximately 4.28 million square kilometers (1.65 million square miles). This marked a significant reduction of about 750,000 square miles compared to the 1981-2010 average for that time of year.³ The annual maximum extent occurred in winter 2024, peaking at 15.01 million square kilometers (5.80 million square miles). While this was the 14th-lowest maximum on record, it still fell 640,000 square kilometers below the 1981-2021 average.⁴ These shifts have not only reshaped the Arctic's environmental landscape but have also altered its strategic and geopolitical significance.

The significance of the Arctic is not new to global politics; however, the impact of climate change has added renewed impetus to its relevance. Historically, global powers have shown interest in navigating the Northwest Passage (NWP), but thick ice sheets were a major impediment. As early as the 1800s, the British Admiralty received reports of diminishing sea ice near Greenland, raising hopes of accessing the NWP.⁵ Similarly, Vilhjalmur

² ACIA, *Arctic Climate Impact Assessment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

³ "Arctic Sea Ice Near Historic Low; Antarctic Ice Continues Decline," *NASA Earth Observatory*, September 24, 2024, <https://www.nasa.gov/earth/arctic-sea-ice-near-historic-low-antarctic-ice-continues-decline/>.

⁴ "Arctic Sea Ice Maximum 2024," *NASA SVS*, March 25, 2024 <https://svs.gsfc.nasa.gov/5242/#:~:text=Arctic%20sea%20ice%20maximum%2C%20March,the%20March%2014%2C%202024%20maximum.>

⁵ Charles Emmerson, *The Future History of the Arctic* (London: The Bodley Head, 2010).

Stefansson, in the early 1900s, projected the Arctic as a hub of economic activity and questioned who would benefit from its emerging resources.⁶

Throughout the 20th century, various global leaders demonstrated interest in creating economic bases in the Arctic. In the 1930s, Joseph Stalin aimed to secure Soviet bases in the Russian Arctic, while Canadian Prime Minister John G. Diefenbaker envisioned economic development in Canada's Arctic frontiers during the 1950s.⁷ Furthermore, European explorers had long searched for northern passages, discovering potential trade routes and vast natural resources, including gas and oil.⁸

The Arctic has recently transformed into a geopolitical and strategic frontier due to its ice sheet melting. The region has become more accessible due to rise of global temperature, opening up the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and the NWP for global shipping. These newly navigable routes offer significant economic benefits by reducing travel distances by up to 40 percent between northern Europe and northeast Asia, compared to traditional routes through chokepoints like the Suez Canal and the Strait of Hormuz.⁹

As the Arctic becomes more accessible, competition over its vast resource wealth has intensified. According to the estimates of the US Geological Survey, the Arctic holds about 90 billion barrels of oil (13 percent of the world's undiscovered oil) and 30 percent of its natural gas reserves, most of which are located offshore within 500 meters of the Arctic Ocean.¹⁰ This transformation has led to reconceptualization of the Arctic as a "new economic

⁶ Vilhjalmur Stefansson, *The Friendly Arctic: The Story of Five Years in Polar Regions* (London: Macmillan, 1921).

⁷ J. G. Diefenbaker, A New Vision (1958), in *Arctic Sovereignty and International Relations*, August 3, 2009, <http://byers.typepad.com/arctic/2009/03/john-diefenbakers-northern-vision.html>.

⁸ J. G. Diefenbaker, (2009).

⁹ Hassol, *Arctic Climate Impact Assessment*, 83; cf. International Northern Sea Route Programme (INSRP), accessed April 2, 2025, [http://https://www.fni.no/projects/international-northern-sea-route-programme-insrop#:~:text=INSROP%20\(International%20Northern%20Sea%20Route,Bering%20Strait%20in%20the%20east;Clive%20Schofield%20and%20Tavis%20Potts,%20%20Across%20the%20Top%20of%20the%20World?%20Emerging%20Arctic%20Navigational%20Opportunities%20and%20Arctic%20Governance,%20Carbon%20&%20Climate%20Law%20Review%203,%20no.%204%20\(December%2030,%202009\):%20473.](http://https://www.fni.no/projects/international-northern-sea-route-programme-insrop#:~:text=INSROP%20(International%20Northern%20Sea%20Route,Bering%20Strait%20in%20the%20east;Clive%20Schofield%20and%20Tavis%20Potts,%20%20Across%20the%20Top%20of%20the%20World?%20Emerging%20Arctic%20Navigational%20Opportunities%20and%20Arctic%20Governance,%20Carbon%20&%20Climate%20Law%20Review%203,%20no.%204%20(December%2030,%202009):%20473.)

¹⁰ U.S. Department of the Interior, U.S. Geological Survey, *Circum-Arctic Resource Appraisal: Estimates of Undiscovered Oil and Gas North of the Arctic Circle*, by Kenneth J. Bird et al. (Reston, VA: USGS, 2008), <https://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/2008/3049/fs2008-3049.pdf>.

frontier” within global geopolitics.¹¹

These environmental and economic shifts have sparked both cooperation and competition among Arctic stakeholders. While the need to manage environmental risks calls for collaborative frameworks, such as the Arctic Council, the lure of economic and strategic gains fuels rivalry. The region maintained a relatively peaceful status in the era following the Cold War, with Mikhail Gorbachev famously describing it as a “zone of peace” in his 1987 Murmansk speech.¹² However, as Francis Fukuyama argued, the end of the Cold War did not signify the cessation of geopolitical rivalry.¹³ Today, the Arctic continues to be a stage where global powers pursue their interests in both cooperative and competitive ways.¹⁴

These ongoing dramatic changes in the Arctic not only bring environmental concerns but also spark a new geopolitical competition and strategic manoeuvring within the area. With the ice in the Arctic melting further and trade routes and resources becoming accessible, the region becomes a key area in the power politics, including states within and outside the Arctic claiming their rights on it.

This paper aims to explore the emerging geopolitical dynamics and strategic interests in the Arctic region due to its evolving landscape as a consequence of the melting of its ice sheet. It will examine the changing narrative of the Arctic stakeholders and their regional policies, from cooperation to competition. It will analyze how the potential of vast unexplored natural resources and emerging maritime trade routes redefine geopolitical interactions in the Arctic and increase the chances of great power competition. Moreover, it will also evaluate how the heightened competition and assertive policies reshape realignment in the region, owing to the strategic and economic interests of the Arctic stakeholders and global powers.

¹¹ B. Kaiser, L. Fernandez, and N. Vestergaard, “The Future of the Marine Arctic: Environmental and Resource Economic Development Issues,” *The Polar Journal* 6, no. 1 (2016).

¹² Mikhail Gorbachev, The Speech in Murmansk at the Ceremonial Meeting on the Occasion of the Presentation of the Order of Lenin and the Gold Star Medal to the City of Murmansk (Moscow: Novosti Press Agency, 1987).

¹³ Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” *The National Interest*, no. 16 (Summer 1989): 3–18.

¹⁴ Gustavo Sosa-Nunez and Ed Atkins, eds., *Environment, Climate Change and International Relations* (Bristol, England: E-International Relations, 2016), <https://www.e-ir.info/publication/environment-climate-change-and-international-relations/>.

Climate Change and the Transformation of the Arctic Landscape

The Arctic region, once a scientific interest for the world, has now become an epicenter of geopolitics owing to global climate change. As the increasing temperature thinned its ice cap, competition for commercial and strategic interests emerged, emanating dramatic implications for the international system.¹⁵ As per the reports of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the average rise in the average temperature of the earth is measured as 1.46 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial levels in 2024.¹⁶ This increase is notably higher than the 0.6 degrees Celsius rise reported in the initial years of 2000s by the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA).¹⁷

The Arctic is experiencing a warming rate above the global average that is more than the normal worldwide temperature warming rate; it is twice the average. This warming speed of the Arctic is estimated to increase further as the disappearing ice cap increases the rate of heat absorption.¹⁸ Both the terrestrial and offshore ice in the Arctic Ocean melted as a result of rising temperatures.¹⁹

The rapid reduction in the Greenland ice sheet, along with glaciers and ice caps of the Arctic, has already led to significant alterations in ice conditions. Simultaneously, the melting of permafrost in both submarine and subsoil layers releases carbon in the forms of carbon dioxide and methane, further accelerating climate change.²⁰

Climate change is described as a “threat multiplier”, and it poses a significant risk of heightened geopolitical instability in the Arctic, extending

¹⁵ Charles K. Ebinger and Evie Zambetakis, “The Geopolitics of Arctic Melt,” *International Affairs* 85, no. 6 (2009): 1215–1232.

¹⁶ “2024 was the world’s warmest year on record,” *National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration*, January 10, 2025, [https://www.noaa.gov/news/2024-was-worlds-warmest-year-on-record#:~:text=Climate%20by%20the%20numbers,F%20\(1.46%20degrees%20C\).](https://www.noaa.gov/news/2024-was-worlds-warmest-year-on-record#:~:text=Climate%20by%20the%20numbers,F%20(1.46%20degrees%20C).)

¹⁷ Susan Joy Hassol, *Arctic Climate Impact Assessment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 2.

¹⁸ Alun Anderson, “The Great Melt: The Coming Transformation of the Arctic,” *World Policy Journal* 26, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 53.

¹⁹ Michael Meredith et al., “Polar Regions,” in *IPCC Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate*, ed. H.-O. Pörtner et al. (2019), <https://www.ipcc.ch/srocc/chapter/chapter-3-2/>.

²⁰ Jonathan Bamber, “Greenland’s Ice Sheet Could Melt at a Rate Not Seen in the Last 130,000 Years,” *World Economic Forum*, 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2020/11/greenland-melting-climate-change-worry-environment/>.

beyond threats to human security.²¹ The Arctic Ocean's transformation due to climate change is creating both opportunities and risks. While economic and strategic interests drive competition, the need for cooperative governance and environmental protection remains critical.

