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INDIAN MILITARY MODERNIZATION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON STRATEGIC STABILITY IN SOUTH ASIA

Bilal Zubair and Zain Rashid Tarar

Indian Military Modernization and Its Implications on Strategic Stability in South Asia

Bilal Zubair and Zain Rashid Tarar[1]

Abstract

Indian military modernization and its implications have been a major debate in the South Asian security calculus. The strategic dynamics of South Asia reflect divergent priorities and goals for India and Pakistan. For India, military modernization aims towards regional hegemony, while for Pakistan, it is a source of strategic stability. In the given context, this study examines how the ongoing trends in India's military modernization are exacerbating the security dilemma in South Asia and examines Pakistan's responses to establish arms parity. The findings reveal that while Pakistan primarily relies on credible minimum deterrence, it recognises the need to modernize its conventional military capabilities. Whereas India theoretically adheres to a two-front war strategy, its main military build-up and capabilities are Pakistan-centric. Further, this research also examines the role of great powers i.e., the United States, Russia, France, and China, as major providers of military hardware for their respective strategic interests in the region. This study concludes Indian Military Modernization and the ensuing arms race pose a challenge to strategic stability in South Asia. India's aim to fight a conventional war through its military modernization under a nuclear shadow has made South Asia the most dangerous nuclear flashpoint.

Key Words: India, Pakistan, Military Modernization, South Asia, Security Dilemma, Strategic Stability

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Introduction

Modernization in military affairs refers to a holistic process driven by technological innovations and advancements that influence doctrinal thinking, tactical approach, and organizational structures.[2] Existing technologies are replaced by or supported by superior capabilities, improving the efficiency and lethality of wars.[3] States modernize their military through indigenous development of modern weapons or by procuring advanced weapons from their allies. The factors influencing military modernization include changing geostrategic and geo-economic realities, global innovation in modern technologies and most importantly, the threat perception.

In case of India, the drivers of Indian military modernization include aspiration to become regional hegemon, sustainable economic growth, the convergence of Indo-US interests in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). These strategic desires influence the security architecture between India and Pakistan.

India has world's second-largest military and fifth-largest defence budget. It is now qualitatively improving its military to achieve strategic edge in South Asia.[4] According to the *Global Fire Power Ranking* 2024, India is the world's fourth most powerful military.[5] This has enabled the Indian Air Force (IAF) to develop modern capabilities in offensive and defensive operations. India's blue-water Navy is steadily being upgraded with innovative naval technologies reinforced with nuclear submarines. India has also partnered with the US and Israel to improve its spy satellites, acquire ballistic missile defence systems, and import modern unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).[6]

In contrast, Pakistan is strategically committed to 'full spectrum deterrence,' keeping in line with its policy of 'Credible Minimum Deterrence' vis-à-vis India. Pakistan seeks to maintain conventional warfare capabilities as integral part of its doctrinal thinking for pursuing

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[2] Richard A Bitzinger and Michael Raska, "Capacity for Innovation: Technological Drivers of China's Future Military Modernization," Chinese Liberation Army in 2025. *Strategic Studies Institute US Army War College* (2015): 132.

[3] Bernard Fook Wang Loo, Decisive Battles, Victories and the Revolution in Military Affairs," *Journal of Strategic Studies,* Vol 32, no. 2 (April 2009): 189-211.

[4] Xiao Liang et. Al, "Trends in World Military Expenditure: 2024," *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute* (April 2025), https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2025-04/2504_fs_milex_2024.pdf.

[5] "2024 Military Strength Ranking", *Global Fire Power,* 2024, Retrieved from: https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.php.

[6] Ishtiaq Ali, "Challenges for the Conventional Deterrence of Pakistan in the Post-2019 Security Situations: Options and Choices," *Scandic Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews* 3, No. 3 (2022): 12, https://doi.org/10.55966/sjarr.2022.3.3.0054.

arms parity.[7] Compared to India, Pakistan is ranked twenty-ninth in terms of military spending. In response to the Indian military modernization, Pakistan faces a significant challenge of updating its land, air and sea-based military capabilities. While deterrence stability has tested four major escalations in South Asia since 2001: the 2001-2002 standoff, the 2008 military buildup, the 2019 Pulwama-Balakot standoff and the May 7-10, 2025 post-Phalagam Conflict, the importance of conventional capabilities remains vital.

Pakistan responded to the Indian 'Balakot Airstrikes' by shooting down an Indian MIG-21 on February 27th 2019. Pakistan also struck Indian military targets and shot down six Indian Air Force (IAF) fighter jets in response to Indian missile strikes inside Pakistan on May 7th and 8th, 2025. Pakistan's conventional response demonstrated that Pakistan has a defensive strategic posture vis-à-vis India and acted in self-defence in response to Indian aggression.

The existing scholarship on the military modernization in South Asia encompasses doctrinal evolution, nuclear deterrence and arms race in the region.[8] Whereas, the emerging scholarly work focuses on crucial aspects of military modernization, such as India's space-based intelligence, development of sea-based nuclear capabilities and future trends within modern warfare.[9] Experts on South Asian military affairs have expressed concerns that Indian military modernization has increased the risk of an accidental war in South Asia.[10] This notion was reinforced on March 9, 2022, when the Indian BrahMos missile launched from Haryana, India, accidentally landed in Pakistan's Khanewal district.[11] While the incident exposed weaknesses in the Indian technological spectrum, it also heightened the risks of escalation through such accidents.[12]

Indian military modernization is also viewed as a means to counter the dual threat of China and the Sino-Pak strategic cooperation.[13] India's efforts to expand its naval strength and

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[7] Nabeel Hussain and Salma Malik, "Prospects of Integrated Deterrence for Pakistan Amid Conventional Asymmetry in South Asia" *Journal of Security & Strategic Analyses* 9, no. 1 (2023): 44, https://doi.org/10.57169/jssa.009.01.0241.

[8] Ghazala Yasmin Jalil, "Nuclear Arms Race in South Asia: Pakistan's Quest for Security," *Strategic Studies* 37, no. 1 (2017): 25, https://www.jstor.org/stable/48535985.

[9] Noreen Naseer, Muhammad Fahim Khan and Aamer Raza, "A Comparative View of India and Pakistan's Defence Capabilities: Historical Evolution and Future Trends," *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 8, no. 1 (2023): 218, https://doi.org/10.1177/20578911221124384.

[10] Yogesh Joshi, and Frank O'Donnell, *India and Nuclear Asia: Forces, Doctrine, and Dangers,* (Washington D.C., Georgetown University Press, 2019). 6.

[11] Christopher Clary, "The Curious Case of Accidental Indian Missile Launch," *War on the Rocks*, March 17, 2022, https://warontherocks.com/2022/03/the-curious-case-of-the-accidental-indian-missile-launch/.

[12] Atia Ali Kazmi, "Accidental, Inadvertent or Deliberate Launch: The Case of Indian Air Force's Nuclear Supersonic Cruise Missile," *CISS Strategic View* IV, (2024), https://ciss.org.pk/accidental-inadvertent-or-deliberate-launch/.

[13] Rajesh Basrur, Ajaya Kumar Das and Manjeet S. Pardesi (eds), 'Introduction', in Rajesh Basrur, Ajaya Kumar Das, and Manjeet Singh Pardesi (eds), *India's Military Modernization: Challenges and Prospects,* Oxford

establish blue-water dominance in the IOR, by acquiring new ships, submarines and aircraft carriers, aims to achieve strategic advantage, not only in South Asia but beyond.[14] Yogesh Joshi argues that "facing a coordinated military manoeuvre from a relatively weak but prickly and resolute military power like Pakistan and a highly capable Chinese military is beyond India's capability to resist and defend."[15] Therefore, India has been modernizing its domestic military infrastructure and diversifying foreign procurement.[16] Moreover, India has been focused on Integrated Deterrence, which will guide policy frameworks to 'deter any forms of conflict above and below the conventional armed conflict spectrum.'[17]

Blarel and Ebert have contested that the military modernization of the two nuclear rivals will only complicate the mutual strategic behaviour and increase the chances of potential conflict.[18] Furthermore, the 'security trilemma' in a volatile nuclear-powered region, exacerbated by the 'unresolved territorial disputes, cross-border terrorism, and growing nuclear arsenals', increases the chances of conflict.[19] "South Asia is marred by aggressive posturing and bitterness as witnessed by the sour relationship that exists between Pakistan and India, the two strongest nations in the region. This animosity left them with consistent and incremental growth in defence expenditure."[20]

Keeping the existing literature on India-Pakistan military modernization and its impact on strategic stability in perspective, this study finds that there is abundant literature available on the topic from a theoretical viewpoint. This study, however, adds to the literature on the doctrinal approach corresponding with the modernization trends, viewing Indian military procurements aimed at an absolute conventional superiority against Pakistan. Also, this paper

International Relations in South Asia (Delhi, 2013; online edn, Oxford Academic, Jan 23, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198092384.003.0001.

[14] Aditya Gowdara Shivamurthy, "Building Indian Narrative and Battling New Militancy in Kashmir," *Observer Research Foundation*, July 26, 2021, https://www.orfonline.org/research/building-indian-narratives-and-battling-new-militancy-in-kashmir.

[15] Yogesh Joshi, "India's Two-Front War Anxiety and Nuclear Deterrence", *Institute of South Asian Studies,* August 30, 2023, https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/indias-two-front-war-anxietyand-nuclear-deterrence/.

[16] Alok Bhagwat and Pradnya Vishwas Chitrao, "The Economics of 'Make in India' Over 'Buy (Import)' Decision in Selected Technologies for the Indian Navy," In *Information and Communication Technology for Sustainable Development*, (2019): 345–61, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-7166-0_34.

[17] Adil Sultan, Faraz Haider and Shayan Hassan Jamy, "Integrated Deterrence: Relevance & Implications for South Asia," *Margalla Papers* 27, no. 2 (2023): 72, https://doi.org/10.54690/margallapapers.27.2.176.

[18] Nicolas Blareland Hannes Ebert, "Explaining the Evolution of Contestation in South Asia," *International Politics* 52, no. 2 (2014): 238, https://doi.org/10.1057/ip.2014.44.

[19] Gregory D Koblentz, "Strategic Stability in the Second Nuclear Age." Special Report No. 71, *Council on Foreign Relations*, (Nov 2014): 3, https://cdn.cfr.org/sites/default/files/pdf/2014/11/Second%20Nuclear%20Age_CSR71.pdf

[20] Unbreen Qayyum, Sohail Anjum, and Samina Sabir, "Armed Conflict, Militarization and Ecological Footprint: Empirical Evidence from South Asia," *Journal of Cleaner Production* 281 (Jan 2021): 1 https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2020.125299

has briefly explained how India is gradually making a rationale for fighting a conventional war under a nuclear umbrella by raising the escalation ladder in the conventional domain through analysing the series of recent conflicts between India and Pakistan.

Given the above discussion, this study would examine the primary research question that how India is modernizing its military and its possible implications on Pakistan? The primary research question is followed by the secondary research that how does Pakistan view Indian military modernization and approach its military modernization?

Based on the following research question, this paper argues that the strategic landscape of South Asia is primarily shaped by the interplay of two nuclear powers, India and Pakistan. India regards Pakistan as its arch-rival on its western border, supported by the Republic of China on its northern and north-eastern borders. Indian military doctrines and subsequent modernisation aim to counter a two-front challenge. However, India's military modernisation creates a security dilemma for Pakistan, which has a history of wars with India. Pakistan has a strong predilection to prevent India from undermining the strategic stability that resulted from South Asian nuclearization in 1998. Based on these assumptions, this paper hypothesises that "Indian military modernisation is driven by its pursuit of regional dominance and the concept of a two-front war, which heightens Pakistan's efforts to secure itself through countermeasures, resulting in a perpetual security dilemma in the region."

This research is qualitative descriptive research grounded in the theoretical premise of offensive realism. It explores the policies, perceptions and interplay of strategic responses of India and Pakistan towards their respective military modernizations. This study utilizes official documents, policy papers and statements of political and senior military leadership. For the secondary sources, this study uses reputable and relevant books, journals and newspaper articles.

The Indian perception of a two-pronged security dilemma has transformed its approach to a more offensive posture. According to India's former Air Vice Marshal Arjuna Subramaniam, India's military is rapidly evolving, shifting from a predominantly continental and conventional strategy to a comprehensive approach that fully utilises aerospace and cyber domains in all-spectrum operations.

Indian military modernization efforts and Pakistan's quest for balance can, therefore, be scrutinised through the lens of the Structural Realist paradigm. Structural Realism provides a systemic analysis of Indian military modernization, its impact on South Asian nuclear rivalry, and how this cycle of insecurity shapes regional security dynamics. The theoretical examination is followed by the doctrinal debate of the Indian military modernization.

Discussion regarding doctrines is an important component of this paper, which underscores the Indian threat perception, which has spurred its modernization efforts. This section also explains the evolution and further development of the Indian military doctrines with reference to the changing geopolitical realities and strategic requirements. The following section explains Pakistan's response to Indian Military modernization and enunciates the China mix in the India-Pakistan equation. Last section provides policy recommendations.

Structural Realism and Arms Race in South Asia

This study uses Structural Realism as conceptual framework, explaining how South Asian military modernization efforts will reinforce the security maximisation in the region.[21] The anarchic structural conditions in South Asia have created a self-help environment that undermines regional stability.[22] According to Structural Realists, Pakistan and India are modernising their militaries to maximise their relative power.[23]

According to Structural Realism, this military growth is not merely about maximizing security but enhancing India's position as regional hegemon. Therefore, New Delhi's ambitions extend beyond simply defending its territory to cementing itself as a key power broker in the South-Asian region.

These anarchic structural forces have driven Pakistan into a never-ending cycle of insecurity. Pakistan views India's modernising and aggressive stance as an existential threat. This has resulted in a regional security arrangement, hindered by a security dilemma, where Pakistan cannot retreat without seeming vulnerable.

Based on an understanding of John Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism, New Delhi's aspirations aim to achieve a relative power-maximising behaviour for regional hegemony. These aspirations not only stem from the antagonistic sense of mistrust and insecurity between South Asian rivals but have also been shaping the security culture in the region. Pakistan, in its quest for arms parity, follows the reactive logic of Structural Realism and endeavours to balance equilibrium vis-à-vis India in the hostile regional security environment to ensure its survival.

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[21] Liliang You, "Looking at the Security Dilemma between India and Pakistan from Structural Realism," *Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Economics and Management, Education, Humanities and Social Sciences (EMEHSS 2019)* (2019), https://doi.org/10.2991/EMEHSS-19.2019.25.

[22] Liliang You, "Looking at the Security Dilemma between India and Pakistan from Structural Realism," *Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Economics and Management, Education, Humanities and Social Sciences (EMEHSS 2019)* (2019), https://doi.org/10.2991/EMEHSS-19.2019.25.

[23] Nimra Sajjad, Tajjalla Munir and Sharmeen Batoo,l "Indian Hegemonic Design in South Asia: Implication for Regional Stability," *Global International Relations Review* V, no. III (2022): 32, https://doi.org/10.31703/girr.2022%28v-iii%29.04.

Although Pakistan is facing an economic crisis and cannot afford full-scale military modernization at this stage, its approach has been asymmetric, focusing full spectrum deterrence and adequate conventional capabilities to counter India's offensive posturing. Thus, Pakistan's pursuit of arms parity is no different to the traditional arms race, characterised by its selective India-centric military modernisation and the precision of its military capabilities, including tactical versatility and nuclear deterrence.

Thus, India and Pakistan have divergent goals in their pursuit of military modernization. While India aims to dominate the region and establish its position as the net security provider in the region, Pakistan aims for strategic stability by denying India the opportunity to dominate the regional security architecture.

These divergent goals put India in a persistent pursuit of power maximization through military buildup and extra-regional alliances. Pakistan, in response, would aim to enhance its defensive military capabilities and maintain credible minimum deterrence to ensure that the regional balance of power is not shifted in India's favour.

Evolution of the Indian Military Doctrines

One of the main reasons behind Indian military modernization is that Indian policymakers believe there is room for limited conflict against Pakistan under a nuclear umbrella.[24] This evolving nature of Indian warfare strategies aligns with the need to adapt to contemporary challenges.[25] This has led to India's military doctrinal evolution over the years, marked by crucial developments in its various strategic doctrines.

- ### *Sunderji Doctrine*

India's military has a predilection towards an 'orthodox offensive' doctrine, which is Pakistan-centric and rooted in India's organizational and wartime experiences with Pakistan during 1965 and 1971 wars. The 'orthodox offensive' relies on large army formations and revolves around the concept of 'deterrence by punishment.'[26] The Sunderji Doctrine of 1981 reflected the offensive orthodoxy, following India's territorial losses during the war with China in 1962. This doctrine aimed to enable India to conduct a military offensive deeper into Pakistani

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[24] Syed Ali Zia Jaffery, "Enhancing Deterrence Stability on the Subcontinent: The Case for Conventional Deterrence," *Stimson*, (2020), https://www.stimson.org/2020/enhancing-deterrence-stability-on-the-subcontinent-the-case-for-conventional-deterrence/.

[25] B. W Thangamani, "Defence Budget: Insufficient Allocation for Modernization of Forces," *International Journal of Management* 7, no. 3 (2020): 28-30, https://doi.org/10.34293/management.v7i3.1438.

[26] Arzan Tarapore, "The Army in Indian Military Strategy: Rethink Doctrine or Risk Irrelevance," *Carnegie India,* (2020), https://carnegieindia.org/2020/08/10/army-in-indian-military-strategy-rethink-doctrine-or-risk-irrelevance-pub-82426.

territory using conventional forces.[27] This doctrine was perceived as a direct threat to territorial integrity prompting Islamabad to proactively mobilise its forces alongside the Indian border as a defensive strategy in the 1980s and 1990s.[28] To date there is little evidence that India has shifted away from the 'Orthodox Offensive' doctrine.

- ▪ *Cold Start Doctrine*

Since the late 1990s and early 2000s, orthodox offensive has been based on the notion of 'deterrence by punishment' and is considered India's de facto military strategy.[29] In line with this ideology, the Sunderji Doctrine was followed by the 2003 Cold Start Doctrine, which was tailored in the aftermath of the 2001-02 India-Pakistan border standoff. The 'Cold Start Doctrine' envisioned the deployment of the IAF along the borders with Pakistan in a formation that would allow proactivity and flexibility to Indian forces.[30] Under this doctrine, New Delhi envisioned a 'concept of 'limited war under the nuclear overhang', which included the mobilisation of troops in a short time and capturing a portion of Pakistan's territory, to be later used as a bargaining chip.[31]

India's assertive military operations strategy and limited warfare posturing are an even bigger threat to the survival and security of Pakistan. Therefore, in response to India's offensive tactics, Pakistan improvised its nuclear doctrine by developing 'HATF IX/NASR' tactical nuclear missiles in 2011, and achieved Full-Spectrum Deterrence (FSD) against India, giving Pakistan the ability to deter conventional and sub-conventional threats from India's offensive approach.[32] However, these shifts in the South Asian military milieu did not affect India's offensive doctrinal thinking towards Pakistan and subsequently evolved into the Indian Land Warfare Doctrine (LWD); however, before it, India also adopted other doctrines.

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[27] Ayaz Khokhar, "Shifts in India's Security Policy Towards Pakistan: From Sunderji to Cold Start Doctrine," *Strafasia*, (2019), https://strafasia.com/shifts-in-indias-security-policy-towards-pakistan-from-sunderji-to-cold-start-doctrine/.

[28] Hafeez Ullah Khan and Ijaz Khalid, "Indian Cold Start Doctrine: Pakistan's Policy Response," *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan* 33, no. 1 (2018): 326-27, https://pu.edu.pk/images/journal/history/PDF-FILES/24_55_1_18.pdf.

[29] Abeer Iftikhar Tahirkheli, "India's Strategic Force Modernization and Its Implications on Strategic Environment of Pakistan," *Strategic Thought* 4, no. 1 (2022): 158, https://strategicthought.ndu.edu.pk/site/article/view/83.

[30] Ayaz Khokhar, "Shifts in India's Security Policy Towards Pakistan: From Sunderji to Cold Start Doctrine," *Strafasia*, (2019) https://strafasia.com/shifts-in-indias-security-policy-towards-pakistan-from-sunderji-to-cold-start-doctrine/.

[31] Allah Nawaz, "Analysing India's Military Doctrinal Evolution," *Strafasia*, (April 8, 2023), https://strafasia.com/analysing-indias-military-doctrinal-evolution/.

[32] Sannia Abdullah, "Pakistan's Full-Spectrum Deterrence: Trends and Trajectories," *South Asian Voices*, (December 13, 2018), https://southasianvoices.org/pakistan-full-spectrum-deterrence-trends-trajectories/.

▪ *Joint Armed Forces Doctrine (JAFD)*

Complementing the LWD is the Indian JAFD of 2016, which aims to enhance coordination between the military tri-services (Army, Air Force and Navy), making them more effective and efficient in their responses to critical security threats.[33] The JAFD stands out for its focus on cohesive joint operations, information sharing and the integration of advanced cutting-edge technology to fuel its warfare engines.[34] Implementing JAFD and LWD has enabled India to modernize its Cyber Warfare (CW) capacities and augment its Information Warfare (IW) capabilities.

▪ *Indian Land Warfare Doctrine*

In 2018, India introduced the LWD within a previous strategic orthodoxy, replacing the Cold Start Doctrine, an approach that focused more on conventional warfare.[35] The LWD aims to enhance Indian warfare capabilities to address threats emerging from grey zones and hybrid warfare techniques.[36] This doctrine provided broad details and key insights into India's plans, and laid the foundations for the modernizing of the Indian military by incorporating advanced hardware and futuristic technologies into warfare planning and strategies.[37] The LWD, the deployment of Rafael C jets and S-400 systems supporting the Integrated Battle Groups (IBGs) formations along the border with Pakistan.[38] Through the LWD, the formulators envision that the Indian military will be sufficiently modernised to operate in a complex security environment in the region.

▪ *The Indian Air Force (IAF) Doctrines*

The IAF has significantly influenced Indian doctrinal thought. The IAF 2012 doctrine marked a crucial development reflecting the evolution and modernization of India's warfare strategies. Under this doctrine, all branches of the Indian armed forces (Army, Navy, and Air Force) would enhance their capabilities of 'jointness' to effectively counter emerging regional challenges. This doctrine was further optimised and refined under the IAF 2017 Doctrine, which aimed to

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[33] Gulshan Bibi, "Deterrence Adrift: Dissecting Indian Coercive Military Doctrines 2017-2018," *Journal of Security and Strategic Analyses* 5, no. 1 (2021): 27, https://thesvi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/JSSA-Vol-5-No.1-Final-31-48.pdf.

[34] Ankit Panda, "India's 2017 Joint Armed Forces Doctrine: First Takeaways," *The Diplomat,* (April 28, 2017), https://thediplomat.com/2017/04/indias-2017-joint-armed-forces-doctrine-first-takeaways/.

[35] Samara Iqbal Babar and Muhammad Nadeem Mirza, "Indian Strategic Doctrinal Transformation: Trends and Trajectory," *Journal of Security and Strategic Analyses* 6, no. 2 (2021): 80.

[36] Yasir Hussain, "India's Pakistan-Specific Land Warfare Doctrine: An Overview," *South Asian Voices,* (March 15, 2019), https://southasianvoices.org/indias-pakistan-specific-land-warfare-doctrine-an-overview/.

[37] P. C Katoch, "Indian Army Land Warfare Doctrine 2018," *SP Guide Publications,* Issue 6. 2018, https://www.spslandforces.com/story/?h=Indian-Army-Land-Warfare-Doctrine-2018&id=570.

[38] Muhammad Ali and Syed Mussawar Hussain Bukhari, "Indian Military Doctrine and Its Impact on South Asia's Strategic Stability," *Margalla Papers* 26, no. I (2022): 75, https://doi.org/10.54690/margallapapers.26.I.98.

modernise Indian Air Defence and Air Offensive capabilities to tackle the full spectrum of challenges.[39] Subsequently, the refined IAF 2022 Doctrine emphasised the development of sophisticated aerospace capabilities to ensure India's dominance in the regional airpower spectrum.[40] It outlines modernised aerospace power, including reach, enhanced mobility, efficient responsiveness, and support for India's offensive approach and sustained military dominance against Pakistan.[41] The Indian military's doctrinal evolution illustrates an ambitious plan to solidify its conventional asymmetry against Pakistan. By retaining the core principle of 'Orthodox Offence', India's modernization expedition reinforces the notion of engaging in fighting a conventional warfare against Pakistan.

India's Military Modernization

Indian military modernization seeks to maximise regional power, particularly against Pakistan.[42] In recent years, India's defence budget reflects strategic recalibrations, geopolitical shifts, and economic health.[43] India allocated USD 19.64 billion to procure advanced weapons and technology in the fiscal year 2024, which is part of the increased USD 78.8 billion defence budget for 2024/25.[44] As compared to the other high military spenders the IOR including France spending of USD 64 billion on defence and Australia pouring USD 59 billion, India aims to be the highest spender. The spending aimed at the procurement of new warships, aircraft and military hardware.[45] To complement its military modernization, India has been planning to increase its nuclear arsenal and construct new plutonium production facilities to increase its nuclear warheads.[46] Moreover, India has been developing new warhead delivery

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[39] Christopher Clary, and Vipin Narang, "India's Counterforce Temptations: Strategic Dilemmas, Doctrine, and Capabilities," *International Security* 43, no. 3 (2019): 32. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00340.

[40] Anil Chopra. "Indian Air Force Released Its New Doctrine; Aims to Evolve as Aerospace Power to Keep Pace with Technology," *EurAsian Times*, (Feb 19, 2023), https://www.eurasiantimes.com/indian-air-force-released-its-new-doctrine-aims-to-evolve/.

[41] Zaki Khalid, "Analysing Indian Air Force's 2022 Doctrine," *Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research,* (February 21, 2023), https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/defense-security/analysing-indian-air-forces-2022-doctrine/.

[42] Nimra Sajjad, Tajjalla Munir, and Sharmeen Batool, "Indian Hegemonic Design in South Asia: Implications for Regional Stability," *Global International Relations Review* 5, no. 3 (2022): 28 https://doi.org/10.31703/girr.2022%28v-iii%29.04.

[43] Sarahbeth George, "From Galwan to 2024: How India's Defence Budget Reflects Strategic Changes," *Economic Times*, (July 16, 2024). https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/union-budget-2024-from-galwan-to-2024-indias-defence-budget-reflects-strategic-changes/articleshow/111773915.cms.

[44] Vivek Raghuvanshi, "India to Boost Defence Spending by 13% with Billions for New Weapons," *Defence News,* (Feb 2, 2023), https://www.defensenews.com/global/2023/02/02/india-to-boost-defense-spending-13-with-billions-for-new-weapons.

[45] "Defence Budget of India 2023: India's Defence Sector Gets Rs 5.94 Lakh Crore for 2023-24," *Economic Times.* (Feb 1, 2023), https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/budget-2023-indias-defence-sector-gets-rs-5-94-lakh-crore-for-2023-24/articleshow/97511172.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst.

[46] Hans M Kristensen and Matt Korda, "Indian Nuclear Weapons," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 78, no. 4 (July 2022): 224, https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2022.2087385.

systems, such as new variants of its Agni Ballistic Missiles. India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and its Strategic Forces Command have demonstrated confidence in their newly deployed Agni-V and Agni-P, which incorporates a host of novel technologies and are capable of carrying nuclear and conventional warheads over medium to long ranges. With the inclusion of new missile technologies, such as BrahMos missile system, India gains the readiness and confidence in its Draft Nuclear Doctrine, to maintain a credible minimum deterrent. However, the Indian defence minister, Rajnath Singh, has hinted at the evolving nuclear doctrine of India, which might be a shift away from the 'no first use' (NFU) policy.[47] India's increasing tilt towards reconsidering the NFU shows wariness of China's technological advancements and changing geostrategic realities.

Indian Naval Modernization

The Neo-realist perspective explains security dynamics in South Asian and Indian Ocean region.[48] To meet its strategic needs in the Indian Ocean and control key trade routes in the region, India has started to invest heavily in upgrading its naval strength, hardware and technologies. In 2019, New Delhi allocated USD 8 billion to pursue its ambitious P75 (I) project to build new and modern shipyards to develop high-quality submarines to improve India's deep-water naval capabilities.[49] BrahMos PJ-10 hypersonic missile system was inducted into the Indian Navy in 2023. It has a speed of up to Mach 3, with a range of up to 300 km, and carries a payload of 300 kg.[50] India is also in the process of developing the advanced version of this hypersonic cruise missile, BrahMos II, which will have a range of up to 1500 km, a speed of up to 8,575 km per hour, and will allow the Indian Navy to hit targets with more precision.[51] This will enable the Indian Navy to maintain a strong strategic position across the Indian Ocean's littoral states.

The Indian Navy has also acquired 12 additional P8-I, LRMR/ASW aircraft, which are equipped with lethal modern armament systems, including depth charges, Harpoon Block-II

[47] Elizabeth Roche, "India's No First Use Nuclear Policy May Change: Rajnath Singh," *Live Mint*, (September 17, 2019), https://www.livemint.com/news/india/india-s-no-first-use-nuclear-policy-may-change-rajnath-singh-1565946292515.html.

[48] Bruce Vaughn, "China-India Great Power Competition in the Indian Ocean Region: Issues for Congress," *Congressional Research Service*, (April 2018), https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/R45194.pdf.

[49] Alok Bhagwat, and Pradnya Vishwas Chitrao, "The Economics of 'Make in India' Over 'Buy (Import)' Decision in Selected Technologies for the Indian Navy," In *Information and Communication Technology for Sustainable Development,* (2019): 345, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-7166-0_34.

[50] Joe Saballa, "Indian Navy to Order BrahMos Cruise Missiles for $2.5 Billion." *The Defence Post,* (March 15, 2023), https://www.thedefensepost.com/2023/03/15/indian-navy-brahmos-missiles/.

[51] "Hypersonic BrahMos-II Missile May Include Tech from Tsirkon Missile," *Naval News*, (Aug 2, 2022). https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2022/08/hypersonic-brahmos-ii-missile-may-include-tech-from-tsirkon-missile/.

missiles and MK-54 lightweight torpedoes.[52] These aircraft can detect incoming threats and support maritime surveillance, electronic warfare, search and rescue missions, providing targeting data and real-time surveillance.[53] In 2021, the Indian Navy Directorate of Network Centric Operations (DNCO) issued a tender for Space-Based Automatic Dependent Surveillance-Broadcast (ADS-B) feeds.[54] India is also planning to upgrade its fleet under the Advanced Technology Vessel (ATV) program. Under the ATV, India will build four Nuclear-Powered Ballistic Missile Submarines (SSBNs), with the Indian built Arihant-class already operational.[55]

India, together with France, has launched the document entitled '*Horizon 2047*', under which India will acquire futuristic modern French-made diesel-electric Scorpene submarines.[56] Additionally, through projects like *75 Alpha* and modernisation, India aims to strengthen its nuclear triad. "This is the first time that India is moving towards consolidating its position in the Indian Ocean as a foreign policy priority. Imports to India's harbours are a growing part of its economy that it must protect with a strong navy."[57] The INS Vikram Aditya, India's Aircraft Carrier that can carry MiG-29K aircraft, with a range of 1500 kms with air defence and strike capabilities, gives India the offensive edge to assert its effective presence in the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal. Moreover, the Indian naval bases in the IOR, including the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Lakshadweep and Minicoy Island, which harbour the Indian Navy Ships (INS) fleets, are positioned to counter China's growing influence and develop a strong naval presence in the region.

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[52] Ajai Shukla, "Boeing Completes Delivery of 12 P-8I Aircraft to India," *Business Standard,* (February 24, 2022), https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/boeing-completes-delivery-of-12-p-8i-aircraft-to-india-122022400776_1.html.

[53] "India's Navy's P-81 Maritime Surveillance Aircraft Completes a Decade; Expects More Order," *Financial Express,* (Feb 24, 2023), https://www.financialexpress.com/business/defence-india-navys-p-8i-maritime-surveillance-aircraft-completes-a-decade-expects-more-order-2991922/.

[54] Zaki Khalid, "Indian Navy Eyes Enhanced Air Traffic Surveillance of the Arabian Sea," *Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research,* (May 24, 2021), https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/defense-security/indian-navy-eyes-enhanced-air-trafficsurveillance-of-the-arabian-sea/.

[55] Brad Lendon, "India Has a New Nuclear-Capable Ballistic Missile Submarine. But Can It Catch Up with China?" *CNN,* (Sep 14, 2024), https://edition.cnn.com/2024/09/14/asia/india-nuclear-ballistic-missile-submarine-intl-hnk-ml/.

[56] Christina Mackenzie, "India, France Increase Defense Ties with New Rafale Jet and Submarine Buys." *Breaking Defense,* (July 18, 2023), https://breakingdefense.com/2023/07/india-france-increase-defense-ties-with-new-rafale-jet-and-submarine-buys/.

[57] Meredith Roaten, "India Manages Diverse Arms Sources for Military Modernization," *National Defence*, (December 9, 2021), https://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/articles/2021/12/9/india-manages-diverse-arms--sources-for-military-modernization.