Harboring roughly 30 percent of the earth's untapped natural gas reserves and 13 percent of its unexploited oil resources, the Arctic has emerged as a region of increasing strategic relevance in foreign, security and economic policy domains. The retreat of the polar ice cap is facilitating access to previously unreachable areas, enabling expanded resource exploration and maritime transit. Concurrently, unresolved questions concerning authority over maritime areas and boundary delimitation within the Arctic Ocean and its neighboring regions are gaining greater prominence in regional and international discourse due to large deposits of resources and shipping routes.²² The Arctic's hydrocarbon resources alone can be profound for the global powers. As per the survey of the US Geological Survey (USGS), the continental shelves in the Arctic provide an extensive amount of unexplored gas and oil.²³

The mineral deposits richness of the Arctic does not end with oil and gas, but it also includes a large amount of hard minerals. In Russia, Murmansk and Norilsk contain large deposits of copper and nickel. In Canada, Baffin Island and Baffin Bay are enriched with high-level iron ore and coal and zinc deposits are found near Alaska, Nome and in the Bering Strait.²⁴

Besides hydrocarbon deposits, marine living resources, particularly fish stocks, are affected by shifting patterns of heat transfer, prompting their migration further north along the Atlantic sector of the Arctic Ocean. As a result, fishing fleets are increasingly required to shift their operations northward within the Arctic Ocean. Furthermore, the retreat of sea ice presents new opportunities for the shipment of these resources to the states with high

²¹ Dirk Notz and Julianne Stroeve, "The Trajectory Towards a Seasonally Ice-Free Arctic Ocean," *Current Climate Change Reports* 4 (2018): 407–16.

²² Kristian Åtland, "Interstate Relations in the Arctic: An Emerging Security Dilemma?" *Comparative Strategy* 33, no. 2 (2014): 145–66, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2014.897121>.

²³ U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), *USGS Arctic Oil and Gas Report: Estimates of Undiscovered Oil and Gas North of the Arctic Circle*.

²⁴ Todd L. Sharp, "The Implications of Ice Melt on Arctic Security," *Defence Studies* 11, no. 2 (2011): 297–322, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2011.590318>.

demand.²⁵

The access to Arctic fishing grounds will also increase as the Arctic water persists longer due to warming. In the Barents and Bering Seas, a large number of fishing industries exist, which can excessively benefit from the Arctic waters.²⁶ Ultimately, it will further increase competition among the stakeholders and can spark disputes. Moreover, the Arctic has become susceptible to the dynamics of the security dilemma in recent years. Its low-conflict zone is fading away as the five bordering countries of the Arctic Ocean have developed Arctic strategies to safeguard their strategic and economic interests in the region. Their Arctic strategies also include expanding their military capabilities. However, similar to other global contexts, one state's moves to boost its security can unintentionally cause insecurity in others, prompting them to respond in kind. As a result, the Arctic becomes a part of global geopolitical competition as the Arctic's water state continues longer.²⁷ Conversely, the impacts of climate change are driving new developments that contribute to escalating geopolitical tensions. As human activity in the Arctic intensifies, particularly in the harnessing of natural resources, there is a rising global interest in the region, further complicating the geopolitical landscape and heightening competition involving both state and non-state entities.²⁸

Theoretical Framework

The evolving geopolitical dynamics and strategic interests in the Arctic can be analyzed through the realist perspective. Realism emphasizes the absence of a central authority in the international system. According to the realists, the states are primarily motivated by their national interests, power and security. They tend to pursue these incentives at any cost, often increasing their military capacities and posturing assertive policies.²⁹ This theory is relevant in the Arctic context in light of geopolitical changes occurring there, where states pursue strategic interests and competition over resources.

²⁵ Tore Haug et al., "Future Harvest of Living Resources in the Arctic Ocean North of the Nordic and Barents Seas: A Review of Possibilities and Constraints," *Fisheries Research* 188 (2017): 38–57.

²⁶ Todd L. Sharp, *The Implications of Ice Melt on Arctic Security*, 297–322.

²⁷ Kristian Åtland, *Interstate Relations in the Arctic: An Emerging Security Dilemma*, 145–66.

²⁸ Kamrul Hussain, "Climate Change and Hard-Soft Security Nexus: Future of Arctic Security Cooperation," *International Journal of Politics and Security* 3, no. 1 (2021): 25–50.

²⁹ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

Neorealism can particularly be used to assess the state's behavior in the Arctic. Acknowledging the international system to be anarchic, with no central authority governing state behavior, states primarily pursue power and security. Therefore, the enhanced access to the Arctic's vast, unexplored resources and maritime trade routes has intensified competition in the region. States endeavor to maximize power and ensure their security in case of any other state's aggression. Every state tries to pursue its national interest and maximize power in case of accessibility to a region of strategic significance. For instance, Russia enormously expanded its military footprint in the Arctic to assert its dominance. This militarization aligns with the neorealist notion that states will enhance their capabilities to secure their national interests.³⁰

Furthermore, the integral perspective of realism is the concept of self-help and relative gain in the international system. States engage themselves advancing their status in the international system through increasing military capabilities, assertive territorial claims and undertaking strategic actions.³¹ In Arctic geopolitics, the key powers of the international system are ensuring such actions to assert their control over critical areas and expand their operational activities.³²

Russia's assertive Arctic policy to consolidate its power in the region and dominate the resource exploitation exemplifies the realist approach. This Russian approach aligns with the realist emphasis of power politics and security concerns.³³ The country's approach to heightening military deployment and strategic infrastructure in the Arctic reflects its efforts to enhance its relative power.

³⁰ Ryan Burke, "Fear, Honor, and Interest in the Arctic: The Case for Realism and Transactional Balancing - Modern War Institute," *Modern War Institute*, December 21, 2022, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/fear-honor-and-interest-in-the-arctic-the-case-for-realism-and-transactional-balancing/>; Dominik Stojkovic, "The Race for the Arctic: A Neorealist Case Study of Russia and the United States," E, May 17, 2021, <https://www.e-ir.info/2021/05/17/the-race-for-the-arctic-a-neorealist-case-study-of-russia-and-the-united-states/>.

³¹ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001).

³² E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1946).

³³ Steve Smith, "Realism," in *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, 7th ed., ed. John Baylis, Steve Smith, and Patricia Owens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 82–97.

Similarly, the US and its allies reciprocated by expanding their military infrastructure to counterbalance the Russian presence. Thus, reflecting the neorealist notion of balancing, where states align against a perceived threat to establish equilibrium in the international system. Moreover, the entry of China into the Arctic scenario further complicates the situation in the Arctic. China is a key power in the international system and it cannot distance itself from a strategic region. Though China is not an Arctic state, it declares itself a “near-Arctic state” and takes an active role in the Arctic region. China pursues a “Polar Silk Road” and has increased its Arctic activities, which reflect its strategy to expand its influence in the region, leading to tensions among the Arctic states. These developments underscore the realist view that states act unilaterally in the absence of a central authority, leading to heightened tension and conflict.³⁴

Realism also positions the Arctic as a geopolitical arena where the absence of effective governance allows the pursuit of national interests by the states. As Keil (2014) argues, neorealism perceives states’ actions as motivated by the pursuit of power and security, particularly in terms of hydrocarbon exploration and territorial claims. Neorealists believe that competition over resources and sovereignty prevails as the melting of ice makes Arctic more accessible. Keil points out that this perspective is apparent in military advancements of countries like Russia, the US and Canada, which seek enhanced influence over the potentially resource-rich areas of the Arctic.³⁵

Similarly, Dr Vahid Nick Pay and Harry Gray Calvo (2020) assess the Russian foreign policy in the Arctic through the realist lens, highlighting the long-term objectives of Russia. They argue that Russia’s Arctic policies reflect a realist approach to pursue national interest and security dominance. Structural realism explains how the Russian advancements in the Arctic region compete with the Western powers. The authors argue that the primary driving force for states is always national interest and the pursuit of power, regardless of the presence of institutional frameworks.³⁶

³⁴ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948).

³⁵ Kathrin Keil, “The Arctic: A New Region of Conflict? The Case of Oil and Gas,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 49, no. 2 (2014): 162–190, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836713482555>.

³⁶ Vahid Nick Pay and Harry Gray Calvo, “Arctic Diplomacy: A Theoretical Evaluation of Russian Foreign Policy in the High North,” *Russian Politics* 5, no. 1 (2020): 105–131, https://brill.com/view/journals/rupo/5/1/article-p105_5.xml.

Moreover, the realist principles can also be found in Canada's Arctic policies, which have emphasized security and national sovereignty in the wake of emerging geopolitical dynamics. The Canadian government increasingly invests in its military infrastructure to assert its control over the northern territories. Its purchase of a Canadian USD 6 billion Over-the-Horizon Radar system signifies its commitment to territorial control in the Arctic region.³⁷ These actions align with the realist perspective that states prioritize power and security, especially in regions of strategic importance. Furthermore, Canada also participates in joint military exercises, such as the Nanook, demonstrating its proactive approach in safeguarding its interests in the Arctic.³⁸

China is also actively involved in the Arctic region. Its involvement can be analyzed through realist principles, particularly neoclassical realism. Neoclassical realism considers systemic pressure and domestic factors in shaping foreign policy. In 2018, China represented itself as a "near-Arctic state" in its Arctic Policy White Paper. It asserted its interests in resource exploitation, scientific research and participation in Arctic governance. This strategic position reflected China's interest in the Arctic's potential benefits. These endeavours emphasized China's desire to expand its influence in the Arctic region. Neoclassical realists explain China's strategic behavior to be motivated by economic interests and perception of international status. China aims to secure its global status and strategic advantages by integrating itself into the Arctic framework.³⁹

Emerging Geopolitical Dynamics and Economic Interests in the Arctic Region

In recent years, the Arctic region has emerged as a critical arena for strategic rivalry among major powers, especially China, the US and Russia. This growing interest stems from the Arctic's wide ranging natural reserves and its potential to serve as a vital maritime corridor linking the Atlantic and Pacific

³⁷ Rob Gillies, "Canada's New Leader Announces \$4.2 Billion Australian Radar Purchase on Visit to Arctic Circle," *AP News*, March 19, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/canada-carney-arctic-circle-greenland-d44e557453bc402a8c4e617041e262b0>.

³⁸ "Canadian Military Flies the Flag in Frozen North as Struggle for the Arctic Heats Up," *The Guardian*, March 9, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/mar/09/canada-arctic-military-exercise>.

³⁹ Nicholas Poulson, *China's Arctic Policy: A Neoclassical Realist Approach*, Master's thesis, Aalborg University, 2021, https://vbn.aau.dk/ws/files/460093895/FINAL_THESIS.pdf.

Oceans. Russia has maintained a stronghold in the region through its geographical presence and investment in Arctic infrastructure. Although the US national security strategy treats Russia and China as distinct strategic challenges, their converging interests and cooperation in the Arctic present a new geopolitical reality.⁴⁰

Political scientist Rob Huebert introduced the concept of the “New Arctic Strategic Triangle Environment” (NASTE), describing the Arctic as a central arena for triangular security interests involving the US, Russia and China.⁴¹ These converging interests increase competition and geopolitical tensions in the region.