Modernization of the Indian Air Force

The IAF 2022 doctrine has transformed the IAF's regional posture. With the inclusion of French Rafale jets, India has planned to develop multiple new squadrons that will enhance its combat abilities. In addition, Boeing has already delivered the AH-64E Apache and CH-47F (I) Chinook military helicopters to the IAF.[58] For a long time, the IAF has faced criticism for its ageing technology and aircraft, such as the Mig-21 Bison, which is not set to retire.[59] India, to diversify its air combat solutions, has begun manufacturing an indigenous single-engine multi-role light-weight combat jet, Tejas, a project of Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL).[60] Under the initiative to promote 'Made in India', decision has been made to equip the IAF with 123 Tejas jets, despite critics opposing the inclusion. India, however, plans to develop more advanced variants of Tejas in the future, such as Tejas Mark II, which will feature a multi-sensor data fusion system, including an Active Electronically Scanned Array (AESA) radar and a missile approach warning system with search and track infrared.[61]

Technological superiority is a crucial aspect of modern warfare.[62] So far, India's biggest obstacle to becoming a dominant military force in South Asia is its inability to assert conventional superiority vis-à-vis Pakistan despite clear numerical advantage. Comparing the Indian military to Pakistan's military, India's 1.46 million active personnel are more than double the Pakistan's 654,000 personnel. India is ranked the 5th largest in terms of military size, whereas Pakistan is ranked 12th. Similarly, India has the 7th largest naval force in the world as compared to Pakistan, which is ranked 27th.[63] However, despite Indian military numerical strengthen, it faced setback against Pakistan in limited conflicts. For instance, after the 2019 Balakot strikes inside Pakistan, two IAF jets were shot down in a dogfight by Pakistan.

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[58] Dario Leone, "Boeing Completes Delivery of All AH-64E Apache and CH-47F Chinook Military Helicopters to the Indian Air Force," *The Aviation Geek Club*, (July 13, 2022), https://theaviationgeekclub.com/boeing-completes-delivery-of-all-ah-64e-apache-and-ch-47f-chinook-military-helicopters-to-the-indian-air-force/#:~:text=Boeing%20has%20completed%20delivery%20of,at%20Air%20Force%20Station%2C%20Hindan.

[59] Alison Saldanha, "MiG-21s Well Past Their Retirement Age: Here's Why IAF Needs New Jets," *Business Standard,* (March 1, 2019), https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/mig-21s-well-past-their-retirement-age-here-swhy-iaf-needs-new-jets-119030100184_1.html.

[60] Shreya Biswas, "Tejas Light Combat Aircraft: Here's How India Created Its First Flying Dagger," *India Today*, (July 1, 2016), https://www.indiatoday.in/fyi/story/tejas-light-combat-aircraft-history-indian-air-force-326777-2016-07-01.

[61] EurAsian Times Desk, "Tejas Mk-2 – India's New SuperFighter Is Now One of Top 4 Light Combat Aircraft in the World Along With 'Idol' Saab Gripen," *EurAsian Times*, (October 31, 2021), https://www.eurasiantimes.com/tejas-mk-2-indias-new-superfighter-top-light-combat-aircraft/.

[62] Aamir, Omer, "IAF's Defence Acquisitions and Their Effect on Regional Stability," *SSRN,* (2020)*: 2* http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3543058.

[63] Desk, DH Web, "India vs Pakistan Military 2025: Strength, Manpower, Budget and More Compared," Deccan Herald, April 27, 2025, https://www.deccanherald.com/india/india-vs-pakistan-military-ranking-manpower-budget-and-more-3512808.

In 2025, India lost five aircraft, including three advanced French Rafael jets, during the May 7-10 conflict with Pakistan.[64] These setbacks demonstrate that mere numerical superiority does not guarantee Indian dominance in South Asia. The key issues hindering the Indian military's modernization include technology, training capacity and the integration of new technology in the military operations.

India declared the year 2023 as its 'Year of Transformation', based on the five pillars of Force Structuring and Optimisation, Modernisation & Technology Infusion, Systems, Processes & Functions, Human Resource Management and Jointness and Integration with an estimated allocation of USD 42 billion.[65] To achieve the envisioned modernization of the Indian military intended to integrate five squadrons of S-400 systems, which include forty launchers, 1,000 missiles, and a multifunctional radar system equipped with anti-stealth capabilities and an autonomous detection and targeting system, out of which three have been received and operationalized. This advanced system allows the IAF to engage multiple targets simultaneously through mobile launch vehicles. Additionally, India's USD 10 billion procurement from the US includes logistics aircraft such as C-130J 'Super Hercules, C-17 Globemaster and patrolling P-81 aircraft.[66] Through the inclusion of S-400, India plans to utilise it for an offensive air defence role during a war against Pakistan. India's diversification of military hardware is supported by huge budgetary inflows, a pattern which reflects India's aspirations of absolute superiority in the South Asia. These aspirations are not only doctrinal but also supported by investment in military hardware and technology.

Indian Military Modernization in the Disruptive Technologies

Indian military modernization is prompting New Delhi to enhance coordination amongst its tri-services while developing advanced technologies that will be crucial in the South-Asian region, including Artificial Intelligence (AI), Lethal Autonomous Weapons (LAWs), Hypersonic Weapons, Directed Energy Weapons (DEWs), and Quantum technology, apart from modernizing Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. In 2019, India established the Defence AI Council (DAIC) chaired by Indian Minister of Defence. This division has been created to integrate AI in the defence structures of the Indian armed forces. The use of AI, advanced robotics, cyberspace and nanomaterials will play a vital role in the

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[64] Akalia Kalan, "How did Pakistan Shoot Down Five Indian Jets," *The Economist,* (July 16th, 2025), https://www.economist.com/asia/2025/07/16/how-did-pakistan-shoot-down-indias-fighter-jets.

[65] Alok Deb, "Indian Military: Five Issues for the Immediate Future," *The Peninsula Foundation,* (February 07, 2024), https://www.thepeninsula.org.in/2024/02/07/the-indian-military-five-issues-for-the-immediate-future/.

[66] Sandeep Unnithan, "In a Graphic: India-US—Brothers in Arms," *India Today,* (September 23, 2021), https://www.indiatoday.in/india-today-insight/story/india-us-brothers-in-arms-1856465-2021-09-23.

future of warfare. Additionally, AI-integrated systems can more efficiently manage vast quantity of data.[67] The application of AI-powered technology is diverse covering areas such as logistics, reconnaissance, cyberspace, warfare, missile guidance and the detection of hostile units.[68]

With the advancement in AI, LAWs are the future of warfare. In 2018, India signed a deal with Israel Aerospace Industries to provide India with approximately 100 Heron TP UAVs and 10 missile-armed drones, to improve its cross-border strike capabilities, especially the surgical strike capabilities.[69] Furthermore, to expand its drone inventory in January 2025, India joined the Eurodrone program as an observer, indicating its interest in acquiring Eurodrone Remotely Piloted Aircraft (RPAS). This inter-European technological venture is a highly advanced drone system with a payload capability of over 2.3 tons and advanced reconnaissance and precision strike capability.[70] The drone expedition shows India's intent to expand strategic alliances with advanced countries, including Israel and Europe, to expand its UAVs capabilities.

India has now developed effective hypersonic-missile technology to establish a first strike capability against strategic targets in Pakistan.[71] In 2020, India's DRDO announced the development of DEWs to address China's rising dominance along its northern borders. India, along with other major powers of the system, has made significant progress in quantum research and development. India has upgraded and developed advanced ISR systems through the utilisation of quantum technology.[72] The ISR capabilities of India have become a pivotal 'informationised' warfare tool, as they serve as a crucial component contributing to India's national security strategy. Furthermore, the development of an ISR network by India is likely to adversely impact the South Asian security environment where India and Pakistan, the two

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[67] Eliaçık, Eray, "Guns and Codes: The Era of AI-Wars Begins," *Dataconomy* (August 17, 2022), https://dataconomy.com/2022/08/17/how-is-artificial-intelligence-used-in-the-military/.

[68] Maximilian Schreiner, "AI in War: How Artificial Intelligence Is Changing the Battlefield," *The Decoder* (January 9, 2023), https://the-decoder.com/ai-in-war-how-artificial-intelligence-is-changing-the-battlefield/#:~:text=AI%20is%20helping%20to%20optimize,an%20impact%20on%20military%20operations.

[69] Manu Pubby, "Government Approves $400-Million Plan to Procure Armed Heron TP Drones from Israel," *Economic Times,* (Sep 15, 2015), https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/government-approves-400-million-plan-to-procure-armed-heron-tp-drones-from-israel/articleshow/48906195.cms.

[70] "India Joins Eurodrone Program as the Newest OCCAR Observer State," (January 21, 2025), *OCCAR,* https://www.occar.int/news/india-joins-eurodrone-programme-as-newest-occar-observer-state-.

[71]V. K Saxena, "India's March towards Achieving Hypersonic Capability," *Vivekananda International Foundation*, (Feb 16, 2023), https://www.vifindia.org/article/2023/february/16/indias-march-towards-achieving-hypersonic-capability.

[72]Michal Krelina and Denis Dúbravčík, "Quantum Technology for Defence," *JAPCC,* 35 (Feb 2023), https://www.japcc.org/articles/quantum-technology-for-defence/.

nuclear-armed states, remain embroiled in a military competition and have experienced several serious military crises over the past many years."[73]

On the space front, the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) has been designing modern strategic warning systems, which are being spearheaded by their information gathering satellites alongside an 'expanding fleet of airborne platforms and ground-based sensors.[74] In addition to this, ISRO has developed cutting-edge space systems which are equipped with Space Situational Awareness (SSA) as well as Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (C4ISR).[75] With these advancements in its space and satellite technology, India is now equipped with military satellite networks, including ELINT (Electronic Intelligence), GEOINT geo-spatial intelligence and even Communications, Early Warning, Navigation, Search and Rescue, Space Control, which will benefit India with its Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) systems.[76] These security installations are not merely measures to feel secure, but have been developed to equip India to demonstrate its offensive posture at will. It is difficult to argue against India's attainment of a relative qualitative and quantitative advantage in its military inventory. Nevertheless, in a region plagued with unresolved territorial disputes and a history of wars, India's rising military ambitions have germinated a security dilemma for Pakistan.

Pakistan's Response to Indian Military Modernization

To maintain a balance in the South Asian power equation, Pakistan has been improving its conventional capabilities to counter Indian military modernization. Pakistan's defensive yet enduring posture has contested India's offensive rise in the region. Blarel and Ebert argue that the current conditions of regional contestation in South Asia, most importantly the persistent revisionist versus status-quo domestic agendas, the presence of growing nuclear arsenals, and multi-tiered Asian rivalry constellations, undermine prospects for conflict resolution and complicate modelling future strategic behaviour in the region.[77] As a direct consequence of the Indian Military modernization, the conventional asymmetries between the two states are

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[73] Amjad Mahmood and Adil Sultan, "Impact of India's ISR Capabilities on South Asian Security Dynamics," *Strategic Studies* 41, no. 4 (April 2022): 17, https://doi.org/10.53532/ss.041.04.0040.

[74] Muhammad Jawad Hashmi and Sultan Mubariz Khan, "Emerging Network Centric Warfare Capabilities of Indian Military: Challenges for Pakistan's Security," *Margalla Papers* 23, no. 2 (2019), https://margallapapers.ndu.edu.pk/site/issue/download/15/70.

[75] Amjad Mahmood, Adil Sultan, "Impact of India's ISR Capabilities on South Asian Security Dynamics," *Strategic Studies* 41, no. 4 (2022): 19, https://doi.org/10.53532/ss.041.04.0040.

[76] Amjad Mahmood and Adil Sultan, "Impact of India's ISR Capabilities on South Asian Security Dynamics," *Strategic Studies* 41, no. 4 (April 2022): 20, https://doi.org/10.53532/ss.041.04.0040.

[77] Nicolas Blarel and Hannes Ebert, "Explaining the Evolution of Contestation in South Asia," *International Politics* 52, no. 2 (Dec 2014): 233, https://doi.org/10.1057/ip.2014.44.

expanding. Pakistan is now focusing on efforts to achieve credible arms parity with India to deter any aggression coming from its eastern borders. Although the Indian IBGs' formation at the western borders with Pakistan could not undermine stability, it has given rise to a new age of arms race, which has the potential to put the deterrence stability in South Asia under stress.[78]

The existing conventional asymmetry between Pakistan and India is increasing because of the sizes of their respective economies. India has allocated USD 74.34 billion as its defence budget for the fiscal year 2024/25, which is a 4.79% increase from the previous year and an 18.43% increase from the fiscal year 2022/23.[79] India's defence budget accounts for 1.91% of its GDP.[80] Pakistan, on the other hand, allocated USD 7.6 billion as defence budget for the fiscal year 2024/25, which is almost a 15% increase from the previous year, and accounts for just 1.7% of its GDP, a decline compared to previous years, which was around 2%.[81]. Pakistan's defence spending is expected to reach USD 12.5 billion by 2027 as forecasted by Global Data.[82]

According to Pakistan's former Air Marshal, Ashfaq Arain, Indian military modernisation and its ever-evolving offensive doctrine will push Pakistan into modifying its warfighting tactics along the border with India. Furthermore, the right-wing BJP-RSS rise in India will further lead to a contestation of ideologies between Pakistan and India, which might push both adversaries into hostile confrontations. All these developments around the Eastern borders of Pakistan are forcing Pakistan to resort to its nuclear deterrent. However, Pakistan is now moving towards selective modernization of its conventional forces, naval modernization, and missile development and delivery systems, to balance the evolving and delicate arms disparity in South Asia.[83]

India has deployed Rafael jets, S-400, long-range Air defence systems, modern UAVs, long-range maritime systems and nuclear submarines along the borders of Pakistan.[84] In

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[78] Muhammad Ali and Syed Mussawar Hussain Bukhari, "Indian Military Doctrine and Its Impact on South Asia's Strategic Stability," *Margalla Papers* 26, no. 1 (2022): 74-84 https://doi.org/10.54690/margallapapers.26.I.98.

[79] Gordon Arthur, "Despite Security Threats, India's Defense Budget Remains Static," *Defense News*, (August 6, 2024), https://www.defensenews.com/land/2024/08/06/despite-security-threats-indias-defense-budget-remains-static/

[80] Vanessa Le, "India's 2024-2025 Defense Budget: Incremental Progress at Best • Stimson Center," *Stimson Center*, November 30, 2024, https://www.stimson.org/2024/indias-2024-2025-defense-budget-incremental-progress-at-best/.

[81] Usman Ansari, "Pakistan Unveils Increased Defence Budget, IMF Decries Spending Plan," *Defence News*, (June 22, 2023), https://www.defensenews.com/global/asiapacific/2023/06/22/pakistan-unveils-increased-defense-budget-imf-decries-spending-plan/.

[82] "Pakistan Defense Market Size, Trends, Budget Allocation, Regulations, Acquisitions, Competitive Landscape and Forecast to 2028," *GlobalData,* August 10, 2023, https://www.globaldata.com/store/report/pakistan-defense-urmarket-analysis/.

[83] Iftikhar Ali and Jatswan S. Sidhu, "Strategic Dynamics of the Arms Race in South Asia," *Journal of Asian and African Studies,* (2023): 16, https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096231153150.

[84] Muhammad Ali and Syed Mussawar Hussain Bukhari, "Indian Military Doctrine and Its Impact on South Asia's Strategic Stability," *Margalla Papers* 26, no. I (2022): 77, https://doi.org/10.54690/margallapapers.26.I.98.

response, Pakistan has started to increase the quantity of its MIRVs along the border and is working to enhance its long-range ballistic and submarine-launched cruise missile (SLCM) systems, such as the Shaheen III and Babur III.[85] Pakistan has also developed warfare drones, which have been very effective and precise in its fight against terrorism.[86] As a counter to India's deal of procuring Rafael C jets, Pakistan has procured 25 J-10C Firebird multi-purpose 4.5 generation fighter aircrafts.[87] Alongside, China has supplied Pakistan with PL-15 air-to-air missiles, which add real value to Pakistan's aerial combat ability.

Earlier this year, Pakistan's former Air Chief indicated that Pakistan is also set to acquire 36 FC-31 Gyrfalcon fifth-generation stealth fighter jets from China, becoming the first nation to do so.[88] Pakistan has also enhanced its capabilities, such as ISR, air defence, cyber and mechanisation systems, despite economic challenges. In 2020, Pakistan ordered 50 UCAVs from the manufacturers of the Wing Loong II which will be crucial inventory for surveillance, reconnaissance and precision striking.[89] Furthermore, Pakistan has placed an order for Russian Kornet-E anti-tank guided missiles and Spanish Alcotan-100 shoulder-carried anti-tank rockets, to counter India's T-90 tanks.[90] Additionally, Pakistan has been working on enhancing its C4I systems and capabilities, developing more Al-Khalid and, Al-Zarrar tanks, advanced third-generation Haider tanks, T-80UD tanks and rebuilding the M113-series armoured personnel carriers.

The Pakistan Air Force (PAF) has been working on producing JF-17 jets, which have three production blocks: Block 1, Block 2 and Block 3 – 150 of which will be produced in the coming years.[91] Pakistan's naval modernization programs also 'remain on track', as a complete fleet renewal is underway. The Pakistan Navy has received two Type 054 A/P frigates this year.

[85]Ankit Panda, "Pakistan Conducts Second Test of Babur-3 Nuclear-Capable Submarine-Launched Cruise Missile," *The Diplomat*, (April 1, 2018), https://thediplomat.com/2018/04/pakistan-conducts-second-test-of-babur-3-nuclear-capable-submarine-launched-cruise-missile/.

[86] Aritra Banerjee, "Pakistan 'Races Ahead' of India in Drone Technology; Is 4th Country to Deploy UCAVs in Combat Ops," *The EurAsia Times,* (September 8, 2021), https://www.eurasiantimes.com/pakistan-races-ahead-of-india-in-drone-technology-is-4th-country-to-deploy-ucavs-in-combat-ops/.