Russia has established its geopolitical foothold in the Arctic through military and infrastructural development. It has rebuilt old Soviet bases and constructed new ones to secure its interests in oil, gas and territorial sovereignty.⁴² After the US Geological Survey (2009) projected the Arctic as a mineral-rich region, the US sought more cooperation in the region; however, Russia had already placed a flag on the seabed beneath the North Pole to demonstrate its claim, shifting the Arctic discourse from cooperation to competition.⁴³

Russia’s strategy in the Arctic combines cooperation and competition. While it engages in governance and environmental discussions, it simultaneously protects its strategic interests through militarization and territorial claims.⁴⁴ Russia’s takeover of Crimea in 2014 exemplifies its assertive posture in strategically valuable regions, including the Arctic.⁴⁵ Additionally, Russia utilizes a mix of incentives and coercive tools in its Arctic

⁴⁰ Rebecca Pincus, “Three-Way Power Dynamics in the Arctic,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (2020): 40–63, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26891883>.

⁴¹ Rob Huebert, “The New Arctic Strategic Triangle Environment (NASTE),” in *Breaking the Ice Curtain: Russia, Canada, and Arctic Security in a Changing Circumpolar World*, eds. P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Suzanne Lalonde (Calgary: Canadian Global Affairs Institute, 2019), 76, <https://www.academia.edu/>.

⁴² Natalia A. Serova and Valentina A. Serova, “Critical Tendencies of the Transport Infrastructure Development in the Russian Arctic,” *Arctic and North* 36 (2019): 35–46, <https://doi.org/10.17238/issn2221-2698.2019.36.42>.

⁴³ T. Parfitt, “Russia Plants Flag on North Pole Seabed,” *The Guardian*, August 2, 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/aug/02/russia.arctic> (accessed April 9, 2025).

⁴⁴ Elana Wilson Rowe and Stina Torjesen, *The Multilateral Dimension in Russian Foreign Policy* (London: Routledge, 2008).

⁴⁵ “The Russian Arctic Threat: Consequences of the Ukraine War,” CSIS | Center for Strategic and International Studies, accessed April 6, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-arctic-threat-consequences-ukraine-war>

diplomacy.⁴⁶ It maintains dominance in the Arctic energy sector through state-controlled enterprises like Gazprom and Rosneft, which support Moscow's energy politics.⁴⁷ Climate change-induced ice melting has opened new maritime routes, triggering strategic competition between the US and Russia.⁴⁸

The post-globalization era and China's rise have also transformed the geopolitics of the Arctic. Although China is not an Arctic state, it has developed a formal Arctic strategy and integrated a Polar Silk Road into its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The strategy aims to undertake developmental projects and trade through the region. Moreover, the Trump administration's interest in buying Greenland highlighted the Arctic's geopolitical and economic significance.⁴⁹ The European Union also recognizes the strategic and economic importance of the Arctic. It actively seeks to enhance its Arctic presence, with Denmark, Sweden and Finland representing its interests.⁵⁰ The US recognizes the Arctic's strategic importance, particularly through Alaska, and aims to expand its influence both economically and militarily.⁵¹ Other Arctic states like Denmark and Norway are also pursuing greater involvement. Denmark focuses on Greenland's geopolitical significance, while Norway emphasizes energy exploration.

During the Cold War, the Arctic was a strategic frontier between the US and the Soviet Union. Today, the "Arctic Five", which are Russia, Canada, the US, Denmark and Norway, along with other stakeholders like Finland and

⁴⁶ "Kennan Cable No.24: Russian Foreign Policy in the Arctic: Balancing Cooperation and Competition," *Wilson Center*, accessed April 14, 2025, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no24-russian-foreignpolicy-the-arctic-balancing-cooperation-and->

⁴⁷ "The Russian Arctic Threat: Consequences of the Ukraine War," *CSIS | Center for Strategic and International Studies*, accessed April 6, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-arctic-threat-consequences-ukraine-war>

⁴⁸ M.E. Goodsite, R.G. Bertelsen, S. Cassotta Pertoldi-Bianchi, et al., "The Role of Science Diplomacy: A Historical Development and International Legal Framework of Arctic Research Stations under Conditions of Climate Change, Post-Cold War Geopolitics and Globalization/Power Transition," *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences* 6 (2016): 645–661. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13412-015-0329-6>; Elana Wilson Rowe, "Analyzing Frenemies: An Arctic Repertoire of Cooperation and Rivalry," *Political Geography*, October 8, 2019, 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2019.102053>.

⁴⁹ Matthias Paul, *Polar Power USA: Full Steam Ahead to the Arctic [Polarmacht USA: Mit Vlldampf in die Arktis]* (Berlin: German Institute for International and Security Affairs [SWP], 2019).

⁵⁰ "Changing Geopolitics in the Arctic," *Council on Foreign Relations*, last modified September 7, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/report/changing-geopolitics-arctic-0>.

⁵¹ Changing Geopolitics in the Arctic, (2023).

Sweden, aim to protect their interests. These states are strengthening their military presence through surveillance systems, coast guards and naval and air deployments, which further increase geopolitical tension in the region.⁵²

Meanwhile, Japan, China and South Korea have emerged as influential states in the region. China's increasing energy needs have led to major investments in Arctic resources, particularly in Russian oil and gas. In 2013, China bought Canadian energy company Nexen for USD 15 billion, highlighting its strategic intent.⁵³ China has also invested in rare earth minerals in Greenland.⁵⁴

China and Russia have partnered to develop the NSR, a key part of the Polar Silk Road, which is integrated into China's BRI. This maritime route reduces travel time between China and Europe by 20–30%, saving fuel costs.⁵⁵ Although China has not formally declared its Arctic ambitions, its investments and diplomatic engagement suggest its strategic interests.⁵⁶ Russia has welcomed China's financial and logistical support, which has bolstered both countries' Arctic strategies.⁵⁷ The NSR also opens the region to other East Asian nations.

Japan, the leading global importer of liquefied natural gas, and South Korea, a major trading economy, have also joined the Arctic race. Their involvement reflects both economic interests and concerns over China's

⁵² Kristian Åtland, *Interstate Relations in the Arctic: An Emerging Security Dilemma*, 145–66.

⁵³ Kamrul Hussain, *Climate Change and Hard-Soft Security Nexus: Future of Arctic Security Cooperation*, 25–50.

⁵⁴ Sophia Yan, "China is About to Tighten Its Grip on Rare Earth Minerals," *CNN Money International*, June 5, 2015, <http://money.cnn.com/2015/06/05/investing/molycorp-china-rare-earth-minerals/index.html> (accessed May 2, 2025).

⁵⁵ Federico Pieraccini, "The Arctic Silk Road: A Huge Leap Forward for China and Russia," *Global Research*, November 13, 2017, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/the-arctic-silk-road-a-huge-leap-forward-for-china-and-russia/5618000> (accessed May 5, 2025); Kamrul Hossain, "China's BRI Expansion and Great Power Ambition: The Silk Road on the Ice Connecting the Arctic," *Cambridge Journal of Eurasian Studies* 3 (2019): 6–7, <https://doi.org/10.22261/CJES.F3OSGP>.

⁵⁶ Gang Chen, "China's Emerging Arctic Strategy," *The Polar Journal* 2, no. 2 (2012): 358–71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2154896X.2012.735039>.

⁵⁷ Federico Pieraccini, *The Arctic Silk Road: A Huge Leap Forward for China and Russia*.

expanding influence.⁵⁸ The expanding China-Russia cooperation has raised alarms in Washington. The US perceives their cooperation in the Arctic through the lens of the “China threat” discourse, adding complexity to regional geopolitics.⁵⁹

Arctic Governance and Strategic Dynamics

The existing governance structures in the Arctic region become insufficient as the region transforms into a global strategic interest zone. The traditional governance mechanism has come under immense pressure as the region becomes essential for global power politics. The Arctic Council is one of the main governing bodies in the region; however, it has shortcomings concerning military security, which limits its effectiveness in warding off geopolitical competition. Furthermore, non-cooperative behaviour in the Council raises tension among the Arctic states. For instance, Russia was suspended from the Council because of Ukraine crisis, which disrupted diplomatic consensus and raised concerns about future cooperative governance in the region. As the Council struggles to adapt to new realities, the risk of unilateral actions and policy fragmentation continues to grow, plunging the Arctic region into power politics.⁶⁰

An inclusive and more robust governance mechanism is necessary to ensure stability in the Arctic. A renewed governance model is required to engage both Arctic and non-Arctic states and actors to prevent the escalation of power competition in the region. As Japan, China and South Korea are pursuing Arctic strategies and interests ranging from energy to maritime shipping, it is imperative to include them in Arctic governance. Their exclusion only serves to create ambiguity and render confusion and assertive actions. The Arctic authority can be expanded and reformed to include these alterations, as these changes are essential to manage the intersection of climate change, economic

⁵⁸ Kamrul Hussain, *Climate Change and Hard-Soft Security Nexus: Future of Arctic Security Cooperation*, 25–50; Ekaterina Klimenko and Camilla T. N. Sørensen, “The Status of Chinese–Russian Energy Cooperation in the Arctic,” *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)*, 2017, <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-background/2017/chinese-russian-energy-cooperation-arctic> (accessed April 18, 2025).

⁵⁹ Rosita Dellios, “The Rise of China as a Global Power,” *The Culture Mandala* 6, no. 2 (January 2005).

⁶⁰ Council on Foreign Relations, *The Arctic and Geopolitics in an Era of Climate Change* (April 2024), <https://www.cfr.org/report/arctic-governance>.

interests and security in the region. The Arctic risks becoming a conflict zone if adaptive and inclusive governance structures are not put in place.⁶¹

The legal framework in the Arctic, which is the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is highly challenged in its capacity to manage Arctic disputes. The UNCLOS is responsible for governing maritime boundaries and claims in the continental shelf; nevertheless, key Arctic states such as Canada and Russia have managed to bypass its mechanism of dispute resolution. The freedom to opt out undermines UNCLOS's authority and leaves many contentious issues unresolved, such as intersecting navigation rights and territorial claims. This increases the region's vulnerability and susceptibility to political standoffs. Thus, the lack of a binding enforcement mechanism in the Arctic governance increases its fragility in the already complicated geopolitical scenario.⁶²

Recently, strategic military exercises have increased in the Arctic, which reflect its growing significance in great power competition. Russia has reactivated its Soviet-era bases and developed a multi-purpose structure along the NSR, demonstrating itself as a dominating military actor in the Arctic. NATO has increased Arctic surveillance and military exercises. These developments mark a shift from soft-power scientific cooperation to hard-power posturing, revealing a fragile security environment that governance frameworks are ill-equipped to handle.⁶³ Moreover, these developments also revealed the fragility of the security environment in the Arctic, which could deteriorate because of the ill-preparedness of the Arctic governance framework.

Russia interprets its military manoeuvres as a security need, and NATO find itself bound by its collective defence narrative and deterrence obligation,

⁶¹ Nima Khorrami, "India-Russia Cooperation in the Arctic and the Rising Prospect of Polarization in Arctic Governance," *The Arctic Institute - Center for Circumpolar Security Studies*, December 4, 2024, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/india-russia-cooperation-arctic-rising-prospect-polarization-arctic-governance/>

⁶² "UNCLOS Is Not Adequate for the Arctic Because States Can Easily Opt out of Dispute Resolution," *UNCLOS Debate*, accessed May 2, 2025, <https://www.unclosdebate.org/evidence/1866/unclos-not-adequate-arctic-because-states-can-easily-opt-out-dispute-resolution>.

⁶³ "Russia in the Arctic: A critical examination," *Carnegie endowment for international peace*, accessed May 9, 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/03/29/russia-in-arctic-critical-examination-pub-84181>.

leading to tension along the alliance's northern areas. However, there is a lack of enough evidence that represents a novel military development. Though it is tempting to frame the Arctic-centred activities of states through the lens of great power competition, the region has not yet become a full-blown geopolitical battle ground. However, the current postures of Russia and NATO reflect their Cold War era rivalry, particularly focusing on safeguarding their ballistic missile zones, which are operational to ensure their strategic presence in the North Atlantic, in case a conflict erupts in Europe.⁶⁴

The Arctic governance structure rarely integrates climate change as a security threat in its framework, even though it enormously drives the Arctic into a geostrategic hotspot. Disputes over sovereignty of the region and shipping rights are emerging as new pathways are becoming navigable, particularly the NSR and NWP. Environmental protection is also a contentious issue in the Arctic among the various stakeholders. For example, the US and Canada disagree on the NWP's legal status; while the US insists it is an international strait, Canada claims it is a part of its internal waters. Such legal obscurity sparks geopolitical competition and calls for an effective governance framework that balances environmental management with evolving strategic importance.⁶⁵

Meanwhile, the native communities in the Arctic, who are the first to bear the repercussions of environmental and geopolitical transformation, are frequently not a part of the dialogue concerning the Arctic region. Albeit, they are a permanent member of the Arctic Council, they get deprived of their voting rights, especially in the national-level strategic dialogues. As the Arctic endures further changes, shipping traffic, military activity and industrial projects increase, thus threatening their culture, food security and territorial autonomy. As a result, an internal conflict could flare up in the Arctic, which could be hard to control due to the non-existent participation of the indigenous communities in the Arctic governance system. Without a proper channel of dialogue to resolve issues and ensure cooperation, the Arctic may become a conflict flashpoint in the future.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Russia in the Arctic: A Critical Examination, (2025).

⁶⁵ Gabriella Gricius, "Geopolitical Implications of New Arctic Shipping Lanes," *The Arctic Institute - Center for Circumpolar Security Studies*, February 27, 2025, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/geopolitical-implications-arctic-shipping-lanes/>.perative s.

⁶⁶ Aryn Baker, "How the Melting Arctic Will Both Hurt and Help Alaskans," *Time*, May 11, 2022, <https://time.com/6174947/melting-arctic-indigenous-communities-alaska/>.

Conclusion

The Arctic is no longer a peaceful and cooperative zone but a central arena for geopolitical contestation, strategic maneuvering and governance experimentation. The accelerating pace of climate change has dramatically transformed the physical and political landscape of the region by opening the routes and resources which were previously inaccessible. These shifts do not occur in isolation, but they reshape national interests, military strategies and international relations among states. Hence, the governance system and international relations in the Arctic must evolve beyond their current institutional constraints to address the incoming multidimensional geopolitical and strategic challenges.

Previously, the UNCLOS and the Arctic served as foundational structures to serve the interests of the Arctic region; however, the evolving geopolitical dynamics in the region require profound reforms in the governance structure of the Arctic to maintain cooperation. The contemporary dynamics of the Arctic in the aftermath of the structural change in the Arctic Ocean due to climate change have become more complicated for these traditional legal structures. Legal shortcomings in the Arctic Council deliberations in terms of clarity on maritime boundaries and security signify a major governance gap in the Arctic, especially after the region evolved to be a hotspot for great power competition. As new developments unfold in the geopolitical and strategic domains of the Arctic, traditional cooperative institutions become obsolete, risking a vacuum that could be filled by states' unilateral and assertive policies.

Furthermore, the involvement of non-Arctic nations such as China, Japan and South Korea signifies global recognition of the Arctic's strategic and economic importance. These states are taking interest in the Arctic shipping routes, energy reserves and infrastructure, which highlight the Arctic's strategic importance in the international system and necessitate significant reforms to ensure peace and cooperation in the region. The current model in the Arctic is exclusionary, in which observer states have limited influence. It is unsustainable in the contemporary arena when the Arctic is attracting global attention and is the center of great power competition. The Arctic needs a more inclusive, efficient and adaptive governance, which is essential to accommodate interests of an increasing number of states.

The melting of the Arctic ice sheet and data-supported evidence of its vast resources and significant maritime trade routes drive new regional realignment in the Arctic. The Arctic is likely to become a zone of geopolitical competition and power dynamics. The changing state of the Arctic will result in new alliances and rivalries. Russia and China could cooperate in the Arctic to counter the US in the region. Owing to competing interests of global powers, cooperation and peaceful exploitation of the Arctic is unlikely.

The native communities in the Arctic cannot be sidelined when the region is undergoing massive geopolitical and strategic transformation. The future of the Arctic also lies with these indigenous communities, as they are at the receiving end of any change and development in the region. Their knowledge about the region can compound governance reforms, safeguarding the environment of the Arctic and ensuring peace in the Arctic area. As the strategic interests of many states unravel in the Arctic through their regional policies, the path forward for the Arctic requires more focused diplomatic effort, inclusive of all stakeholders, to ensure the region does not turn into a conflict zone. A new upgraded institution needs to be formed to ensure peaceful co-existence in the Arctic because without reimaging the Arctic governance mechanism, the region risks falling into uncertainty and anarchy. The region risks becoming a flashpoint of geopolitical rivalry if timely cooperative measures and effective governance reforms are not undertaken, because climate change is serving as a geopolitical accelerator in the Arctic that needs to be curtailed before it spirals out of control.

A new governance framework must be created to include Arctic and non-Arctic states along with indigenous communities. The governance framework must focus on environmental sustainability in the region despite its emerging geopolitical dynamics. The indigenous communities should be protected and their experiences should be used to protect the Arctic landscape. All the stakeholders in the Arctic should bear the expenses of climate finance in the region through a robust governance framework.

The Geopolitical Impact of Pakistan's Victory in the Four-Day War with India

Azhar Ali¹

Abstract

From 6 to 10 May 2025, Pakistan was engaged in a Four-Day War initiated by India under the pretext of avenging the Pahalgam attack, yet another false flag operation. This paper analyzes the geopolitical impact of Pakistan's victory in the Four-Day India-Pakistan War across multiple domains, resulting in a significant geopolitical shift in South Asia. The resounding success of Operation Bunyanum Marsoos, a well-calibrated counter-response by Pakistan to India's Operation Sindoor exposed the inherent vulnerabilities of the Indian Armed Forces, particularly the Indian Air Force (IAF). The demonstration of a well-synergized military strategy and impressive warfighting capabilities of the Pakistan Armed Forces have shattered the long-standing myth of India's conventional military superiority over Pakistan, resulting in the establishment of conventional deterrence between the two nuclear-armed neighbors. India's recent military misadventure against its nuclear-armed neighbor has once again raised questions about its behavior as a nuclear weapon state, as it threatens regional and international peace and security. Notably, the Four-Day War has re-hyphenated India with Pakistan in the global discourse and highlighted the need for the resolution of the Kashmir dispute, a nuclear flashpoint in South Asia. The diplomatic support received by Pakistan before and after the war from the international community signified rejection of India's false narrative in the aftermath of the Pahalgam incident, failure of its diplomacy and isolation at the global level.

Keywords: Pahalgam Incident, Indian Aggression, Conventional Deterrence, Regional Power Shift, Diplomatic Isolation, Operation Sindoor, Operation Bunyanum Marsoos, Kashmir Dispute, Peace and Security, Four-Day War

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Introduction

Concerns have been raised internationally regarding India's practice of attributing nearly every terrorist attack on its territory and Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK) to Pakistan, immediately after the incident and without providing any evidence. Such incidents include: (i) Chittisinghpura massacre of Sikhs (2000); (ii) Attack on Indian Parliament (2001); (iii) Godhra train burning (2002); (iv) Samjhauta Express bombings (2007); (v) Mumbai attacks (2008); (vi) Pathankot attack (2016); (vii) Uri attack (2016); and (viii) Pulwama attack (2019). These incidents, initially blamed on Pakistan, were later exposed as false flag operations or found to have been committed by Indian nationals.² The latest in the series of Indian false flag operations was the Pahalgam incident of April 2025.

In the aftermath of the Pahalgam attack, which resulted in twenty-six deaths and injuries to seventeen others on 22 April 2025 in the Baisaran Valley in the Indian occupied Kashmir, concerns were expressed by many observers including Indians about the exploitation of the deadly incident by the Modi government to advance its domestic political agenda.³ In the days that followed, the Indian political landscape was dominated by warmongering, political rhetoric and saber-rattling.⁴ The Indian compliant media was quick to point fingers at Islamabad.⁵ Pakistan was blamed within ten minutes of the incident.⁶ The killings were instantly framed as an act of war by the Modi government, without sharing any credible evidence with the world.⁷

² Reema Shaukat, *India's False Flag Operations*, February 27, 2024, <https://www.nation.com.pk/27-Feb-2024/india-s-false-flag-operations>, accessed June 18, 2025.