[87]Usman Ansari, "Pakistan Confirms Chinese 'Firebird' Fighter Acquisition," *Defense News*, (January 3, 2022), https://www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2022/01/03/pakistan-confirms-chinese-firebird-fighter-acquisition/.

[88] Usman Ansari, "Pakistan to Buy Chinese FC-31 Fighter Jets, Says Air Chief," *Defense News,* (January 4, 2024) https://www.defensenews.com/air/2024/01/04/pakistan-to-buy-chinese-fc-31-fighter-jets-says-air-chief/.

[89] Shishir Gupta, "China Sells 50 Armed Drones to Pakistan, Begins Psyops: It's a Reminder," *Hindustan Times,* (December 26, 2020), https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/chinese-platries-to-psyche-indian-army-by-supplying-armed-drones-to-pak/storytySb4UnKimFUYIxJdP3xGL.html.

[90] Bilal Khan, "Pakistan Ordered Kornet-E Anti-Tank Guided Missiles in 2017-2018," *QUWA*, (October 6, 2019), https://quwa.org/2019/10/06/pakistan-ordered-kornet-e-anti-tank-guided-missiles-in-2017-2018/.

[91] Franz-Stefan Gady, "Pakistan Stands Up New Fighter Squadron," *The Diplomat*, (March 8, 2018). https://thediplomat.com/2018/03/pakistan-stands-up-new-fighter-squadron/.

To counter India's BrahMos, Pakistan has operationalised the HHQ-16 surface-to-air missile systems and P-282/CM-401 supersonic anti-ship weapons.[92]

Pakistan's missile system is diverse, and since 1998, Pakistan has successfully tested *'Short-Range Ballistic Missiles (SRBM), Medium-Range Ballistic Missiles (MRBM), Close-Range Ballistic Missiles (CRBM), Short-Range Cruise Missiles (SRCM), Air-Launched Cruise Missiles (ALCM), Submarine-Launched Cruise Missiles (SLCM), Anti-ship Cruise Missiles (ASCM)'.*[93] By incorporating these varied missile systems, Pakistan has improved its strike range to encompass all of India. However, given the military modernization by India and growing conventional imbalances, nuclear deterrence remains the bedrock of strategic stability in South Asia.

The "China Mix" and Impact of Indian Military Modernization on Strategic Stability in South Asia

China's impact on the South-Asian balance of power and the Sino-Pak strategic partnership has played a key role in influencing Indian military modernization. When China conducted its first nuclear test on October 16, 1964, it created a spill over effect in the region. To balance the power, India conducted its nuclear test in May 1974, dubbed as the 'Operation Smiling Buddha'.[94] This spill over effect forced Pakistan to develop its nuclear capability. Pakistan conducted its first nuclear tests in May 1998, demonstrating its technological capabilities to maintain a balance of power in the region. The Sino-Pak strategic partnership has always been perceived as a threat by India, as this partnership has led to several joint military exercises, military cooperation agreements and most importantly, nuclear cooperation, through which Pakistan aims to contain Indian hegemony in the South-Asian region.

While India's relations with Pakistan remained sour, its strategic competition with China has tempted India to grow its conventional superiority. The Sino-Indian 2020 Ladakh limited standoff along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) is a case in point, which led India to expedite its military modernization.

The fast-paced military modernization reflects India's predilection for military rather than political and diplomatic means to deal with regional neighbours. This tendency reinforces

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[92] Usman Ansari, "How are Pakistan Naval Modernization Plan Coming Along," *Defence News,* (Feb 13, 2023) https://www.defensenews.com/smr/defending-the-pacific/2023/02/13/how-are-pakistans-naval-modernization-plans-coming-along/.

[93] Iftikhar Ali and Jatswan S. Sidhu, "Strategic Dynamics of the Arms Race in South Asia," *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 59, no. 8 (2023): 8-9, https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096231153150.

[94] "Operation Smiling Buddha: The Story of India's First Nuclear Test at Pokhran in 1974," *The Indian Express*, (May 19, 2023), https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-history/operation-smiling-buddha-nuclear-first-test-pokhran-history-8616714/.

the notion of a security dilemma for the smaller South Asian neighbours, especially for Pakistan. Since 2014, India has stalled talks and reduced the scope of any bilateral negotiations to terrorism and the status of Azad Jammu and Kashmir. In the absence of dialogue, the regional security environment is becoming volatile every passing day and can impact the region in the following ways.

- Military modernization would increase tensions and the likelihood of war in South Asia. India's increasing focus on automation, enhancing ISR capabilities, would likely to tempt India to a limited Conflict against Pakistan. The traditional notion of crisis stability relies on predictable patterns of an adversary. Supposedly, AI in the military domain by India will erode these patterns because of the speed and unpredictability of such weapons, which may result in a possibility of "miscalculation and escalation."

- Secondly, the proximity between nuclear India and Pakistan increases the risk of miscalculations and inadvertent war. In March 2022, the accidental firing of an Indian BrahMos missile inside Pakistan which India claims was due to a technical malfunction, was a serious negligence by New Delhi. While it raises questions on India's command supervision and operational protocols, more importantly, the consequences of such an incident, if a missile hits any military installation, can be grave. In the fragile security environment of South Asia, the chances of inadvertent war cannot be ruled out in the wake of any future incident of the same nature.

- For the past two decades, India has attempted to achieve escalation dominance in each conflict. Balakot strikes set the tone for the use of military force as seen in the post-Pahalgam May 2025 four-day conflict between India and Pakistan. India's Military buildup, a charged political environment, and media-supported war-hysteria have raised the ante of war below the nuclear threshold.

- Current trends in the Indian Military modernization shows a trajectory to find path for a limited war with Pakistan. Though Pakistan does not view even a limited war between India and Pakistan under a nuclear umbrella, however, India continues to explore new tools/strategy to engage in a limited conflict: a contestable-incontestable vs less credible or more credible paradox. In the realm of the emerging and disrupting technological landscape, India will prefer to use unmanned aircraft and other aerial platforms with

stand-off weapons that could be used to inflict damage deep inside Pakistan territory and build its credentials as a credible military power.[95]

Conclusion

Indian Military Modernization and the ensuing arms race pose a challenge to strategic stability in South Asia. India's aim to fight a conventional war through its military modernization under a nuclear shadow has made South Asia the most dangerous nuclear flashpoint. Further, the idea to establish a new normal by penalising Pakistan for any militant attack inside India seems a preposterous proposition. Alongside India's ploy of supporting proxies and alliances with the non-state actors inside Pakistan, espionage can lead to uncontrollable consequences that might spread beyond the regional geo-political boundaries. These instabilities have significantly hampered the Pakistan-India peace process and adversely impact on the socioeconomic development in the region.

In a regional context, the Indian Military Modernization must also be viewed as an effort to tackle the Sino-Pak strategic convergence. The "China mixes" is also another reason why India is making headways to acquire foreign armaments, including futuristic weapons systems and technologies, like advanced missiles and advanced combat systems, to enhance its warfighting capabilities. These modernization build-ups are shaping aggressively because India feels that it is militarily capable, economically confident and strategically well placed with its military and economic alliances with the global powers to restructure South Asia by becoming the dominant power. With the inclusion of Rafael C jets, and the expansion and modernizing Indian naval forces and equipping the Indian Army with futuristic weaponry, India aims not only to counter any regional strategic partnerships but to assert its strategic and economic dominance in the region. Indian Naval Modernization supports the country's extensive coastlines, international trade and shows that Indian strategic posture is now evolving beyond South Asia.

Arguably, South Asia is becoming a veritable tinderbox that could explode at any moment. To sum up, the Indian military modernization, marked by technological advancements and doctrinal evolution, has fueled the South Asian arms race, increasing the prospects of strategic instability in the region. India's hegemonic ambitions require the international community's attention to consider the rapid Indian military expansion to prevent any escalation that could have regional consequences. The only way forward to de-escalate the heightened

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[95] Adil Sultan, Airpower, Conventional Escalation, and the Nuclear Overhang, Drawing Lessons from Operation Bunyanum Marsoos, Seminar on "Pakistan's Nuclear Weapon Program – Guarantor of Peace and Stability in South Asia," *CISS, Islamabad*, May 30th, 2025.

militarized environment is to address the long-standing unresolved disputes, such as Kashmir, end the use of proxies like the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), and engage in broad-based dialogue and cooperation through enabling cooperative frameworks, Track-II diplomacy, and people-to-people contacts. One such framework is the Strategic Restraint Regime (SRR) to reduce the likelihood of war in South Asia. In addition, Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) such as the resumption of the composite dialogue and adherence to bilateral agreements i.e., Indus Water Treaty (IWT) will be crucial for regional peace and stability. Moreover, there is a greater need to promote people-to-people contacts and bilateral exchanges among think tanks, civil society, and academic to normalize the elevated strategic temperature in South Asia.

NEW MEDIA AS A TOOL OF HYBRID WARFARE:

ANALYZING PAKISTAN'S CASE

Afsah Qazi and Faiz Ali Shah

New Media as a Tool of Hybrid Warfare: Analyzing Pakistan's Case

Afsah Qazi and Faiz Ali Shah[1]

Abstract

The hybridity of warfare has been a long-standing phenomenon, yet the term has become more popular in recent years. Its revival has largely come in the context of misinformation and disinformation campaigns within and among states, targeted at and by varied actors in the world today. Manipulation of information has become a feature of our globalized world as communication media continuously proliferate – hence the rise of 'New Media'. To explicate the intrinsic link of media with disinformation and hybrid conflict, this study centers on Pakistan's case and answers the question, 'how new media may impact Pakistan's national security?'. It argues that the fundamental challenge lies in the possibility of new media being employed as a tool of hybrid warfare against Pakistan. The argument is qualitatively substantiated using existing academic literature and primary factual data collected from new media platforms (primarily X (formerly twitter) and You Tube between 2021-2023. The data-based-findings helped to establish how new media is already being employed for subversive purposes in and against Pakistan. The argument seeks theoretical support from Shaw and McComb's agenda-setting theory that emphasized traditional media's ability to influence, direct, and shape perception regarding what issues are 'imminent' and 'important' while relegating others down the agenda. Comparably, New Media's agenda-setting potential allows faster spread of mis- and disinformation (without credibility checks) – thus posing a hybrid challenge. The study is significant in terms of clearly establishing this equation between New Media and hybrid warfare – that may be replicable to cases of other states and societies.

Key Words: New Media, Hybrid Warfare, Agenda-setting, Misinformation, Fake News

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Introduction

The link between media and politics has long existed and is well researched. In simplest terms, Media (a plural of medium) collectively refers to the means of mass communication – including broadcasting, publishing, and the internet. Media's traditional role was one of manufacturing consent[2], in a direction of states' choosing. However, with progress from conventional print and electronic media to mass/social media, states' control over the outcome of information dissemination got challenged. Undoubtedly a tool of mass communication and influence that makes information reach to the target audience with relative ease, media has also played a role in spreading unwanted or undesired content. This comes as a byproduct of rapid technological advancement that has transformed media into a complex entity. To the exiting print and electronic media platforms, the rise of 'New Media' adds further complexity by enhancing multilayered vulnerabilities. New Media is any media – from newspaper articles and blogs to music and podcasts – delivered digitally.

Social science research already recognizes media as a non-kinetic weapon, especially when discussing the hybridity of threats to human existence today.[3] Despite hybridity's archaic link with warfighting, the term hybrid warfare has gained greater usage over the past decade or so. Information misuse is the most common tool of hybrid warfare that plays into adversary's hands, enabled by media's wide-scale employment and access. Therefore, the role of media finds a central mention in majority discussions on hybrid warfare in the 21st century[4] - reinforcing its linkage to security. Through media, a target's information environment may be accessed to spread fake news and steer public opinion to achieve the set goals. Promoting divisive narratives between the state and its people undermines national cohesion that aids the pursuit of foreign agendas.

Placed in the said context, this study probes into the challenges that Pakistan faces with the rise of New Media. The link between traditional media and hybrid war against Pakistan is well acknowledged[5] (by country's strategic community and policy elite) and provides the rationale for current research. As the discourse on Pakistan's experience with hybrid warfare has evolved,

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[2] Edward Herman & Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York City: Pantheon,1988), https://chomsky.info/consent01/.

[3] C.A. Gillis, "Media as the Dominant Factor in Modern Conflict," *Canadian Forces College*, 2015.

[4] "Social Media as a tool of hybrid warfare", *NATO Strategic Communications Centre for Excellence*, 2016.

[5] Sajjad Hussain et. al., "Role of Media in Hybrid Warfare in Pakistan: How to Convert Challenges into Opportunities," *Journal of South Asian Studies* 11 (03): 2023, 231-241.

employment of media - both as a weapon against, and as a counterstrategy has been discussed.[6] New Media may thus be feared to become just another tool of such warfare in the country. Therefore, it is pertinent to explore and document its impact on Pakistan, in order to better equip and prepare the country for the challenges ahead.

The primary research question that this research addresses is, (i) how the New Media may impact Pakistan's security? The subsidiary questions addressed along the primary one are: (ii) What is New Media and how is it differentiated from other media? (iii) Why is the New Media seen as a rising challenge for states? and (iv) how has the rising use of New Media impacted Pakistan? The objective of research thus is to highlight the unique features of New Media and to explore the impact these may have for national security in Pakistan's case.

A review of literature helps identify the gap(s) in existing discourse on the subject. First come the source lying at the intersection of media's information function and hybrid conflict. Hoffman's[7] and Joseph Nye's[8] works have contributed towards conceptualizing media's role in hybrid warfare. Those specifically establishing the role of media in waging information and cyber warfare through spreading dis- and misinformation are also numerous.[9] A few works focus on Russia's information operations adding hybridity to conflict environments.[10] Similarly, multiple sources talk about hybrid threats as a challenge for Pakistan[11] yet few emphasize directly on the role of media as an instrument for that.[12]

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[6] Haseeb Ur Rehman Warraich, Muhammad Waqas Haider and Tahir Mahmood Azad, "Media as an Instrument of Hybrid Warfare: A Case Study of Pakistan" *Global Mass Communication Review* VI (I): 2021, 12-27.

[7] Frank G. Hoffman, "Conflict in the 21st century: The rise of Hybrid wars," *Potomac Institute for Policy Studie*s, 2007.

[8] Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (Cambridge: Public Affairs books, 2004).

[9] C. J. Hamelink, *Media and conflict: Escalating evil* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2011); Mary Aikin, *The Cyber Effect: A pioneering cyberpsychologist explains how human behavior changes online* (New York; Speigel and Grau, 2016).

[10] Edward Lucas and Peter Pomerantsev, "Winning the Information War: Techniques and counterstrategies to Russian propaganda in Central and Eastern Europe," *Centre for European policy Analysis*, 2016; Ofer Fridman, *Russian Hybrid Warfare: Resurgence and Politicization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[11] Tahir Azad and Muhammad Waqas Haider, "Cyber Warfare as an Instrument of Hybrid Warfare: A Case Study of Pakistan," *South Asian Studies* 36 (2): 2021; Javeria Jahangir & Naheed Bashir, "Fifth Generation and Hybrid Warfare: Response Strategy of Pakistan," *Academic Journal of Social Sciences* 6 (2): 2022; Imtiaz Hussain Naz, "Foreign Policy in Hybrid Warfare Environment – Way Forward for Pakistan," *Margalla Papers* 25 (1): 2021; Mian Nadir Sulaiman, "Fighting Hybrid: Hybrid Threats to Pakistan's National Security," *Pakistan Perspectives* 28 (1): 2023; Hafiz Imran Ahmed Qureshi &. Iram Khalid, "Hybrid Warfare in the 21st Century: Implications for Pakistan," *Journal of Development and Social Sciences* 5 (4): 2024; Tughral Yamin, "Hybrid Warfare – Challenges for Pakistan," Strategic *Thought* 1 (1): 2021.

[12] Zainab Khan & Abdul Wajid Khan, "Role of ISPR in Countering Hybrid Warfare," *Human Nature Journal of Social Sciences* 1 (1): 2020; Sajjad Hussain et al., "Role of Media in Hybrid Warfare in Pakistan," 2023.

The second category of literature reviewed was related to challenges of New Media specifically. The challenges these works have associated with New Media (digitized mass-access platforms) include misinformation and disinformation spread through fake news via social media[13]; New Media's algorithmic bias creating filter bubbles and echo-chambers with reinforce negative emotions/sentiments[14]; the socio-cultural and economic effects[15]; and the enlarging threat of polarization and eroding democratic values across states.[16]

The last strand of reviewed literature is one detailing the impact of New Media on Pakistan specifically. Zafar et al. have elaborated social media's role in improving the political socialization of youth[17], while Baqir et al. have analyzed X/twitter data between 2018 and 2022 for its impact on political polarization in the country.[18] Social media has become a central instrument of political awareness and opinion-framing among youth.[19] A recent work uncovers the misuse of social media for derailing democratic values and processes including elections.[20] Research has worked upon the positive[21] and negative[22] socio-cultural impact of digital media on university students in (Pakistani) Punjab. How social media fed misinformation related to public health sector during Covid-19 has also been established.[23] Manzoor and Shahzad have highlighted the deteriorating media ethics and substandard journalism in South Punjab as one impact of digital-social media.[24]

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[13] Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election." *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31 (2): 2017; C. Wardle & H. Derakshan "Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making," *Council of Europe,* September 27, 2017.