³ "Leaked Document Alleges RAW Role in Orchestrating Pahalgam False Flag Operation," *The Express Tribune*, May 2025, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2543404/indian-intelligence-accused-of-staging-pahalgam-attack-according-to-leaked-psy-ops-file>.

⁴ Haroon Janjua, "Pahalgam Attack: Tensions Rise between Pakistan, India," *dw.com* (Deutsche Welle, April 24, 2025), <https://www.dw.com/en/pahalgam-attack-tensions-rise-between-pakistan-india/a-72339533>.

⁵ "Kashmir: Why Was India so Quick to Blame Pakistan?," *Lowy Institute*, 2025, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/kashmir-why-was-india-so-quick-blame-pakistan>.

⁶ "Tarar Tears through India's False Flag Op," *The Express Tribune*, April 25, 2025, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2542313/tarar-tears-through-indias-false-flag-op>.

⁷ "India's 'New Normal' of Perpetual War Will Damage Its Democracy," *Al Jazeera*, May 13, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2025/5/13/indias-new-normal-of-perpetual-war-will-damage-its-democracy>.

India initially took some non-kinetic diplomatic measures against Pakistan, followed by military aggression in May. On 24 April, at the press conference held by Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri, following the special Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) meeting chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, false and unfounded allegations were made against Pakistan. He stated, "The Cabinet Committee had decided that the Pahalgam attack had cross-border links to Pakistan".⁸ Notably, India failed to provide any evidence linking the incident to Pakistan, despite Islamabad's repeated insistence.⁹

Consequently, the Modi government undertook following decisions: (i) The Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) 1960 was held in abeyance; (ii) Wagah-Attari border was closed; (iii) Pakistani nationals were restricted from travelling to India; (iv) Defence Attachés in the Pakistani High Commission in New Delhi were declared persona non grata; and (v) The overall strength of Pakistan's diplomatic staff at New Delhi was reduced from fifty-five to thirty.¹⁰ Pakistan perceived these steps as a pretext for Narendra Modi's impending military aggression against Pakistan.¹¹ Regrettably, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's offer to support a "credible, neutral and transparent international investigation" into the Pahalgam incident¹² was rejected by India.¹³

In view of India's escalatory measures, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif convened a meeting of the National Security Committee (NSC) on 24 April 2025. According to the statement issued by the Prime Minister's Office (PMO):

⁸ "India Unleashes Hydro Terror," *The Express Tribune*, April 24, 2025, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2541925/india-unleashes-hydro-terror>.

⁹ "Pakistan Army Says India Gave No Evidence on Pahalgam Terror Attack," *Hindustan Times*, April 29, 2025, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/pakistan-army-says-india-gave-no-evidence-on-pahalgam-terror-attack-101745949090499.html>.

¹⁰ Dr Hasan Zafar, "False Flags and Fallout: The Politics behind the Pahalgam Attack," *The Friday Times*, April 24, 2025, <https://thefridaytimes.com/24-Apr-2025/false-flags-and-fallout-the-politics-behind-the-pahalgam-attack>.

¹¹ Kalika Mehta and Matt Ford, "Pakistan Accuses India of Planning 'Military Strike' Soon," *dw.com*, April 29, 2025, <https://www.dw.com/en/pakistan-accuses-india-of-planning-military-strike-soon/a-72391287>.

¹² "PM Shehbaz Says Pakistan Open to 'Neutral, Transparent' Probe into Pahalgam Attack," *DAWN*, April 26, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1906694>.

¹³ Anirban Bhaumik, "India Rejects Pakistan's Call for a Joint Probe into Pahalgam Attack, Says Evidence Shared Earlier Used to Shield Terrorists," *Deccan Herald*, May 8, 2025, <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/india-rejects-pakistans-call-for-a-joint-probe-into-pahalgam-attack-says-evidence-shared-earlier-used-to-shield-terrorists-3531930>.

(i) Pakistan categorically rejected India's decision to hold the IWT in abeyance, declaring that any attempt to stop the flow of water from India will be considered as an act of war and will be responded to with full force across the complete spectrum of national power; (ii) Pakistan would consider suspending all bilateral agreements with India, including the Simla Agreement, until India ceased its involvement in terrorism inside Pakistan and its violations of international norms and United Nations (UN) resolutions; (iii) Wagah Border was closed, suspending all cross-border transit, with those already in Pakistan required to return to India by 30 April; (iv) Visas issued under SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme (SVES) to Indian nationals were suspended and cancelled, excluding Sikh religious pilgrims; (v) Indian Defence, Naval and Air Advisors posted in Indian High Commission in Islamabad were declared *persona non grata* and directed to leave Pakistan by 30 April, along with their support staff; (vi) Indian High Commission in Islamabad was downsized to a maximum of thirty diplomats and staff members; (vii) Pakistan's airspace was closed to all Indian-owned or Indian-operated airlines; and (viii) all trade with India, including transit to or from any third country through Pakistan, was suspended.¹⁴

On the night of 6–7 May, India launched a series of airstrikes, codenamed Operation Sindoor, inside Pakistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), in blatant violation of Article 2(4) of the UN Charter.¹⁵ The IAF flagrantly breached Pakistan's territorial sovereignty by targeting civilian population with standoff weapons across the international border in Muridke, Sialkot and Bahawalpur, as well as across the Line of Control (LoC) in Kotli and Muzaffarabad. Indian jets also targeted the Nauseri Dam, a part of the Neelum-Jhelum Hydropower project.¹⁶ The unprovoked Indian attacks resulted in the death of thirty-one innocent civilians, while leaving fifty-seven people injured.¹⁷ India's aggression was termed as "a shame" by the US President

¹⁴ "Prime Minister's Office, Islamabad, Pakistan," *Pmo.gov.pk*, 2025, https://www.pmo.gov.pk/press_release_details.php?pr_id=6034.

¹⁵ Jillian Kestler-D'Amours, "Kashmir updates: Pakistan claims Pahalgalam attack 'false flag operation'," *Al Jazeera*, April 24, 2025, accessed June 13, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2025/4/24/kashmir-attack-live-india-summons-pakistan-envoy-hunts-pahalgalam-gunmen>.

¹⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, "Pakistan Strongly Condemns India's Blatant Aggression," May 7, 2025, <https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/pakistan-strongly-condemns-indias-blatant-aggression>, accessed June 13, 2025.

¹⁷ "31 Civilians Martyred, 57 Injured in Unprovoked Indian Aggression: DG ISPR," *The News International*, May 7, 2025, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/1309295-31-civilians-martyred-57-injured-in-unprovoked-indian-aggression-dg-ispr>.

Donald Trump.¹⁸

Pakistan Air Force (PAF) gave a measured response to Indian aggression on 6–7 May by shooting down six IAF fighter jets, including four Rafale, and an Israeli-made Heron combat drone. Pakistani forces also destroyed a Brigade Headquarters and several check posts along the LoC.¹⁹

As part of “Marka-e-Haq” (the Battle of Truth), the official name given by Pakistan to the May 2025 conflict with India, Pakistan Armed Forces launched “Operation Bunyanum Marsoos” (Iron Wall) on 10 May 2025, in response to the Indian military’s dastardly attacks.²⁰ It comprised a series of strikes by Fateh-1 and Fateh-2 missile systems targeting 26 critical Indian military installations, including airbases, missile facilities and other strategic sites, with the primary objective of deterring further aggression.²¹ The targets included: (i) BrahMos missile storage sites in Beas and Nagrota; (ii) Airbases and airfields at Udhampur, Pathankot, Adampur, Bathinda, Sirsa, Akhnoor, Halwara, Mamun, Suratgarh, Jammu, and Barnala; (iii) Artillery gun positions in Dehrangyari and Mankot, IIOJK; (iv) Brigade Headquarters at K G Top and Bhimber Gali, along with a supply depot in Uri; (v) Indian military posts including Dharam Sal 1, Danna 1, Table Top and positions opposite the Phuklian sector, as well as forward posts such as Rabtanwali, Danna, Khawaja Bhaik Complex and Ring Contour near Sankh along the LoC; (vi) Additional LoC positions including Rahtanwali Post, Jazeera Post Complex, Kafir Mehri, Shahpar 3 and Ghadar Top; (vii) Indian Military Intelligence training center in Rajouri; and (viii) S-400 air defense system at Adampur neutralized using JF-17 Thunder.²²

¹⁸ Sanaullah Khan et al., “Pakistan Downs 5 Indian Jets as Retaliation for Late-Night Strikes at 6 Sites: Officials,” *DAWN*, May 6, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1908824>.

¹⁹ “31 Civilians Martyred, 57 Injured in Indian Missile Attacks: DG ISPR,” *Associated Press of Pakistan*, May 7, 2025, <https://www.app.com.pk/national/31-civilians-martyred-57-injured-in-indian-missile-attacks-dg-ispr/>.

²⁰ Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), “Afghan National Among 3 Terrorists Killed in North Waziristan Operation,” press release, February 6, 2025, ISPR (Pakistan), accessed [today’s date], <https://ispr.gov.pk/press-release-detail?id=7283>.

²¹ “Pakistan Military Releases Details of Operation ‘Bunyanum Marsoos,’” *Brecorder*, May 12, 2025, <https://www.brecorder.com/news/40362281/pakistan-military-releases-details-of-operation-bunyanum-marsoos>.

²² “Pakistan Launches,” *Radio.gov.pk*, 2025, <https://radio.gov.pk/10-05-2025/pakistan-launches-operation-bunyan-un-marsoos-to-respond-indian-aggression>.

Eventually, after four days of intense military confrontation, a ceasefire was announced on 10 May by the US President Donald Trump, at Indian request, ending the hostilities that had significantly heightened tensions between the two nuclear-armed neighbors.²³ Pakistan's victory in the Four-Day War marks a pivotal moment in South Asian geopolitics. The outcome of the war has not only shattered longstanding assumption about India's conventional military superiority over Pakistan, but also defined the new strategic realities, both regionally and globally. Furthermore, the war has yet again highlighted the intricate interplay of regional geopolitics and international diplomacy, underscored by the role played by President Trump in brokering a ceasefire and offering to mediate between India and Pakistan to resolve the Kashmir dispute. Pakistan's decisive victory has prompted a fundamental reassessment of regional power dynamics, diplomatic strategies and the prospects for lasting peace in South Asia.

This paper aims to answer the following two research questions: (i) What is the geopolitical impact of Pakistan's victory in the Four-Day War with India?; and (ii) How Pakistan's victory in the Four-Day War with India has shifted the balance of power in South Asia and contributed to maintaining strategic stability in the region?

Research Methodology

This research paper uses a qualitative research methodology based entirely on secondary sources to analyze the geopolitical impact created by Pakistan's victory in the Four-Day War with India. The research draws from a wide range of publicly available sources, including official statements, think-tank reports, academic analyses, media coverage and expert opinion. Through thematic analysis, the study examines key topics such as conventional deterrence, regional power dynamics, diplomatic responses and the evolving discourse on the Kashmir dispute. The research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the strategic and diplomatic implications of the war for India and its impact on the regional peace, strategic stability and security.

²³ "India and Pakistan Agree Ceasefire: What Does It Mean?" *Al Jazeera*, May 10, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/10/india-and-pakistan-agree-ceasefire-what-does-it-mean>, accessed June 13, 2025.

Critical Assessment of Operation Sindoor

Operation Sindoor stands as a glaring example of strategic miscalculation and under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Launched in the aftermath of the Pahalgam incident, the operation was hastily conceived and poorly executed, reflecting lack of coherent military planning and political foresight. Rather than demonstrating strength, it exposed deficiencies in India's defense preparedness and ability to manage crises diplomatically. The downing of advanced Indian military aircraft by PAF not only eroded India's military credibility but also delivered a blow to its global power aspirations. India's request to Washington to broker a ceasefire, in view of Pakistan's massive retaliation that caused colossal damage to Indian military installations, radar stations and missile depots, further revealed India's vulnerability and inability to defeat Pakistan in the conventional domain.

Tactical and Strategic Defeat of Operation Sindoor: Operation Sindoor was touted as a decisive tactical operation aimed at neutralizing those responsible by pursuing the so-called perpetrators of the Pahalgam attack "to the ends of the earth."²⁴ However, it failed to translate into operational success.²⁵ Despite the scale and symbolism of the strikes, Operation Sindoor has exposed a critical gap between New Delhi's intent and the resultant outcome.²⁶ The Indian authorities have been unable to capture any of the four alleged perpetrators, raising serious questions about the intent and effectiveness of India's counterterrorism measures.²⁷ The inability to translate tactical moves into sustained geopolitical influence has exposed weaknesses in India's strategic approach.²⁸

²⁴ Narendra Modi, "PM Narendra Modi's Address to the Nation - Operation Sindoor," *YouTube*, May 12, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZkICICEHUSE>.

²⁵ Sophie Landrin and Elise Vincent, "Military Operation in Pakistan Reveals Weaknesses of India's Air Force," *Le Monde*, May 8, 2025, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/05/08/military-operation-in-pakistan-reveals-weaknesses-of-india-s-air-force_6741047_4.html.

²⁶ Shemin Joy, "How Is Operation Sindoor Successful If Pahalgam Terrorists Haven't Been Caught? Congress Asks BJP," *Deccan Herald*, May 12, 2025, <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/how-is-operation-sindoor-successful-if-pahalgam-terrorists-havent-been-caught-congress-asks-bjp-3536783>.

²⁷ Aswini K Ray, "Lesson from Op Sindoor: To Truly Win, India Must Tone down Its Public Trumpeting," *The Wire*, July 2025, <https://thewire.in/politics/lesson-from-op-sindoor-maga-miga-modi-trumpeting>.

²⁸ "What Do These Six Indicators Tell Us of India's Diplomacy after Operation Sindoor?," *The Wire*, June 7, 2025, <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/operation-sindoor-india-modi-diplomacy-situation>.

At the strategic level, this failure carries significant implications. First, by launching a high-risk operation without demonstrable tactical gains, India has weakened its deterrent credibility and exposed limitations of its military capabilities.²⁹ Second, Operation Sindoor appeared driven more by the need to project India's military muscle and personal bravado of Narendra Modi than by a coherent counterterrorism strategy.³⁰ Third, the failure of Operation Sindoor would not only remain confined to the Indian battlefield losses, but also reverberate through the strategic calculus, both regionally and globally, ultimately impacting India's long-term strategic ambitions.³¹

India suffered heavy losses as Pakistan's swift mobilization, precise strikes and use of advanced drone and missile systems outmatched Indian conventional tactics.³² Pakistan downed six Indian fighter aircraft in rapid succession. The aircraft losses comprised four Rafale, one Su-30MKI and one MiG-29, marking a significant setback for the IAF in the initial phase of the conflict.³³

The loss of Indian fighter jets has been acknowledged by Indian Chief of Defence Staff General Anil Chauhan, who stated that their downing by Pakistan was due to "tactical errors" made by the Indian pilots.³⁴ Similarly, India's Defence Attaché to Indonesia, Captain Shiv Kumar, has also publicly acknowledged the loss of several aircraft on the first night of the conflict.³⁵

²⁹ Prasenjit Bose, "Operation Sindoor — a Case of Doubtful Deterrence," *The Hindu*, May 18, 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/operation-sindoor-a-case-of-doubtful-deterrence/article69591261.ece>.

³⁰ Mehul Malpani, "Prime Minister Narendra Modi Declares Operation Sindoor as Biggest and Most Successful Anti-Terror Operations in India's History," *The Hindu*, May 31, 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/operation-sindoor-is-biggest-and-most-successful-anti-terror-operations-in-indias-history-says-pm-modi/article69641111.ece>.

³¹ Omair Ahmad, "The Many Failures of Operation Sindoor," *The Wire*, May 23, 2025, <https://thewire.in/politics/the-many-failures-of-operation-sindoor>.

³² Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), "11 Soldiers Martyred, 78 Wounded While Defending Pakistan in Indian Attack," press release, May 13, 2025, *ISPR*, accessed July 2, 2025, <https://ispr.gov.pk/press-release-detail?id=7283>.

³³ "India Loses Four Rafale Jets, Pakistan Condemns Aggression: Ishaq Dar," *Aaj News*, June 4, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f6mx1wBP6gE>.

³⁴ "India Confirms It Lost Fighter Jets in Recent Pakistan Conflict," *Bloomberg Television*, June 1, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YaUyntSzgds>.

³⁵ "India Again Admits Jet Losses in Pakistan Clash," *The Express Tribune*, June 30, 2025, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2553367/india-again-admits-jet-losses-in-pakistan-clash>. "India Finally Admits It Lost War Planes in Recent Clash with Pakistan," Associated Press of Pakistan, May 31, 2025, <https://www.app.com.pk/foreign-correspondent/india-finally-admits-it-lost-war-planes-in-recent-clash-with-pakistan/>.

According to Lieutenant General Rahul Singh, the Deputy Chief of Army Staff (Capability Development and Sustenance), India's indigenous defence equipment faced significant performance failures and supply chain delays during Operation Sindoor, exposing serious shortcomings in India's preparedness and its claims of self-reliance.³⁶ Pravin Sawhney, a renowned Indian security analyst, has emphasized the need for India to assess how Pakistan's military, operating with just a fifth of India's defense budget, manages to hold its own in military engagements.³⁷

India's Diplomatic Failure: While Operation Sindoor received broad endorsement within the country,³⁸ India found itself diplomatically isolated, as none of its key strategic partners, including the US, Russia and France, publicly displayed any solidarity with New Delhi.³⁹ The diplomatic isolation underscored increasing skepticism among the world's key capitals concerning New Delhi's unconvincing justification for initiating the conflict, as none offered public support throughout the escalation.⁴⁰ In a most desperate diplomatic stunt, India sent seven all-party delegations to thirty-two countries across the world to explain its military aggression against Pakistan.⁴¹ Despite this outreach, the effort was largely ineffective, as the delegations failed to garner international backing, highlighting the growing disconnect between India's domestic narrative and global perceptions.⁴²

³⁶ "Five Key Revelations from Army's Deputy Chief on Operation Sindoor," *The Wire*, July 4, 2025,

<https://thewire.in/security/five-key-revelations-lt-gen-rahul-singh-operation-sindoor>.

³⁷ Tom Stevenson, "Tom Stevenson | across the Line of Control," *London Review of Books*, May 18, 2025, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2025/may/across-the-line-of-control>.

³⁸ Omair Ahmad, "The Many Failures of Operation Sindoor," *The Wire*, May 23, 2025, <https://thewire.in/politics/the-many-failures-of-operation-sindoor>.

³⁹ Amit Baruah, "Has the Fallout from Operation Sindoor Isolated India? A Frontline Webinar," *Frontline*, June 16, 2025, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/world-affairs/operation-sindoor-india-pakistan-diplomacy-geopolitics/article69700900.ece>.

⁴⁰ Devirupa Mitra, "World Capitals Urge Calm in Wave of Diplomatic Activity after India's Missile Strikes on Pakistan," *The Wire*, May 7, 2025, <https://m.thewire.in/article/diplomacy/despite-varying-alignment-world-capitals-urge-calm-post-indian-missile-strikes>.

⁴¹ Bharat Bhushan, "Will All-Party Delegation Strengthen India's Stance or Weaken Its Position?," *Deccan Herald*, May 23, 2025, <https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/will-all-party-delegation-strengthen-indias-stance-or-weakenitsposition-3554036>.

⁴² Aswini K Ray, "Lesson from Op Sindoor: To Truly Win, India Must Tone down Its Public Trumpeting," *The Wire*, July 2025, <https://thewire.in/politics/lesson-from-op-sindoor-maga-miga-modi-trumpeting>.

Despite attempting to implicate Pakistan in the Pahalgam incident, India failed to present credible evidence to the international community, which declined to endorse its allegations against Islamabad.⁴³ In contrast, Pakistan's unified domestic response and effective diplomacy were able to ensure the failure of India's slanderous campaign against Pakistan.⁴⁴

Notably, none of the major powers or international multilateral forums, including the US, China, Russia, the United Kingdom, the EU, the UN, the QUAD, BRICS, the SCO, or even the G7, echoed New Delhi's claims or lent diplomatic weight to its stance.⁴⁵ Even within forums where India traditionally enjoys considerable influence, such as the BRICS, the member states refrained from endorsing India's position, underlining the fallacy of its unfounded allegations against Pakistan.⁴⁶

Political Defeat: Narendra Modi is facing severe criticism from opposition parties and defense analysts, who accuse him of undertaking Operation Sindoor for his political gains while withholding crucial information, including losses suffered by the IAF.⁴⁷ The security failure at Pahalgam triggered widespread public protests and calls for the resignation of prominent Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) officials, revealing significant divisions within India. The unprecedented call from Shiv Sena demanding resignation of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah reflected growing discontent within the ruling establishment. The party accused the government of exploiting national security concerns for political gains, while presiding over a significant foreign policy failure following Operation Sindoor.⁴⁸

⁴³ Muhammad Abubaker, "India's Failed Diplomatic Bid to Isolate Pakistan Post-Pahalgam," *Strategic Vision Institute*, June 2, 2025, <https://thesvi.org/indias-failed-diplomatic-bid-to-isolate-pakistan-post-pahalgam/>.