[14] Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding from You* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011); Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: NYU Press, 2018).

[15] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011); Shoshana Zuboff, T*he Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019).

[16] Robert W. McChesney, *Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism is Turning the Internet Against Democracy* (New York NY: New Press, 2013)

[17] Zubaida Zafar, Ruqia Kalsoom and Maria Jafar, "Impact of social media on socio-political socialization of Youth in Pakistan," *Journal of Policy Research* 10 (2): 2024.

[18] Anees Baqir, Alessandro Galeazzi, Andrea Drocco and Fabiana Zollo, "Social media polarization reflects shifting political alliances in Pakistan," *Social and Information Networks* 2023, https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2309.08075.

[19] M. M. Ali, A. M. Alaa and Ambreen Shahnaz, "The impact of mobile learning in English language classrooms in Pakistan," *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education* 9 (1): 2024.

[20] Sudaish Kumari, Sahr Rafaqat and Tooba Shabbir, "Misuse of social media: Impacts on Pakistan politics," *Pakistan Social Sciences Review* 9 (1): 2025.

[21] H. K. Tareen and M. Adnan, "Political communication with Social media in Pakistan: Internal and External efficacy," *Global Social Sciences Review* VI (II): 2021.

[22] Ghulam Safdar, "Effects of digital media on Pakistani culture" A study of university students of Punjab, Pakistan," *Online Media and Society* 3: 2022.

[23] Haroon et al., "Investigating misinformation dissemination on social media in Pakistan," 2021, https://arxiv.org/abs/2106.09338

[24] Samia Manzoor and M. A. Shahzad, "Impact of Social Media on Media Ethics of Journalists in South Punjab, Pakistan," *Pakistan Social Sciences Review* 8 (3): 2024.

The existing works have established the role of media as a tool of hybrid warfare, the challenges associated with its rise, and its impact on Pakistani state and society. However, comprehensive academic research that links the rising use of 'New Media' to the context of Pakistan's hybrid warfare challenge, has not been found. This study therefore argues that 'New Media brings greater challenges for Pakistan's security, by being employed as a tool of hybrid warfare against it'.

The said argument has been substantiated qualitatively through the collection and representation of factual data. A simplified form of content-analysis (analyzing selected content from New Media platforms) has been employed. Case/instances displaying the exploitative use of New Media vis-à-vis Pakistan have been extracted from New Media platforms – primarily Twitter(X) and YouTube - and documented for validating the argument. Furthermore, to theoretically relate the findings based on factual data, agenda-setting theory has provided the main conceptual frame.

This work is significant for its contribution to the larger discourse on New Media and hybrid warfare. It establishes the use and employment of New Media as an instrument of hybrid warfare – something already unfolding in Pakistan's case. Facts have been collected to anchor the proposed argument. Another significance comes with the use of agenda-setting theory – one that evolved in relation to traditional media but is being extended here to study 'New Media'. The point of emphasis being that the speedy dissemination and mass accessibility of New Media only enhances its agenda-setting potential.

The remainder of the article is *organized* into four sections. The second section describes the defining features of the New Media, its differentiating features and tools. Towards the end, this section also provides a brief overview of agenda-setting theory that is employed as a conceptual frame here. The third section elaborates on the challenges associated with the rise of New Media, i.e., what allows it to be used as weapon against states and also describes the extent of access to New Media in Pakistan. The fourth section documents and studies the cases where New Media has been employed as a tool of hybrid warfare against Pakistan. This is followed by the conclusion that caps the main findings of this research.

Understanding New Media and its Distinguishing Features

New Media is the latest addition to the list of media available to states for effective communication and outreach. It is an ever-more online and digital way of exchanging information than the regular

press, print, and electronic media. It is easily accessible to the masses and is believed to give voice to the unvoiced. *New Media is any media – from newspaper articles and blogs to music and podcasts –delivered digitally. From a website or email to mobile phones and streaming apps, any internet-related form of communication can be considered New Media.*[25]

New Media relies on digital means to communicate, opposed to traditional print and electronic media.[26] It is accessible through digital devices such as computers, laptops, mobile phones, and tablets.[27] It includes web-based digital platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, in addition to YouTube, information communication and storage apps, gaming applications, and digitized platforms like blogs, websites, podcasts, email, and internet ads.[28]

New Media relies heavily on digital transmission channels facilitated by advancements in satellite, digital cables and fiber-optic communications. The latest information coming from traditional media can be stored and assessed anytime in New Media. Anyone can create an account on digital media to express themselves, where information storage and ease of access provides avenues for greater creativity, collaboration and community engagement that may bring greater convergence – if that be the end goal sought.

Elements constituting New Media

Three elements are responsible for disseminating any information on New Media. First are the 'Agents' who produce the content. Officials/citizens of any state organization can be agents. They may belong to any political party, religious or ethnic group, or can be non-state actors, or individuals. Agents' agendas differ as per their identities, e.g., states, political parties, religious groups, and non-state actors (multi-national companies and terrorists) will all have diverse agendas and target audience. Agents make and disseminate latest content for seeking either prestige, financial gains or for influencing others.

The second element is 'Messages', which can be either malicious, informative, or entertaining. A message has four characteristics: a good piece of information; the repetition of that information; it provokes an emotional response; and it contains images or video. The messages are drafted according to the agenda and target audiences. Some messages may be relevant to ongoing

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[25] Joe Cote, "What is New Media?", *Southern New Hampshire University,* September 23, 2022, accessed January 29, 2025.

[26] Margaret Rouse, "New Media," *Techopedia,* May 20, 2022, https://www.techopedia.com/definition/416/new-media

[27] Lauryn Peterson, "What is Digital Media and How Can It Help Your Business?" *DIGITALLOGIC,* accessed January 29, 2024, https://www.digitallogic.co/blog/what-is-digital-media/

[28] Ibid

situations; for example, when relating to a political development, historical event, leader, or religion, the message may have a longer life.

The third element is the 'interpreter', who receives message, and can either spread or debunk the message through his or her emotional or logical response respectively. Interpretations of neutral and passionate observers greatly vary. The message can be interpreted in these three ways: a "hegemonic interpretation," interpreted as it is a "negotiated interpretation" that accepts a part but not the entire message; and "oppositional interpretation," which rejects the content of that message. The interpreter understands the messages based on his or her academic qualification, biases, socio-cultural status, ethnicity, experience, and political and religious affiliation. The psychological health of an interpreter also matters in understanding the message.

Dissemination Tools for New Media

Artificial Intelligence (AI) created a new tribe known as the "Digital Tribe" on social media. As a result, like-minded people are becoming closer digitally, and those with opposite views are becoming distant. Traditional media now also uses New Media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X and YouTube etc. to reach audiences that do not use traditional media.

▪ *Memes*

Memes are short messages- images of anything, an idea, and behaviors spread from one user to another. The meme can be in the form of text, picture, and video. It is a digital trend to engage the audience, spread disinformation, convince the audience of the campaign, and market the product. Memes are used for trolling of public figures, advertising, commenting on current events, and sharing the content with like-minded people to express oneself. They may be shared and reshared without having a copyright issue.

▪ *Social Media Bots*

Social Media Bots are software programs that are used to operate the internet. They are assigned repetitive actions without human instruction. There are two types of bots: Social media bots and chatbots.[29] Humans can manage thousands of social media bots, but chatbots require human intervention to perform. Chatbots give responses to any input, are faster than humans and available 24/7. Bots significantly affect the information flow on social media and can be used to spread fake information. Bot accounts are created to increase fake followers, spread false information, get

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[29] "What is a social media bot? Social media bot definition," *Cloudflare*, accessed January 29, 2025, https://www.cloudflare.com/learning/bots/what-is-a-social-media-bot/.

more attention, and influence audience for specific agenda. Around 15% of bot accounts are present on Twitter.[30]

Bot accounts are non-organic (social media) accounts that automatically upload content on social media. Now, Facebook has over 60 million bot accounts.[31] Multiple types of bots include fake followers, spam bots, promoter bots, phishing bots, followers' bots, impersonation bots, self-promotion bots, survey, and spam bots.[32] The bot accounts pose a significant challenge as these can be used as political tools in campaigns to change public opinion and spread propaganda.

- ▪ *Hashtags*

The hashtag symbol (#) is used before the keyword on social media posts. It is primarily used on Twitter, but is also used on platforms like Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest, TikTok, and LinkedIn.[33] It develops friends' and other users' interest in posts and critical issues. It helps users to find relevant content and trends on social media to expand influence in the target audience.[34] While writing/ -- Hashtags, 1) the user can use numbers, 2) punctuation or symbols cannot be used, 3) there is no space between words, 4) it can be at any place of post, like in the middle, end, or beginning. Specific hashtags can attract a bigger audience, as people other than followers and friends can also find the hashtag. Hashtag on Twitter is used to converse with users who do not even follow.

Bots and trolls can generate trends to produce pre-set conversations that blame and defame any political or religious leader and state institution. During the 2016 US elections, 23-27% of conversations were generated by automated accounts[35], and 40% fake conversations during Covid-19 were bot generated.[36] Another example of hashtags is the Branded Hashtags. They generate conversation on a political leader, political events or crises, and slogans.

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[30] David M.J Lazer, Matthew A Baum, Yochai Bennkler, Adam J Berinsky, Kelly Greenhill, "The science of fake news", *Science* 359 (6380): 2018.

[31] Scott Shane and Mike Isaac, "Facebook Says It's Policing Fake Accounts. But They're Still Easy to Spot," *The New York Times*, November 2017.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Clodagh O'Brien, "How to Use Hashtags Effectively on Social Media," *Digital Marketing Institute*, January 8, 2022, access date January 29, 2025, https://digitalmarketinginstitute.com/blog/how-to-use-hashtags-in-social-media.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Shane and Isaac, *The New York Times,* 2017.

[36] Sana Jamil Khan, "Did WhatsApp fail us during the pandemic?" *The Express Tribune,* March 2021.

▪ *Trends*

Rapidly proliferating true and false information often becomes trends on New Media. Trends are not permanent and continuously evolve alongside political events. The text, photos, memes, hashtags, audio, and video would generate a trend relevant to an ongoing social or political issue where more and more people share these, generating feelings of fun, anger, and sadness. Fake accounts (bots) help to keep the trend longer. Algorithms keep proliferating content that is popular among users giving it more visibility among target audience.

Evident from the above discussion, New Media's distinguishable features compared to traditional media are: its digital accessibility, greater user friendliness, unmatched freedom for content creation, weaker credibility-checks, and faster information dissemination. These collectively make New Media more difficult to regulate while simultaneously making it stand out as something that must be effectively regulated. New Media is the reality that is connecting the masses and to information at an unprecedented scale. Just as each new technology has its own dividends and challenges, New Media is no exception.

▪ *Conceptual Frame: New Media's Potential for Agenda-Setting*

Donal L. Shaw and Maxwell McComb's Agenda Setting theory talks about the role of Media in determining what people believe to be important and real. Media and press shape and filter reality rather than simply reflecting what is out there. Media concentrates on issues that are important for media managers, and the public tends to perceive those issues as important. Thus, Media determines which stories should be on the top-most agenda and which are of lesser significance.

Shaw and McComb's theory is well-suited to explain New Media's potential for agenda-setting, though the logic differs from the one for traditional media. Given the fact that New Media decentralizes information and loosens authority over content dissemination – it is the alternative discursive function and its tautological effect that allows the framing of issues on the agenda (something that traditional media does in a more animate way). Algorithmic feedback loops and large language modelling facilitate the New Media even more in terms of guiding viewers' perceptions and shaping their preferences of belief and disbelief. Though the content generation is personalized, the fact that paid contents get greater promotion and dissemination on feeds of individual users (to engender a specific thought process) tells how external actors may find a way into spreading a desired idea/agenda or belief.

New Media can influence people and masses, making them believe in importance of an issue or individual much more speedily and efficiently than traditional media. For the same reason, rivals can use New Media to spread disinformation about state, its institutions, and about fellow citizens (as a tool of hybrid warfare) leading to bigger divide within state and society, thus impacting security.

Challenges Associated with New Media in the Context of Hybrid Warfare

Our intensively globalized world with multiple interdependencies offers a context where the rising number of non-traditional security issues and sophisticated technologies contribute to exacerbating vulnerabilities. Hence, the more hybridized and complex threat spectra. The advent of cyber-crimes, AI tools and New Media have changed the way threats are perceived, as these allow direct control or indirect access to one's information environment. Information, though always central to warfare, today finds greater salience as a tool/instrument of warfare.[37] Thus, preparing for war today means much more than having standing armies.

Hybrid war that amalgamates different kinds of war is a key expression repeatedly used to describe contemporary wars as the means to exercise hybridity have now become discrete. States as well as non-state actors can both be the perpetrators or the targets of hybrid attacks. It succeeds by exploiting the vulnerabilities that persist due to poor governance. Societies with fault-lines like political volatility, religious or ethnonational divisions, a weak economy, and poor law and order situation are easy targets of such warfare.

A threat of hybrid warfare exists when an enemy deploys all the available kinetic and non-kinetic means of national power, directly or indirectly, to overpower or destabilize it for seeking political objectives. Strategy, operations, and tactics can vary with context, including (but not limited to) propaganda, disinformation campaigns, cyber-attacks, diplomatic disruptions, and economic and political sabotage. In most cases, however, information management provides key to waging and winning a hybrid war. Controlling the narrative in the target state to influence leaders' decisions by constraining their choices is one goal of hybrid war. New Media fits in the debate as its features encourage its misuse for pernicious ends.

New Media thus brings challenges despite its potential to improve communication and outreach. It offers greater avenues for adversaries to engage in disinformation campaigns and carry

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[37] Raymond Ridderhof, "From Classic Wars to Hybrid Warfare", *Peace Palace library*, July 17, 2017, accessed January 29, 2025, https://peacepalacelibrary.nl/blog/2017/classic-wars-hybrid-warfare.

forward their agenda. This is because people can start giving their opinions on what goes viral on mainstream and social media. New Media can be called a new ally or an enemy of the states because it allows people to produce content and share it with each other relatively freely. This content may be employed to target specific segments, motivate them against the state, or change the perception about state or state institutions.

The 'use of New Media as a tool of hybrid warfare' is an important qualifier here. This means that the New Media's *impact depends on how it is employed or utilized*. Its 'constructive' use with sufficient checks can enhance the dividends. New Media can change the nature of conflict and become a weapon for information warfare when employed to exploit natural vulnerabilities of the states like socio-political instability, historical grievances, economic inequality, and regional injustices.

  ▪ *Spread of Violence and Hate-Speech*

The use of New Media is increasing day by day. There are 5.24 billion users of social media worldwide, which is 63.9 % of the world's population.[38] New Media blurs the line between news and entertainment. The content on New Media is an asset that can be weaponized at any time by states, individuals, or companies. The difference between traditional and New Media is 'censorship'; there is no censorship and editorial process in New Media. Digital platform owners usually do not bear the responsibility for credibility or scrutiny of the content uploaded and provide a disclaimer to that effect. Whether this results out of commercial considerations, incapacity, political affinities, or for survivability amidst powerful political actors - unregulated content is bound to cause bigger problems in less literate societies.

New Media is therefore a cheap and easily accessible platform for malicious actors to proliferate incorrect information, normalizing violence, spreading terror and gathering sensitive information. The amount of information on New Media, its international reach, and low cost make it a competitor to mainstream media.

  ▪ *Trolling and Defamation*

Trolling is an online anti-social behavior when a user makes controversial, offensive, and funny comments on any post that hurts someone's emotions. The purposes of trolling are varied. Social media users troll to get attention, for character assassination, to insult, create fun of other cultures, hurt religious and ideological sentiments, and to take revenge. Trolling contains abusive content

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[38] "Social Media Usage & Growth Statistics," *Backlinko*, February 2025, https://backlinko.com/social-media-users

and threatening criticism. Someone's enjoyable comments on social media may be an act of trolling or torture for others. People with physiological disorders and mental health issues participate in trolling. The mass information on New Media becomes a weapon for the state, company, or individual bringing defamation or damage through enabling perception management.[39]

- ### ▪ *Instigating Public Unrest and Agitation*

New Media can be used to mobilize ordinary people for protests against governments. The New Media is used to spread false or fake news, disinformation, mal-information, non-information, and misinformation. Political, religious, and other differences are the leading causes of disinformation. The bias on the issues compels users to accept and proliferate the disinformation. False information is a challenge for the states because some of it also becomes news headlines.