⁴⁴ Qazi M. Khalilullah (Ret.), "India's Diplomatic Debacle," talk, *Center for International Strategic Studies Sindh*, Commemoration of Youm-e-Takbeer seminar/webinar, 29 May 2025.

⁴⁵ Muqtadar Khan, "Has Modi's Diplomacy Undermined India's National Interests?," *The Diplomat*, May 27, 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/05/has-modis-diplomacy-undermined-indias-national-interests/>.

⁴⁶ Muhammad Abubaker, "India's Failed Diplomatic Bid to Isolate Pakistan Post-Pahalgam," *Strategic Vision Institute*, June 2, 2025, <https://thesvi.org/indias-failed-diplomatic-bid-to-isolate-pakistan-post-pahalgam/>.

⁴⁷ "Modi Government under Fire for Allegedly Hiding Losses in 'Operation Sindoor,'" *Ptv.com.pk*, 2025, <https://ptv.com.pk/ptvworld/newsdetail/6872>.

⁴⁸ Mrityunjay Bose, "'Operation Sindoor Is a Failure': Sanjay Raut Says Demanding Amit Shah's Resignation," *Deccan Herald*, May 27, 2025, <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/maharashtra/operation-sindoor-is-a-failure-sanjay-raut-says-demanding-amit-shahs-resignation-3558682>.

The dissent within the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) highlights the deepening political divide and increasing pressure on the Modi administration.⁴⁹ Narendra Modi has experienced a notable decline in public trust and legitimacy, reflecting a deep-seated dissatisfaction and political instability.⁵⁰ This decline in public trust was reflected in the electoral outcome of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. The BJP managed to secure only 240 seats, against a target of 400, out of 543, signifying a noticeable decline in Modi's popularity as well as of the party. In 2014, the BJP won 282 seats, becoming the first party to do so since 1984, and further increased its tally to 303 in 2019.⁵¹

India's Disinformation Campaign: India's strategy of disinformation and media manipulation failed to secure international support, as independent investigations and open-source intelligence (OSINT) systematically debunked numerous Indian assertions, further undermining New Delhi's credibility. Leading Indian news channels, including Zee News, NDTV, Times Now, ABP News and Bharat Samachar, aired a series of sensational and unverified reports relating to Pakistan's civil and military leadership and destruction of critical infrastructure including Karachi Port, often accompanied by unrelated imagery or video-game footage, highlighting serious concerns about the deterioration of journalistic ethics within India's mainstream media landscape.⁵²

Indian social media became a source of disinformation with Pakistani journalists effectively countering false Indian narratives through verified evidence and satire, including a vibrant meme war. International observers criticized Indian media for sensationalism and false reporting, while acknowledging Pakistani media's responsible journalism. The conflict underscored the power of media narratives in modern warfare and highlighted

⁴⁹ "India S Shiv Sena UBT Calls on PM Modi Amit Shah to Resign over Operation Sindoor," *The Express Tribune*, May 12, 2025, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2545408/indias-shiv-sena-ubt-calls-on-pm-modi-amit-shah-to-resign-over-operation-sindoor>.

⁵⁰ Sandipan Sharma, "Indicate Left, Turn Right: PM Modi's Art of Deception Pakistan Failed to Notice," *India Today*, May 7, 2025, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/operation-sindoor-pm-modi-art-of-deception-pakistan-strikes-pok-pahalgam-attack-2720731-2025-05-07>.

⁵¹ Tarique Ahmed Abro, "Modi 3.0: Electoral Autocracy," *The Nation*, July 28, 2024, <http://nation.com.pk/28-Jul-2024/modi-3-0-electoral-autocracy>.

⁵² Karishma Mehrotra, "How Misinformation Overtook Indian Newsrooms amid Conflict with Pakistan," *The Washington Post*, June 4, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/06/04/india-news-channels-misinformation-pakistan-conflict/>.

the strategic importance of credibility and professionalism in conflict reporting.⁵³

Operation Bunyanum Marsoos: A Resounding Success

Military Success: In response to the Indian aggression, Pakistan launched Operation Bunyanum Marsoos on the night of 9–10 May 2025, in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter. Pakistan's befitting response exemplified battlefield coordination through the integration of AI-driven surveillance and the precise utilization of long-range artillery and drone assets. Real-time intelligence integration, cutting-edge network-centric warfare capabilities and a seamless fusion of multi-domain assets were instrumental in achieving targets. It included well-coordinated strikes across twenty-six strategic locations in India, resulting in substantial destruction of and damage to Indian military assets.⁵⁴

The success achieved by Pakistan Armed Forces, including PAF, was made possible through the use of a secure and advanced data link system, which enhanced situational awareness, enabled network-centric warfare capabilities, facilitated real-time monitoring and targeting, and supported integrated multi-domain operations. Pakistan's strategic focus on the development and deployment of indigenous niche technologies served as a critical force multiplier in this engagement. Notably, the air encounter marked the inaugural operational deployment of Chinese-manufactured Beyond Visual Range (BVR) PL-15 missiles and J-10C fighter aircraft, both of which demonstrated their operational effectiveness under combat conditions.⁵⁵

The destruction of an Indian S-400 missile battery at Adampur Air Force Station in Punjab's Jalandhar district, executed via precision-guided hypersonic CM-400AKG missiles launched from JF-17 Thunder aircraft, highlighted Pakistan's advanced operational capabilities and effective

⁵³ Erum Tanveer, "Role of Pakistan & Indian Media in the 4-Day War: A Comparative Analysis," presentation, *CISSS webinar*, 29 May 2025.

⁵⁴ "Pakistan Carries out Strikes on 26 Locations in India, Inflicting Significant Losses on Enemy: Tarar," *Radio.gov.pk*, 2025, <https://radio.gov.pk/10-05-2025/pakistan-carries-out-strikes-on-26-locations-in-india-inflicting-significant-losses-on-enemy-tarar>.

⁵⁵ Abdul Samad, "Operation Bunyanum Marsoos: Pakistan's Decisive Response Redefining South Asia's Military ...," *The Friday Times*, May 27, 2025, <https://thefridaytimes.com/27-May-2025/operation-bunyanum-marsoos-pakistan-s-decisive-response-redefining-south-asia-s-military-balance>.

employment of emerging missile technologies. Furthermore, a Heron Unmanned Aerial System (UAS) of Israeli origin was successfully intercepted and brought down by Pakistan.⁵⁶

The operation exemplified an exceptional display of integrated tri-service collaboration by the Pakistan Armed Forces. The synergy among air, land, sea and cyber components facilitated precision targeting, overwhelmingly concentrated firepower and effective counterattacks. The unified employment of diverse military platforms enabled the delivery of highly synchronized strikes against strategically prioritized objectives, underscoring Pakistan's exemplary military proficiency and operational cohesion.⁵⁷

Notably, the Operation Bunyanum Marsoos was a strategically calibrated and doctrinally grounded military response by Pakistan to India's botched Operation Sindoor. Rather than escalating impulsively or activating nuclear deterrent, Pakistan employed its Quid Pro Quo Plus (QPQ+) policy, relying on precision conventional capabilities like Fatah-series missiles and airpower to defeat Indian aggression. The Marka-e-Haq demonstrated Pakistan's deterrence credibility, reaffirming that stability in South Asia is not self-sustaining but must be actively reasserted through discipline. It dismantled India's narrative of escalation dominance and restored strategic balance without brinkmanship, signaling Pakistan's commitment to restraint, readiness and regional stability.⁵⁸

Pakistan's Diplomatic Success: During and after Operation Bunyanum Marsoos, Pakistan achieved significant diplomatic successes by effectively rallying regional and international support against Indian aggression. Pakistan's proactive engagement with key global powers and multilateral organizations, including the UN Security Council, was helpful in highlighting India's destabilizing and irresponsible actions, exposing it as an aggressor. At the same time, Pakistan was able to highlight its commitment to promoting peace and stability in the region. By leveraging diplomatic channels and media

⁵⁶ Zeeshan.Ahmad, "Did Modi Inadvertently Confirm Pakistan's S-400 Claim?" *The Express Tribune*, May 13, 2025, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2545624/did-modi-inadvertently-confirm-pakistans-s-400-claim>.

⁵⁷ "Marka-e-Haq - 22 April 2025 to 10 May 2025," Press Release No PR-152/2025-ISPR (12 May 2025), ISPR, Islamabad, <https://ispr.gov.pk/press-release-detail?id=7283>.

⁵⁸ Brig Dr Zahir Kazmi (Retd), "Operation Bunyanum Marsoos: Deterrence & Power Balance Redefined in South Asia," *CISSS webinar*, 29 May 2025, online presentation, Center for International Strategic Studies Sindh (CISSS).

outreach, Pakistan successfully countered India's narrative and received valuable support from the international community, including China, Türkiye, Azerbaijan and many other countries.⁵⁹

In early June 2025, Pakistan sent two high-level delegations to key global capitals to present its perspective on the Four-Day War imposed by India on Pakistan and counter New Delhi's malicious campaign following the Pahalgam incident. One delegation, led by former Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, visited New York, Washington D.C., London and Brussels to engage with UN officials, Western governments, think tanks and Pakistani diaspora. The second delegation, headed by Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs Syed Tariq Fatemi, visited Moscow to brief high-level Russian officials. Both the delegations highlighted Pakistan's call for dialogue, restrained response to Indian aggression and the need to resolve all outstanding issues including Kashmir dispute with India peacefully through dialogue.⁶⁰

While India was attempting to isolate Pakistan diplomatically, a series of international developments instead highlighted New Delhi's failure to sway global opinion, causing significant embarrassment. At the height of India's military campaign, Pakistan was appointed as the Chair of the UN Security Council's Taliban Sanctions Committee and Vice-Chair of the UN Counter-Terrorism Committee, a clear blow to India's efforts to malign Pakistan internationally. International financial institutions also ignored India's attempts to influence their policies towards Pakistan. To the contrary, continued provision of financial assistance by them to Pakistan under agreed programmes not only signaled confidence in Pakistan's stability and governance but also blunted Indian attempts to delegitimize it on the international stage during Operation Sindoor.⁶¹

⁵⁹ "Kashmir, Rafale, Modi: How Pakistan Turned a Crisis into Diplomatic Gain," *The Express Tribune*, May 20, 2025, <https://tribune.com.pk/article/98021/kashmir-rafale-modi-how-pakistan-turned-a-crisis-int-o-diplomatic-gain>.

⁶⁰ "Pakistan Despatches Two Delegations to Key Capitals to Present Its Perspective on Recent Conflict with India," *The Indian Express*, June 2, 2025, <https://indianexpress.com/article/pakistan/pakistan-despatches-two-delegations-key-capitals-india-10043979/>.

⁶¹ Aswini K Ray, "Lesson from Op Sindoor: To Truly Win, India Must Tone down Its Public Trumpeting," *The Wire*, July 2025, <https://thewire.in/politics/lesson-from-op-sindoor-maga-miga-modi-trumpeting>.

Debunking India's Conventional Superiority Myth: India's long-held image of conventional military superiority over Pakistan was decisively shattered during the Four-Day War. It exposed significant gaps in the Indian military's logistics, operational preparedness and tri-service coordination. Pakistan's use of next-generation cyber warfare capabilities, Electronic Warfare (EW) and autonomous drones and multi-domain operations proved to be a force multiplier. Contrary to prior assumptions of India's conventional military superiority, Pakistan demonstrated significant tactical competence, achieving air and ground superiority in several engagements.⁶²

Notably, PAF engaged 72 IAF fighters with 42 jets, downing six Indian aircraft without suffering any loss. Pakistan also showcased advancements in EW and air defense capabilities, neutralizing over 80 hostile drones before they could inflict meaningful damage. On the offensive front, Pakistan launched missile and drone strikes on 26 confirmed targets inside Indian territory, including the destruction of at least one S-400 air defense battery, challenging India's claims of strategic invulnerability.⁶³

Despite India's annual defense spending of nearly USD 80 billion and acquisition of advanced weaponry, Pakistan's strategic response exposed significant vulnerabilities in India's military machine. Pakistani forces, leveraging indigenous and Chinese-supplied technologies, effectively countered India's advancements, leading to the downing of multiple Indian aircraft, including Rafale and the neutralization of sophisticated air defense systems. This conflict underscored the limitations of technological superiority without cohesive strategy and operational integration, challenging the long-held myth about India's military invincibility.⁶⁴

Regional Power Shift Towards Pakistan: The Four-Day War between India and Pakistan marked a pivotal turning point in the region's strategic landscape. Pakistan's ability to rapidly and decisively neutralize key Indian military assets

⁶² Hamza Rao, "Modi Confronts War at Home amid Painful Soul Searching," *The Express Tribune*, May 15, 2025, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2545888/modi-confronts-war-at-home-amid-painful-soul-searching>.

⁶³ Sajid Salamat, "Breaking the Myth of Superiority," *Daily Times*, May 15, 2025, <https://daillytimes.com.pk/1301163/breaking-the-myth-of-superiority/>.

⁶⁴ Sohail A Azmie, "A Shattered Myth: India's Conventional Military Superiority," *The News International*, March 29, 2019, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/450521-a-shattered-myth-indias-conventional-military-superiority>.

demonstrated the emergence of a credible conventional deterrent, effectively recalibrating the balance of power in South Asia.⁶⁵ This shift underscores that deterrence is no longer solely predicated on quantitative superiority or possession of advanced weaponry but increasingly depends on the integration of innovative tactics, multi-domain operations and technological adaptability.⁶⁶ The resultant deterrence effect is twofold: First, it lowers the probability of large-scale military escalation by signaling Pakistan's capability to impose swift and significant retaliation. Second, it compels India to reassess its strategic assumptions, operational readiness and doctrinal postures. Consequently, the conflict has signaled a shift in regional power dynamics towards Pakistan, whereby deterrence stability is increasingly defined by qualitative factors, such as operational coherence and strategic innovation, rather than conventional force metrics alone.

Pakistan's effective employment of asymmetric capabilities – spanning cyber warfare, EW and precision strike platforms – illustrates how strategic agility can compensate for conventional disparities and impose substantial costs on a militarily superior adversary.⁶⁷

Re-hyphenation of India-Pakistan: The recent war decisively reversed India's prolonged diplomatic campaign aimed at de-hyphenating itself from Pakistan.⁶⁸ The ceasefire between India and Pakistan, announced by the US President Donald Trump, has effectively re-hyphenated the two nations on the global stage, something India had long tried to avoid. In asserting credit for brokering the truce via trade leverage, President Trump re-hyphenated both the states in his pronouncements. The re-hyphenation underscores the challenge Modi now faces in reclaiming India's narrative and resisting any framing that places the two nations on an equal footing.⁶⁹ This shift in international

⁶⁵ "Pakistan Established 'New Redline of Strategic Conventional Deterrence' in Conflict with India: Sherry," *DAWN*, May 15, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1911210/pakistan-established-new-redline-of-strategic-conventional-deterrence-in-conflict-with-india-sherry>.

⁶⁶ Inam Ul Haque, "India Pakistan Redefining Deterrence," *The Express Tribune*, May 22, 2025, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2547114/india-pakistan-redefining-deterrence>.

⁶⁷ "South Asia on the Brink: India and Pakistan's 2025 Military Balance Revealed," *Defence Security Asia*, April 25, 2025, <https://defencesecurityasia.com/en/south-asia-on-the-brink-india-and-pakistans-2025-military-balance-revealed/>.

⁶⁸ Faisal Siddiqi, "De-Hyphenation or Denial?," *The Nation*, June 18, 2025, <https://www.nation.com.pk/18-Jun-2025/de-hyphenation-or-denial>.

⁶⁹ "India-Pakistan Ceasefire: Modi Faces 'Re-Hyphenation' Challenge after Trump's Kashmir Mediation Claims," *Lowy Institute*, 2025, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/india-pakistan-ceasefire-modi-faces-re-hyphenation-challenge-after-trump-s-kashmir>.

discourse marks a significant diplomatic victory for Pakistan.⁷⁰

Kashmir: A Nuclear Flashpoint: The recent Four-Day India-Pakistan war has reignited scholarly and strategic discourse regarding Kashmir as a nuclear flashpoint, underscoring the persistent volatility of this internationally recognized dispute between two nuclear-armed neighbors.⁷¹ The world's renewed focus on Kashmir represents a crucial step toward creating conditions conducive to lasting peace, security and cooperation in South Asia. The brief yet intense war has brought renewed urgency to concerns over escalation dynamics, deterrence stability and crisis management in South Asia.⁷²

The intense military clashes underscored the high stakes involved, raising fears of escalation into a broader nuclear confrontation. This escalation prompted major world powers and international organizations to engage more actively in diplomatic efforts to prevent further conflict, highlighting Kashmir as a critical dispute with global security implications. As a result, Kashmir has re-emerged on the international security agenda, with increased scrutiny on the risks posed by India's belligerent posture in the region.⁷³ Kashmir has also made its way to President Trump's agenda, who has offered to mediate between Pakistan and India to resolve the dispute.⁷⁴

India's Great-Power Delusions: According to Ashley J. Tellis, India's assertive and often confrontational posture in its regional engagements can be interpreted as a reflection of what can be identified as its "great power delusion." Driven by sustained economic growth, advances in military

⁷⁰ Saad Hafiz, "The Pahalgam Attack and the Return of the India-Pakistan Hyphenation," *The Friday Times*, May 15, 2025, <https://thefridaytimes.com/15-May-2025/the-pahalgam-attack-and-the-return-of-the-india-pakistan-hyphenation>.

⁷¹ "Flashpoint Kashmir: The Nuclear Dimension," *Counterfire*, 2025, <https://www.counterfire.org/article/flashpoint-kashmir-the-nuclear-dimension/>.

⁷² "UK Parliamentary Study Warns Kashmir Flashpoint Could Spark Nuclear Conflict," *Pakistan Today*, May 18, 2025, <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2025/05/18/uk-parliamentary-study-warns-kashmir-flashpoint-could-spark-nuclear-conflict/>.

⁷³ Noreen Haider, "The Four-Day War: Kashmir, Missiles, and the Shadow of Nuclear Annihilation," *The Friday Times*, June 11, 2025, <https://thefridaytimes.com/11-Jun-2025/the-four-day-war-kashmir-missiles-and-the-shadow-of-nuclear-annihilation>.

⁷⁴ "Trump Offers to Work with India, Pakistan on Kashmir 'Solution,'" *Al Jazeera*, May 11, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/11/trump-offers-to-work-with-india-pakistan-on-kashmir>.

capability and a growing global profile, India seeks to position itself as a dominant regional actor. However, this proactive posture, evident in its border tensions with China, increased naval activity in the Indian Ocean and firm policies toward Pakistan, may overstate its actual strategic capacity. India's aspirations significantly outpace its material capabilities. Moreover, its leadership has yet to fully acknowledge the structural limitations it faces. India's pursuit of strategic autonomy represents a desire for a global order that is neither currently attainable nor likely to emerge, raising concerns that India's aggressive approach could destabilize its neighborhood and hinder its long-term geopolitical ambitions.⁷⁵

Conclusion

The four-day India-Pakistan war stands as a crucial moment in South Asian geopolitics, fundamentally dismantling the myth surrounding India's conventional military superiority and diplomatic leverage. The war initiated by India not only exposed the operational and strategic vulnerabilities of its conventional forces but also challenged its regional hegemony. In contrast, Pakistan's measured yet decisive response, epitomized by the success of Operation Bunyanum Marsoos, underscored its growing military sophistication, technological adaptability and diplomatic maturity. The integrated use of multi-domain warfare, coupled with real-time intelligence and precision strikes, has revealed a new paradigm in Pakistan's defense strategy, decisively shifting the regional balance of power in favour of Islamabad. The war has demonstrated Pakistan's relevance as a regional stabilizer, re-hyphenated India and Pakistan, and reinvigorated the debate about Kashmir as a nuclear flashpoint. Lastly, it has redefined the strategic landscape of South Asia.

⁷⁵ Ashley J Tellis, "India's Great-Power Delusions," *Foreign Affairs*, June 17, 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/india/indias-great-power-delusions>.

Notes on Contributors

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