New Media can create chaos by changing society's behavior toward the state leaders, political decisions and events, through encouraging popular resistance and upheaval. It can complicate an existing volatile situation by engendering greater confusion. The recent India-Pakistan confrontation (post-Pahalgam) in May 2025 well-exemplifies how New Media may be employed by an adversary to undermine your social cohesion and national solidarity in pursuit of its coveted goals. Interestingly, however, the same crisis also unraveled that sharing credible and well-sourced information via similar platforms might be an effective antidote to adversary's disinformation campaigns. While Indian digital platforms exaggeratedly portrayed Indian forces' penetration of Pakistani soil, the short clips of Pakistan Air Forces (PAFs) aerial performance entailed contradictory graphic evidence whose viral dissemination sufficiently undermined the credibility of Indian media's ungrounded pronouncements.

Such disinformation creates mistrust between the state (institutions) and people by maligning their reputation. Psychological operations aim to divide society on important issues by reshaping public perception vis-a-vis the state. New Media is used to change the perception and re-design community narratives. The proliferation of false information occurs in both peace and war times. In peace time, digital media influences society and ethnic groups dissatisfied with the state. For example, during the pandemic, misinformation on health issue was meant to: discourage people from testing, diagnosis and vaccination; to create confusion about whether to get treatment

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[39] Fahri Aksüt, "Social media evolves to warfare tool: Expert," *Science Technology*, April 26, 2020, accessed February 26, 2025, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/science-technology/social-media-evolves-to-warfare-tool-expert/1818953.

or not – thus dividing the society making it question the government policies on treatment and disease prevention, thereby displacing popular trust in government's decisions on health matters.

- ▪ *Influence on Democratic and Electoral Processes*

New Media has a proven use in impacting the electoral process. Using New Media, the losing party can quickly mobilize its supporters to rise in protest against allegedly rigged elections and stolen votes. The voters may be few, but widespread incorrect information motivates them to protest. Moreover, incorrect information can motivate people to refrain from voting and later on disinformation is spread regarding those who do not vote (displayed as if their votes were not counted). The purpose is to make people anti-democratic and not believe in elections. It may influence a single political party or the overall behavior of the voters in the country.

During elections, the candidates' character assassination and disinformation about him or her is now common place. The candidate's data can be shared on social media very easily to change the voters' choices by undermining their trust in the political leader and making them see the candidate/party as incapable of running the state. This raises questions on their eligibility for election due to controversial news being spread about candidates including their religious choices, foreign ties or citizenship. The manipulation techniques efficiently work after determining voter preference through AI and algorithmic analysis. This undemocratic activity is driven by voters' desire for healthy information before and after the election to make a correct choice.

Thus, New Media is challenging the core pillar of democracy, i.e., a well-informed voter with (in)correct information. The misleading content may be created and spread through New Media with the aim to confuse the voters about the election date and timing, voters' eligibility, misguide them to the wrong polling stations, counting non-residents as well as the dead for casting the vote, and disseminating unverified content against the candidates – all of which can impact the election results. Malicious actors may be provoked to hack an election commission's official website, thus, delaying election results.

Employment of New Media in Hybrid War against Pakistan

This section specifically analyzes the evidence about the employment of New Media as a tool of hybrid warfare against Pakistan. Following discussion describes cases where disinformation campaigns were pursued against Pakistan's interests using various New Media platforms. Interestingly and expectedly, without an intention to fix the sources, most efforts at spreading

disinformation about Pakistan have found their sources of origin linked with India – our known archrival who has no intention to bury the hatchet.[40]

1. Disinformation about a New Terrorist Group - Jaish-e-Fursan-e-Muhammad

On January 13, 2023, a video of Jaish-e-Fursan-e-Muhammad in North Waziristan updated that the terrorist organization has started terrorist activities again. Several Twitter accounts uploaded videos and pictures of terrorist organizations. Each had uploaded two pictures and two videos of non-state actors. A Twitter account called "WLVN Analysis" with the twitter handle *@THELegateIN* with the description *Update on Geopolitics, defense, national security, war, and aviation. Politically neutral. Not on Telegram or DFI and affiliated to WLVN music/radio* uploaded a picture of terrorists.

Fig 1: Newly formed jihadist group 'Jaish-e-Muhammad, threatens to carry out attacks targeting Pak Army & ISI.

The tweet was uploaded at 7:52 pm and claimed that "Newly formed jihadist group 'Jaish-e-Muhammad, threatens to carry out attacks targeting Pak Army and ISI," shown in figure1. This tweet tried to spread terror inside Pakistan by portraying that another terrorist group was there to target, and that Pakistani armed forces did not win any war on terror, and a new wave of terrorism is ahead.

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[40] Sumeera Imran, "Propaganda Warfare: Indian Disinformation Campaign against Pakistan," *CISS Insight* 04, no. 8 (2021): 32–46, https://doi.org/10.31703/gsssr.2021(VI-II).04.

2. False Information about Pakistani Journalist Arshad Sharif's Murder

On 24 October 2022, Kathy Peterson had tweeted about Pakistani journalist Arshad Sharif's murder writing "Pakistani official is busy playing candy crush during their visit to Kenya office. Are they serious in the investigation?" as shown in Figure 2. In her Tweet, a person was playing a game on his phone, and his phone was marked. Two people of South Asian origin and two of African origin were in the room. She tried to exhibit that Pakistan authorities were not serious to investigate his murder. Protests were recorded on his murder; it was right time to proliferate disinformation about Pakistani authorities. It had relatable actors "black and brown" people sitting in the room. A person was playing game on his mobile, which was used to indicate "Pakistani authorities" were not serious in his murder investigation. This would create more divide between the people and the State.

Figure 2: Kathy Peterson shared false information during Journalist Murder

Twitter Accounts	Username	Views	Retweets	Likes	Quoted
WLVN Analysis	@THELegateIN	60.2k	188	1,413	14
Megha Updates	@MeghUpdates	51.4k	210	1,239	19
Fineet	@cozyduke-apt29	10.3k	10	42	3

3. Anti-Pakistan Trends regarding Afghan Peace Process - Panjshir Valley

In the last month of President Ashraf Ghani's government in Afghanistan, fake news and disinformation were spread. Indian news channels such as India Today, The Republic, and Time Now, were three news channels that started spreading false news.

Arms-3 video, a video game, and an old photo were broadcast by The Republic, Hindi News, and Zee Hindustan while stating that the Pakistan army supports Northern Alliance against the Taliban and that the Pakistani drones were used in Panjshir Valley. It showed that a Pakistan Air Force jet was shot down in Panjshir Valley. Ahmad Shah Masoud's son Ahmad Masoud tweeted a photo of an aircraft shot down depicted as a picture of a Pakistani fighter aircraft shot down in Panjshir Valley.

In reality, the US F-16 fighter Falcon jet crashed in routine training near the Arizona-California border.[41] The picture was taken from the military.com website. The Boom fact-checking website found that this was a video game, *Arms-3 video*. Time Now also posted a tweet on Panjshir Valley: "#*watch1st visuals of a fighter jet allegedly belonging to Pakistan, hovering over #PanjshirValley in Afghanistan*." It was posted on September 6, 2021. TV9 Bharatvarsh also tweeted the video on September 6, 2021. It became clear that it was a fake video shared out of context when the UK Defence Journal confirmed it, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: US F16 fighter Falcon jet crashed in routine training near Arizona-California border

It was an American F-15 aircraft flying in Great Britain during Royal Air Force air exercises.[42] India Today and TV9 Bharatvarsh shared a fake video of a fighter jet captured in Panjshir,

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[41] https://abcnews.go.com/International/iraqi-16-fighter-jet-crashes-arizona-training-mission/story?id=32024137
[42] https://www.raf.mod.uk/news/articles/first-exercise-for-raf-f-35-lightning/

Afghanistan, belonging to Pakistan. Anti-Fake News War Room (AFWA) found an old video shared on Facebook in December 2018. It was also shared on Jyoti Dwivedi's Twitter account from New Delhi on September 7, 2021 with hashtag #Panjshir, a Pakistani terrorist capture, #EndProxyWarinAfghanishan.

This happened in the context when NATO and US lost war on terror in Afghanistan and withdrew from Afghanistan. It was alleged that the Pakistan Army was violating Afghanistan's sovereignty, and Pakistan was now openly supporting the Afghan Taliban, helping them to establish a government. The narrative building claimed that Pakistan would assist the Afghan Taliban and was not a peacekeeper/peacemaker in the region. It had benefited from America's withdrawal and the fall of Kabul. It was the right time to spread disinformation about Pakistan's role in Taliban control over Afghanistan. When Taliban were trying to establish their control over the remaining areas of Afghanistan, and facing resistance in the Panjshir Valley, the video portrayed that Taliban did not have any air power that could help in the Panjshir fight. The Afghan Taliban had friendly relations with Pakistan, and so Taliban were using the Pakistan Air Force to invade Panjshir Valley as shown in figure 4.

Fig 4: "Republic News Shared fake of Pakistan Army invasion in Panjshir"

Pakistan was facing allegations of terror financing. This fake information provides fertile ground to make Pakistan's role controversial. They tried to convince the international audience that Pakistan was still assisting terrorists in Afghanistan.

4. YouTube Channels spreading propaganda on current affairs and political decisions in Pakistan

Two YouTube channels were involved in spreading disinformation about Pakistan: the first is "WION", and the second is the "First Post". WION is an online platform on other social media accounts, too. The WION app is available on Google Play Store and Apple Store. The Second YouTube channel 'First Post', also has a presence on other social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook.

Fig 5: Pakistan Army was targeted by WION.

WION reported false news titled "Gravitas: Pakistan insults its founder Jinnah" as shown in figure 5. The contender gave baseless information. She narrated that March 23 is observed as Pakistan Day every year, and not celebrating it is an insult to both the country and the founder of Pakistan - Quaid-e-Azam. She gave several reasons why Pakistan had to cancel the parade; first due to the economic crisis, Pakistan could not observe the national day and second, Pakistan cancelled the parade due to political instability, and third reason was the terrorist attacks in Pakistan. She raised the question of whether the government can provide security to its military parade against terrorists or will terrorist guns attack all political leaders.

Platform	Subscribers	Total Videos
WION	8.49M	137k
First Post	3.93M	16k

The host shared the perception of Pakistan as a failed state, which could not celebrate the national day. The real situation was not presented. Pakistan was facing a tough time due to bad

economic conditions. The government had planned to celebrate the Pakistan Day on a small scale in the President's House. However, the parade was cancelled due to severe weather. The official statement came from Aiwan-e-Sadar.

Figure 6: Fake information that "Pakistan Army may be planning another coup"

Another disinformation thread said that "Pakistan Army may be planning another coup," as shown in figure 6. The video blamed the Pakistan Army for overthrowing the puppet Prime Minister Imran Khan: it said that the Army governs Pakistan and called the Pakistan Intelligence Agency a "rouge agency." Ex-DG ISI was more loyal to the political government than the Pakistan Army, and the Army was not satisfied with its role. Ex-Prime Minister Imran Khan was alleged to be intervening in army promotions. She questioned whether Chief of Amy Staff General Qamar Javed Bajwa would repeat the history, as General Zia-Ul-Haq and General Pervez Musharraf did with the (Ex-) Prime Ministers of Pakistan. It said that the Pakistan army can destabilize the government by using other actors within Pakistan like in the past. It may use the extremist Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan, which was mainstreamed by the Pakistan Army in 2018, to destabilize the Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz government.

Another YouTube channel, "First Post," also narrated the same story as WION. In this video, the broadcaster tried to portray that Pakistan Army had planned to overthrow another democratically elected government. They tried to spread the narrative that it is easy for the Pakistan army to overthrow any elected government, and the Pakistan army rules the country.

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Figure 7: Fake information Pakistan army is planning another Coup

There was no chance of any coup in Pakistan, but it tried to propagate that the Pakistan army had an appetite for power. She tried to make it look controversial. The narrative came along with the undertones that Pakistan's security forces are now weak and cannot fight the terrorists. The government feared intelligence failure as a new wave of terrorism came to Pakistan and thus it was planning a coup.

Conclusion

The employment of New Media as an instrument of hybrid warfare against Pakistan is underway. While existing works have highlighted the challenges of New Media in a generic manner, a focused study on the challenge of 'New Media' for Pakistan - in the context of hybrid war was lacking. In addition to filling that space, this work has also qualified new digitized media as being able to perform agenda-setting function – just like traditional media. It has been found that faster pace of dissemination, easy-mass accessibility, and dearth of regulation make New Media more appealing and challenging at the same time. New Media poses challenges to democracy, the state and society, as malicious actors feed anti-state sentiment through dis- and misinformation. In Pakistan's case lately, whenever an internal political instability occurs it provides fertile ground for advancing disinformation fed through external sources. Twitter and YouTube are most commonly used to proliferate disinformation against Pakistan as seen during India-Pakistan confrontation in 2025. As the threat is novel, states would be stressed to respond effectively. However, the threat must be comprehended well for states to be more informed about responding to New Media as a hybrid

war tool. Therefore, Pakistan must first sort and understand the challenge well in order to come up with appropriate strategies to deal with it.

New Media provides platforms where ordinary people can become influencers without much effort and share their thoughts fearlessly with the help of tools such as ads, memes, hashtags, social media bots, and trends. New media can therefore serve as a breeding ground for proliferating fake information - a popular instrument of hybrid warfare – that plays in the hands of state's adversaries. Getting control of a target's information environment can give an enemy the power to manage perceptions by spreading fake news, flooding unsolicited knowhow, building and disseminating desired narratives to masses. The goal of promoting divisive narratives between the state and society can thus undermine national cohesion to facilitate the pursuit of foreign agendas. To the existing media platforms, the rise of New Media thus adds complexity by enhancing multilayered vulnerabilities in a world of multiple interdependencies and rising number of influential non-state entities.

ARMS CONTROL BEYOND NEW START: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

Anum Riaz and Mobeen Jafar Mir

Arms Control Beyond New START: Challenges and Prospects in a Multipolar World

Anum Riaz and Mobeen Jafar Mir[1]

Abstract

The impending expiration of New START Treaty next year on 5 February 2026, the last remaining bilateral arms control treaty, marks a watershed moment in the evolving landscape of global non-proliferation regime. The gradual collapse of global arms control treaties over the years, a process expedited by Emerging and Disruptive Technologies (EDTs), shifting global geopolitical landscape and rise of multipolarity, has brought home nuclear policymakers and experts the urgent need to revive and strengthen the faltering global arms control regime. Therefore, in the prevailing scenario of future arms control ambiguity, the steps required to forge a multilateral cooperation post New-START expiration is the main research question of the paper. Considering the ongoing geopolitical atmosphere where states are more involved in power maximization in an anarchic world than abiding by the rules of non-proliferation, the theoretical framework of offensive realism is being used to explain the phenomenon. The paper takes a brief stock of historical developments of arms control, analyzes the constraints and limitations in the New START Treaty, and its impact on strategic stability in the multilateral world. The paper proposes a future blueprint for a comprehensive new arms control framework while considering the likely future scenarios and concludes with practical policy pathways, like the need for verification regimes, incorporation and regulation of provisions for the ethical use of AI and strengthening of already established international institutions among others.

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Introduction

The Cold War emerged as the broader geopolitical and ideological conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, within which nuclear arm race became the defining and escalation feature. To curb the escalating nuclear arms race, several initiatives were undertaken. The United Nations Atomic Energy Commission (UNAEC) was established but failed to reach a consensus. During the 1950s, there was growing international interest in regulating nuclear energy. US President Dwight D. Eisenhower's 1953 'Atoms for Peace' speech played a significant role in the eventual establishment of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in 1957.[2] Its aim was to restrict the rampant proliferation of nuclear weapons and forge international cooperation on civil nuclear research.

The history of arms control goes back to the beginning of the 20th century when the Hague conferences not only stipulated the rules for warfare but also prohibited certain weapons during conflict. After World War I and particularly during the interwar period various initiatives like the Washington Naval Treaty for naval disarmament and the Geneva Protocol of 1925 for prohibition of biological and chemical weapons were launched. The League of Nations was also established to maintain collective security and peace through disarmament. After World War II, the Baruch plan of 1946 also aimed at international control of atomic energy. Yet, the intensifying Cold War rivalry between US and USSR slowed down the progress of global arms control and disarmament. The 1950s and 1960s witnessed a tremendous arms buildup between the two global powers, yet various treaties, like Limited Test Ban Treaty (LTBT) in 1963, Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1968, Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I & II) in 1972 and 1979 respectively, were introduced. The Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and Biological Weapons Convention of 1972 followed by Chemical Weapons Convention of 1993 were other notable initiatives at arms control and disarmament. In 1996, Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) prohibiting all types of nuclear testing was also introduced. The US and USSR also signed Strategic Arms Reduction Treaties (START I and II) in 1991 and 1993 respectively, Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) in 2002, and the New START treaty in 2010.

The work focuses on two independent variables, (1) changing geopolitical landscape marked by Ukraine war, great-power rivalry in the Asia Pacific, and weakening of liberal order, and (2) EDTs, which can have impact on the future of arms control, which is our dependent

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[2] "List of Member States," *International Atomic Energy Agency, https://www.iaea.org/about/governance/list-of-member-states.*

variable for the study. In April 2010, Obama and his Russian counterpart Dmitry Medvedev signed the New START Treaty.[3] The New START treaty committed the US and Russia to further reduce their strategic arsenals, with a 30% cut in deployed warheads and lower limits on missile launchers and nuclear-capable bombers. The treaty, replacing the first START treaty, was approved by the US Senate[4] and the Russian parliament in 2011 for next ten years.[5]

Since the US withdrawal from the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty in 2019[6] and Treaty on Open Skies in 2020[7], the only working bilateral arms control treaty between Russia and the US is the New START. Just days before the 2021 treaty was set to expire, the US and Russia had agreed to extend New START for an additional five years,[8] maintaining verifiable limits on their long-range nuclear arsenals. This agreement marked one of the former US President Joe Biden's first significant foreign policy actions as US leader. The Trump administration had attempted, but failed, to secure a shorter extension that would also address China's nuclear capabilities.

James Acton in "Reclaiming Strategic Stability" published by Carnegie Endowment for International Peace highlighted how New START contributes to crisis and arms race stability, while critiquing Cold War-era assumptions about deterrence.[9] Alexei Arbatov in "Updating the Concept of Strategic Stability" published by PIR Center, opined New START's role in reducing incentives for nuclear first use and the need to adapt arms control to emerging threats.[10] Heather Williams in "Strategic Stability, Uncertainty, and the Future of Arms Control" published by King's College London evaluated the role of AI, hypersonic weapons, and space-based weapons in complicating the conventional arms control frameworks. In view of the gaps in the

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[3] "Obama signing nuclear treaty with Russia in Prague," *The Guardian*, April 8, 2010, https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2010/apr/08/nuclear-weapons-obama-administration.

[4] Z. Collina, Tom. "Senate Approves New START," *Arms Control Association,* https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2011-01/senate-approves-new-start.

[5] "Russian parliament approves Start nuclear arms treaty," *BBC*, January 26, 2011, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-12284532.

[6] Lopez, C. Todd. "U.S. Withdraws From Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty," *U.S. Department of Defense*, August 2, 2019, https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/article/article/1924779/us-withdraws-from-intermediate-range-nuclear-forces-treaty/.

[7] Bugos, Shannon and Reif, Kingston. "U.S. Completes Open Skies Treaty Withdrawal," *Arms Control Association*, December 2020, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-12/news/us-completes-open-skies-treaty-withdrawal.

[8] Bugos, Shannon and Reif, Kingston. "U.S., Russia Extend New START for Five Years," *Arms Control Association*, March 2021, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2021-03/news/us-russia-extend-new-start-five-years.

[9] James M Acton, "Reclaiming Strategic Stability," Think Tank Website, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 5, 2013, https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2013/02/reclaiming-strategic-stability?lang=en.

[10] "Updating the Concept of Strategic Stability," *PIR Center*, n.d., accessed March 25, 2025, https://pircenter.org/en/editions/updating-the-concept-of-strategic-stability/.

already existing literature this paper attempts to fill those gaps and address the issue regarding the weakening of bilateral arms control arrangements.

This research paper analyzes how the proliferation of EDTs and changing geopolitical landscape are speeding up weakening of arms control norms. With the major focus on the impending expiration of the New START in 2026, followed by the expiration of several other bilateral arms control agreements over the years, the paper highlights how this reverse of arms control regime would be stopped in the future to tackle the challenge of arms control in a multipolar world.

The objective of this research is to give policy pathways for the development of likely arrangements in which challenges of nuclear proliferation emanating from multiple states are addressed and bilateral arms control measures are strengthened.

The paper utilizes qualitative methodology and primary data and secondary data in the form of official documents, statements, research papers, news, reports, and other open-source material to address the primary research question and fill the identified research gap. This research study utilizes descriptive, and explanatory tools to analyze the data. This study highlights the limits and challenges for New START, the impact of its failure to revive on strategic stability in the given future scenarios, and will sum up the debate with policy recommendations.

Theoretical Framework

The study is analysed under the theoretical lens of offensive realism. The international relations theory explains the ongoing conflict in the international system marked by conflict and competition due to self-interest and fear of other states. The security dilemma among states is generated by the absence of a hierarchical system in an anarchic world (as witnessed in the weakening of arms control agreements) leading to power maximization.

Security dilemma, a political science concept considered by some scholars as the most important source of conflict between states, is created when a state takes measures to strengthen its security, which in turn generates arms race as the other state feels threatened by the security measures of the original state. The states would continue to struggle for survival through increasing armament and therefore, a need for a multilateral agreement in post New START-era would be required to stabilize the already fragile international system.

The central elements of power are distributed among multiple states rather than staying under the possession of either one or two countries as the world shifts from unipolarity to multipolarity. EDTs, in this context considered as effective and cheaper tools to counterbalance

traditional conventional military superiorities of adversaries, have become central to states' national military strategies to ensure survival in an anarchial world marked by perpetual security dilemma.

These technologies, like artificial intelligence (AI), cyber capabilities, lethal autonomous weapon systems (LAWS), quantum computing, hypersonic weapons, and space-based assets, no more are merely tools of military modernization, but also effective instrument of strategic deterrence, power projection, and geopolitical signaling in an unpredictable global environment. The more and more states get access to these tools, the more challenging their regulation, use and applications would become in the coming years.

New START: Limits and Challenges

The New START, however, has limitations, like it excludes the tactical nuclear weapons,[11] as it only includes strategic nuclear weapons of Russia and the US. The verification mechanism of New START is less stringent compared to START I, and this has affected the capability of compliance of both states.[12]

Moreover, the Treaty does not impose limitations over conventional or missile defence systems, this has been a major break point between the US and Russia, both states have accused the other of advancing in these areas[13] and have highlighted that this has undermined strategic stability. The issues of compliance[14] amongst the increased geo-political tension led to Russian announcement of withdrawal[15] from the Treaty.

There is also a need to address the gaps in the present form of the New START. The Treaty, for instance, fails to account for new technologies,[16] such as hypersonic missiles and nuclear-powered cruise missiles, dual-capable systems, and missile defense technologies, which could bypass traditional arms control frameworks and undermine strategic stability.

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[11] "New START Treaty," *U.S. Department of Defense*, https://www.state.gov/new-start-treaty?form=MG0AV3&form=MG0AV3.

[12] Amy F., Woolf. "The New START Treaty: Central Limits and Key Provisions," *Congress Research Service*, February 2, 2022, https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R41219.

[13] Liang, Xiaodon. "New START at a Glance," *Arms Control Association*, December 2024, https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/new-start-glance?form=MG0AV3&form=MG0AV3.

[14] Riaz, Anum and Jafar Mir, Mobeen. "The Future of Arms Control: What Follows the End of New START?," *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, February 11, 2025, https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-future-of-arms-control-what-follows-the-end-of-new-start/.

[15] "Foreign Ministry statement in connection with the Russian Federation suspending the Treaty on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms (New START)," *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, February 21, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1855184/.

[16] Jan, Waqas. "Gap in the New START: New START does not address hypersonic missiles," *Modern Diplomacy*, February 24, 2023, https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2023/02/24/gap-in-the-new-start-new-start-does-not-address-hypersonic-missiles/.

Another important issue with New START is its imbalance and one-sided nature. The treaty limits Russia's nuclear arsenal while the US extensively modernizes its strategic and tactical nuclear forces.[17] Although Washington claims to adhere to arms control agreements, it has repeatedly withdrawn from key treaties, such as the ABM Treaty, the INF Treaty, and the Open Skies Treaty—all of which were crucial to maintaining strategic stability. Russia thinks it cannot trust a country that has a track record of abandoning agreements when it no longer serves its interests. Extending New START would only benefit the US unless Russia can secure legally binding guarantees that its security concerns will be addressed.[18]

Additionally, the Treaty does not take into consideration the new military threats that the US and NATO are posing. New START does not address Washington's development of AI-driven command-and-control systems, missile defense systems, or hypersonic weapons. Although Russia has created the Poseidon nuclear torpedo, the Avangard hypersonic glider, and the Burevestnik nuclear-powered cruise missile, these are defensive measures intended to offset the US and NATO's disruptive operations.[19] The West, however, ignores its own quick advances in military technology and presents these improvements as aggressive. Without comprehensive restrictions on all types of military capabilities, arms control initiatives are pointless because the US aims to achieve strategic superiority rather than preserving equilibrium.

The US accuses Russia of violating the agreement while, Russia, on the other hand, blames the West for failing to acknowledge that it is the US and NATO that have consistently escalated tensions by expanding military alliances and stationing nuclear-capable forces near Russia's borders. Because the US has placed travel limitations on Russian officials,[20] this has prevented Moscow from conducting verification inspections in the US, as a result Russia has likewise halted inspections under New START. The treaty's legitimacy may be compromised if one party to the treaty imposes strict compliance requirements while simultaneously hinders the other side's ability to verify them. Russia perceives growing military alliance of NATO and

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[17] Wilson, Geoff. "Reconsider Nuclear Modernization Plans," *Stimson Center*, November 26, 2024, https://www.stimson.org/2024/reconsider-nuclear-modernization-plans/.

[18] "Russia says it's planning for the US to deploy nuclear weapons to Europe after ban treaty abandoned," *Business Insider*, November 26, 2018, https://www.businessinsider.com/russia-doesnt-trust-us-nuclear-arms-treaty-2018-11.

[19] Bendett, Samuel and Boulègue, Mathieu and Connolly, Richard and Konaev, Margarita and Podvig, Pavel and Zysk, Katarzyna. "Advanced military technology in Russia," *Chatham House*, November 2, 2021, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/09/advanced-military-technology-russia/03-putins-super-weapons.

[20] "Russia suspends START arms inspections over U.S. travel curbs," *Reuters*, August 8, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-tells-us-it-is-suspending-inspections-under-start-weapons-treaty-2022-08-08/.

deployment of nuclear-capable forces close to its borders as a security threat. These developments continue to take place despite US criticism of Russia for violating the deal, something Moscow has been denying.

The ability of New START to confirm the combined nuclear stockpiles of both nations is limited by the exclusion of tactical nuclear weapons and non-deployed warheads, even though it has verification tools. The confidentiality surrounding emerging technologies further complicates verification efforts. Furthermore, the US President Donald Trump, during his first presidency, pushed for the inclusion of China in future arms control negotiations.[21] However, this was not a demand specifically for New START itself but rather for any potential replacement or extension of the treaty. Trump's administration viewed New START as flawed because it only covered the US and Russia, while China, Washington believed, was rapidly expanding its nuclear capabilities without any constraints.[22]

During New START extension talks in 2020, Trump's team insisted that China must be included in any future arms control framework.[23] However, China refused to participate, arguing[24] that its arsenal (then estimated at around 300-400 nuclear warheads) were at the 'lowest levels' and much smaller than the US and Russia's stockpiles (1,550 deployed warheads under New START). Beijing saw no reason to be bound by a treaty designed for the two largest nuclear powers. Trump's insistence on including China complicated negotiations between the US and Russia. Moscow also does not seek engaging China in a trilateral arms control as a priority.[25] Russia suggested that if China were to be included, then France and the UK (also nuclear-armed states) should be part of the talks as well[26], but this idea did not gain traction. Eventually, because of these disagreements and Trump's overall skepticism toward

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[21] Ali Abbas, Syed and Saqib, Amna. "U.S. Unilateralism on Arms Control and Impact on South Asian Stability," *Stimson Center*, March 7, 2025, https://southasianvoices.org/sec-c-r-us-unilateralism-arms-control-south-asian-stability-03-07-2025/.

[22] Kuramitsu, Shizuka. "Pentagon Says Chinese Nuclear Arsenal Still Growing," *Arms Control Association*, January/February 2025, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2025-01/news/pentagon-says-chinese-nuclear-arsenal-still-growing.

[23] Gramer, Robbie and Detsch, Jack. "Trump Fixates on China as Nuclear Arms Pact Nears Expiration," *Foreign Policy*, April 29, 2020, https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/29/trump-china-new-start-nuclear-arms-pact-expiration/.

[24] "China says it won't take part in trilateral nuclear arms talks," *Reuters*, May 6, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/world/china-says-it-wont-take-part-in-trilateral-nuclear-arms-talks-idUSKCN1SC0MJ/.

[25] C. Logan, David. "Trilateral Arms Control: A Realistic Assessment of Chinese Participation," *Stimson Center*, August 9, 2021, https://www.stimson.org/2021/trilateral-arms-control-a-realistic-assessment-of-chinese-participation/.

[26] "Russia Wants Britain, France to Join Wider Nuclear Talks With U.S.," *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, July 29, 2021, https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-britain-france-nuclear-talks/31383828.html.

arms control, the US did not renew New START during his first presidency. Instead, the treaty was extended for five more years only after Joe Biden took office in 2021.[27]

Trump maintains this stance even during his second term. This is a blatant attempt by Washington to shift the focus away from its own nuclear modernization and divide Russia and China by pressuring Beijing into an unnecessary arms control framework. Russia maintains[28] strong strategic relations with China and recognizes that Beijing has legitimate security concerns[29] regarding US military activities in the Asia-Pacific. The US is simply using arms control as a geopolitical tool to contain both Russia and China while expanding its own military power unchecked.

The New START Treaty only applies to strategic nuclear weapons, which include intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and strategic bombers—weapons designed for long-range deterrence. However, the treaty does not regulate tactical nuclear weapons,[30] which are smaller, short-range nuclear warheads intended for battlefield use.

This omission creates a significant asymmetry in nuclear capabilities, as Russia holds[31] a clear advantage in tactical nuclear weapons, with an estimated 2,000 warheads compared to the US's 200, most of which are stationed in Europe. Russia maintains a more robust tactical nuclear deterrence since these weapons are not restricted by treaties, whereas the US does not have an equivalent stockpile in this category.

Since there is now no arms control framework that oversees tactical nuclear weapons and New START does not address them, their inclusion is an important issue for future negotiations. The US is likely to support limitations on Russia's tactical nuclear arsenal since these weapons increase the likelihood of conflict escalation. Russia is expected to resist any restrictions or look for compromises on other security problems, such as NATO's military

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[27] Hudson, John. "Biden administration to seek five-year extension on key nuclear arms treaty in first foray with Russia," *The Washington Post,* 21 January 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/biden-russia-nuclear-treaty-extension/2021/01/21/4667a11e-5b40-11eb-aaad-93988621dd28_story.html.

[28] M. Kim, Patricia and Aydintasbas, Asli and Stent, Angela and Varma, Tara, and Wyne, Ali. "China and Russia's strategic relationship amid a shifting geopolitical landscape," *Brookings*, March 6, 2025, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/china-and-russias-strategic-relationship-amid-a-shifting-geopolitical-landscape/.

[29] E. Hamilton, Robert and Primiano, Christopher. "Russia and China in the Indo-Pacific: China's Use of the Instruments of Power," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, March 6, 2025, https://www.fpri.org/article/2025/03/russia-and-china-in-the-indo-pacific-chinas-use-of-the-instruments-of-power/.

[30] Pifer, Steven and Talbott, Strobe. "New START Is No Mistake," *Brookings*, July 7, 2010, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/new-start-is-no-mistake/.

[31] Demirjian, Karoun. "Here are the nuclear weapons Russia has in its arsenal," *The Washington Post*, October 6, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/10/05/russia-nuclear-weapons-military-arsenal/.

posture in Europe, missile defense systems, or hypersonic weapons. Without a solution, the lack of restrictions on tactical nuclear weapons will continue to jeopardize strategic stability, increasing the likelihood that regional conflicts will worsen and making future arms control negotiations more difficult.

Russia sees this contradiction as evidence that Washington is not a reliable[32] ally in the arms control process. Trump's history of pulling out of arms control accords, like the INF Treaty and Open Skies Treaty, raises doubts about whether he will honor any new agreements, despite his indications that he is willing to engage in negotiations. Trump also unilaterally left the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018. Since the US regularly changes its position due to internal political and strategic considerations, while Moscow has continuously insisted that it keeps its promises, any pact is inherently unstable.

Furthermore, NATO's hostile stance toward Russia has seriously hampered efforts to restrict armaments. As seen by its eastward expansion,[33] military drills close to Russia's borders, and direct engagement in the situation in Ukraine, NATO is getting ready for a protracted fight with Russia. Arms control accords are useless in such a hostile climate if they just restrict Russia's strategic options while enabling NATO to bolster its military capabilities. The US would engage in sincere negotiations instead of imposing terms and increasing military threats if it genuinely desired stability.

The New START is currently facing significant challenges, such as NATO attempts at expansion, growing distrust between the US and Russia over Ukraine, and issues over strategic stability of the region. The US-led punitive economic sanctions on Russia, backed by military presence and diplomatic measures aimed at Russian isolation, further complicate the issue. As New START is set to expire next year, the prospects for a new agreement to replace it stay bleak. The unresolved security concerns of the past leading to different interpretations of past agreements further complicate the matter between the two.

If the war in Ukraine continues, arms control talks may collapse, potentially leading to a new nuclear arms race. The ongoing Ukraine war has raised doubts about the reliability of arms control agreements, especially as Russia has placed its nuclear forces on 'special alert.'[34]

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[32] "Russia raises concerns over U.S. implementation of arms control treaty," *Reuters*, May 24, 2021, https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-accuses-us-exceeding-limits-imposed-by-new-start-arms-control-treaty-2021-05-24/.

[33] Sauvage, Gregoire. "Did NATO 'betray' Russia by expanding to the East?," *France 24*, January 30, 2022, https://www.france24.com/en/russia/20220130-did-nato-betray-russia-by-expanding-to-the-east.

[34] "Ukraine invasion: Putin puts Russia's nuclear forces on 'special alert'," *BBC*, 28 February 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60547473.

Both the US and NATO are increasing military spending, and Russia has made threats of nuclear escalation.[35] This reduces the focus on arms control and makes dialogue more challenging.

If New START collapses, the onus will be more on the US than on Russia. The US and NATO are actively pushing the world toward a new arms race by refusing to respect Russia's security concerns. Washington is already modernizing its nuclear triad,[36] developing new ICBMs, submarines, and stealth bombers, and encouraging its allies to expand their military capabilities. If arms control fails, Russia will be forced to further strengthen its nuclear forces to counter these threats. The US must understand that Russia will not be pressured into a one-sided agreement that weakens its strategic position.

Nuclear Arms Control beyond New START: Impacts on Strategic Stability

The already existing literature has prime focus over bilateral treaties and agreements for arms control, the prospects of a new framework for future arms control agreements remain bleak. Moreover, the impact of emerging technologies is yet to be seen over bilateral arms control agreements. There is a need to review the already existing bilateral treaties like New START[37] in the context of the evolving geopolitical landscape.

Historically, treaties and international bilateral or multilateral agreements have been a key factor for improving strategic stability among global powers. These institutions and cooperation might not be sufficient. However, historically, they have played a role in reducing uncertainty, managing arms competition, and mitigating the effects of the security dilemma. The most effective illustration of the effectiveness of bilateral arms control measures that have provided stability between two nuclear-armed adversaries is the New START deal.

The New START treaty's verification procedures have helped to foster mutual confidence between the US and Russia, and its function has effectively fostered cooperative security. There is still potential for the Treaty to be expanded to include additional nuclear-armed states, even though the emergence of multipolarity has limited its applicability. To create a new framework for an arms control deal that duplicates New START, there is a need for deeper international cooperation.

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[35] "New Russian doctrine increases possible nuclear weapons use scenarios," *ICAN*, November 21, 2024, https://www.icanw.org/new_russian_doctrine_increases_possible_nuclear_weapons_use_scenarios.

[36] F. Krepinevich Jr., Andrew, "Modernizing the Nuclear Triad: Decline or Renewal?," *Hudson Institute*, October 21, 2021, https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/modernizing-the-nuclear-triad-decline-or-renewal.

[37] Piccolli, Larlecianne. "Policy Brief – New START Treaty Review: Paving the Way to Strategic Stability in the 21st Century," *Academia*, https://www.academia.edu/76136689/Policy_Brief_NEW_START_TREATY_REVIEW_PAVING_THE_WAY_TO_STRATEGIC_STABILITY_IN_THE_21ST_CENTURY.

Beyond the immediate arms control concerns, the role of non-state actors and proxy conflicts further complicates the security environment. The US continues[38] to supply weapons to Ukraine, support anti-Russian forces, and interfere in global conflicts, all of which increase the likelihood of escalation. Washington's policies are creating a volatile global security environment where nuclear risks are higher than ever. Rather than engaging in diplomacy, the US is fueling conflicts around the world while half-heartedly showing interest in arms control.

Moving forward, if the US and NATO genuinely seek strategic stability, they must abandon their confrontational approach and engage in serious dialogue. Russia has always been open to diplomatic solutions, but it will not negotiate from a position of weakness.

Any future arms control agreement must address the full spectrum of military threats, including missile defense systems, hypersonic weapons, tactical nuclear weapons, and the destabilizing actions of NATO. Furthermore, it must include legally binding guarantees that prevent the US from abandoning the treaty as it has done in the past.

The fate of New START is not just about arms control; it is about the broader global security architecture. If the treaty collapses, it will be because the US and its allies refused to engage in genuine negotiations and instead sought to use arms control as a political tool to weaken Russia. Moscow will not compromise its national security to satisfy American demands. The world stands at a crossroads: either the US acknowledges Russia's legitimate concerns and negotiates in good faith, or the world will enter in a new era of strategic competition where nuclear stability is no longer guaranteed.

Future Scenarios in Focus: A Multifaceted Strategic Analysis

■ *China's Emergence as a Global Player*

China's arrival as a prominent player in the shifting geopolitics is one of the factors that has been motivating the US to modernize its nuclear arsenal.[39] The other factors include regional conflicts and shifting alliances. The rising geopolitical tensions have influenced US and Russia's decision to engage in future arms control negotiations, at bilateral or multilateral level. The global order has shifted towards multilateralism; this has impacted the global nuclear arms control regime.[40] This provides opportunities and challenges for an effective future nuclear

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[38] "Poland confirms supplies of US arms to Ukraine have resumed," *Reuters*, March 12, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/poland-confirms-that-supplies-us-arms-ukraine-have-resumed-2025-03-12/.

[39] Hiim, Henrik Stalhane and Fravel, M. Taylor and Troan, Magnus Langset. "The Dynamics of an Entangled Security Dilemma: China's Changing Nuclear Posture," *International Security*, January 4, 2023, https://direct.mit.edu/isec/article/47/4/147/115920/The-Dynamics-of-an-Entangled-Security-Dilemma.

[40] Bronder, Lt Col T. Justin. "Future Directions for Great Power Nuclear Arms Control: Policy Options and National Security Implications," *Institute for National Strategic Studies*, October 20, 2021,

arms control framework. Beyond the expiration of the New START, the US and Russia should open a channel for negotiations, keeping in view the existing bilateral agreements and how this can be expanded to include other nuclear weapon states like China.

- ### *Case of Strategic Cooperation or Competition*

Arms control is only possible if all the stakeholders are willing to work cooperatively, competition only leads to an arms race. There is a need to view whether states' security imperatives allow them to work towards cooperation or competition. The reduction of already existing nuclear arsenals is possible only when all states are at the same page over nuclear arms control. Reduction of nuclear weapons is a product of a cooperative security environment. Geopolitical environment as charged as current times encourages strategic competition, leaving less room for cooperation. States threat perception, in case of strategic rivals as US and Russia, can be affected by advancements in their nuclear arsenals. Each state's decision to modernize is just not based on its own objectives, it reflects its enemy's moves. This can be applied to the US and Russia, there is mistrust and misunderstanding regarding verification and transparency of the clauses of the New START. In this anarchial world where international institutions are proving more inefficient to bring justice, as shows the inability of the IAEA to hold a non-NPT Israel accountable for attacking an NPT-state Iran, uncertainty about other states' intentions are increasing. This is shaping a state's behavior to go for power maximization and increase their nuclear arsenals and delivery means, even at the cost of weakening the existing arms control regime.

- ### *Impact of Technological Revolution on the future of Arms Control*

The technological revolution in current times has made the future of arms control uncertain, having adverse effects on strategic stability. States are including emerging technologies such as AI driven systems or hypersonic weapons, in their military infrastructure. When a state accumulates military power, in an anarchic international system, other states can not be sure about its intention. This uncertainty leads to security dilemma. The inclusion of technological advancement has changed the conventional norms of strategic competition between adversaries, this calls for a new framework for future arms control, that is not limited to a bilateral level but is more multilateral in nature. Nuclear arms control measures fail when there is uncertainty about the intention of an adversary state. This uncertainty can be managed by modelling scenarios and suggesting strategies to minimize risks. There needs to be a framework

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https://inss.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/2912759/future-directions-for-great-power-nuclear-arms-control-policy-options-and-natio/.

for regulation of emerging technologies that is widely influencing arms control. The US and Russian leadership first need to devise a strategy that model cooperation rather than competition, and then gradually including other stakeholders like China to join a broader, multilateral treaty beyond the New START. This can decrease the trust deficit and move towards a conflict resolution strategy that enhances strategic stability.

▪ *Updating New START's Verification Mechanisms*

The verification mechanism of the New START is less robust as compared to the original New START treaty.[41] There have been loopholes in the physical conduct of the verification, which is reported to be exploited by both parties. Effective verification mechanisms are significant for the dynamic strategic process, where parties know that the cost of not abiding by the terms and conditions will be immense. What lacked has been the commitment on part of the US and Russia to invest in transparency and verification mechanisms for decreasing the trust deficit amid the geopolitical shift and technological evolution in arms control.

▪ *From Bilateral to Multilateral Interactions*

The idea to include China in the US-Russia bilateral arms control equation is not new, it was first suggested by Trump during his first tenure as the POTUS in 2019.[42] According to President Trump, inclusion of China, alongside Russia in New START, will provide transparency in limiting and verifying nuclear capabilities amid its rise as a global power. This was labelled as 21st century arms control, which was refused by China. Since then, the US has maintained a stance that any future arms control agreement aimed at maintaining strategic stability must be multilateral in nature.[43]

The question arises that is it worth including China in the already established bilateral nuclear arms control equation of the US and Russia? According to Western media reports, China is modernizing its nuclear arsenal,[44] but it has never been part of any arms control

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[41] Gottemoeller, Rose. "The New START Verification Regime: How Good Is It?," *Carnegie Endowment of International Peace*, https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2020/05/the-new-start-verification-regime-how-good-is-it?lang=en.

[42] Sonne, Paul and Hudson, John. "Trump orders staff to prepare arms-control push with Russia and China," *The Washington Post,* April 25, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-orders-staff-to-prepare-arms-control-push-with-russia-and-china/2019/04/25/c7f05e04-6076-11e9-9412-daf3d2e67c6d_story.html.

[43] "Briefing with Ambassador Marshall Billingslea, U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for Arms Control And Lt. Gen. Thomas Bussiere, Deputy Commander of the U.S. Strategic Command," *Global Public Affairs, U.S. Department of State*, https://2017-2021-translations.state.gov/2020/08/18/briefing-with-ambassador-marshall-billingslea-u-s-special-presidential-envoy-for-arms-control-and-lt-gen-thomas-bussiere-deputy-commander-of-the-u-s-strategic-command/.

[44] Hiim, Henrik Stålhane. "The last atomic Waltz: China's nuclear expansion and the persisting relevance of the theory of the nuclear revolution," *Taylor and Francis Online*, January 8, 2024, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13523260.2023.2291258.

agreement,[45] this challenges the existing arms control framework. However, data generated by SIPRI 2024 highlights that the China's total nuclear inventory is 500 warheads, while the US has 5,044, and Russia has 5,580 nuclear warheads.[46] This shows that Chinese nuclear arsenal is far less behind the quantitative number of weapons possessed by the US and Russia. No matter if China's rise as an economic power must factor into the US and Russian considerations, mentioning China as a challenge to expanding arms control framework seems unfair. President Trump wanted China to enter an arms control[47] agreement, however, China's position is that it is not at parity with the US regarding the number of nuclear weapons, China will only opt for an arms control agreement with the US if it comes at par with these major powers.

Traditionally, the US and Russia have opted for arms control only when their nuclear forces were at par. This can be assessed form the statement given by the Chinese spokesperson in which he rebuked groundless accusation of the dangers from China's modern and growing nuclear arsenal, saying that the number of nuclear weapons in China's arsenal is not in the same order as the United States and Russia."[48] Having said that for having a comprehensive arms control framework and a stronger non-proliferation regime, the Chinese factor cannot be overlooked. However, it is important to keep in mind that including China would also necessitate including India, Pakistan, Israel, and potentially the UK and France. This would complicate the issue significantly.

New START is a bilateral agreement between the two countries with the largest nuclear arsenals. Expanding the scope at this stage could slow down progress on a future non-proliferation agreement and may leave the world without such a significant binding arms control agreement. For now, the primary objective is to achieve a renewed arms control agreement between the two largest nuclear powers through Confidence Building Measures (CBMs). As the two nations with the largest nuclear inventories in 2024, the United States and Russia must engage in bilateral arms control.

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[45] Kristensen, Hans and Korda, Matt and Johns, Eliana and Knight, Mackenzie. "Chinese Nuclear Forces, 2024: A "Significant Expansion"," *Federation of American Scientists*, January 16, 2024, https://fas.org/publication/chinese-nuclear-forces-2024-a-significant-expansion/.

[46] "Role of nuclear weapons grows as geopolitical relations deteriorate—new SIPRI Yearbook out now," *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, June 17, 2024, https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2024/role-nuclear-weapons-grows-geopolitical-relations-deteriorate-new-sipri-yearbook-out-now.

[47] Reif, Kingston and Bugos, Shannon. "Trump Still Wants Multilateral Arms Control," *Arms Control Association*, April 2020, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-04/news/trump-still-wants-multilateral-arms-control.

[48] "China welcomes extension of New START nuclear treaty, responds to US accusation," *The State Council Information Office, The People's Republic of China*, February 7, 2021, http://english.scio.gov.cn/pressroom/2021-02/07/content_77196591.htm?form=MG0AV3.

Even if Chinese leadership agrees to entering a global arms control framework, it can demand the nature of the framework to be multilateral rather than trilateral. China can also demand massive cuts in the nuclear forces of the other parties that have bigger inventory than China such as Russia and US. The chances of China accepting constraints on its nuclear arsenal resembling New START are unlikely.

What can be done is opening a channel for negotiations over building confidence and giving political commitment to maintain restraint when it comes to the nuclear expansion of all nuclear weapon states. Shifting the focus towards an inclusive multilateral or trilateral framework for arms control while keeping in mind all state's security concerns are addressed, as arms control cannot be restricted to bilateral level.

Policy Pathways

Due to the evolving security landscape, compounded by emerging technologies, geopolitical shift, and multipolar dynamics, the traditional arms control framework has been facing significant challenges. However, the policymakers concerned can navigate these challenges by replicating bilateral/ trilateral or multilateral agreements via cooperation.

There is a need to develop verification regimes to foster principles of mutual trust and compliance with the future arms control treaties and agreements. These must be adaptable to the changing geopolitical environment and reinforce mutual deterrence.

Modern approaches to nuclear arms control should be devised that address the concerns related to nuclear disarmament and factors in the impact of regional conflicts and emerging technologies.

There is a need to acknowledge that the evolving nature of traditional and non-traditional security threats states are facing in contemporary times. Only then can the international community at large and policy makers effectively sustain the future arms control efforts.

The verification mechanisms can be strengthened by investing in advanced technologies, expanding monitoring tools such as AI-driven algorithms for enhancing trust between states involved in arms control treaties.

Transparency can be improved by adopting open-data principles for sharing non-sensitive information. Beyond New START, these recommendations can change the nature of any future nuclear arms control agreement. However, there are reservations regarding informal intrusion into national programs that verification entails.

By taking into consideration the pertinent role of emerging technologies and incorporating provisions for their ethical use in the negotiations for the future arms control agreements can be valuable. Future arms control framework must integrate dialogues over hypersonic missiles, AI driven weapon systems, and other new and disruptive technologies.

A pressing priority is the regulation of emerging technologies, such as AI, Hypersonic missiles, space-based weapons and cyber warfare, that are going to shape the future trajectory of geopolitical competition and arms control efforts. By establishing international agreements and for technological regulation, the impact of these emerging technologies on strategic stability can be monitored.

There is a need to analyze the interlinkage of border security and political issues in the global arms control framework. For this, integrating CBMs among the nuclear armed states, for reducing the mistrust regarding the compliance of future treaties and agreements, will be fruitful. This is instrumental in enhancing cooperation and will lead to transparency. These CBMs can include confidence building exercises, mutual initiatives for greater transparency and enhanced verification mechanisms. Engagement of nuclear armed states can be done by Track II dialogue that is inclusive of state level officials, experts, and analysts. It is imperative to address the debate about the modernization of Chinese nuclear arsenal through targeted CBMs adapted to suit Chinese strategic goals. A critical necessity is to revive multilateral dialogue with other nuclear armed states such as Israel, North Korea, India and Pakistan, keeping in mind the respective regional security dynamics.

It is of utmost importance to strengthen the already existing international institutions such as the United Nations (UN) that can inculcate norms related to emerging technologies and their usage, cyber policies, and conflict resolution for a stable framework for future arms control. The UN can be used as a platform to advocate or open debates about updating the existing nuclear arms control treaties and agreements such as the New START, the NPT to reflect current realities. Nevertheless, diplomatic engagement is the key for harnessing multilateral dialogues between rival states. A concrete dialogue process can foster a conducive environment for future arms control arrangements.

An urgent requirement is to create public awareness campaigns that provide a simplistic view about arms control agreements and highlight their significant role at the national, regional and global level. Think tanks and academic institutions can also be involved for generating grass root level understanding for arms control measures among students and young professionals.

In the long term, there is a need to implement phased approach that includes short term CBMs, intermediate level technological adaptations and long-term commitment to the norms of global nuclear arms control and disarmament. This can be done via establishing a dedicated task force to explore innovative arms control, models that are designed for the shifting geopolitical environment.

Conclusion

The last remaining bilateral arms control agreement between the US and Russia is set to expire next year in February 2026, making the future of nuclear arms control regime uncertain. Absence of any other bilateral or multilateral arms control mechanisms and lack of nuclear non-proliferation discussions among major powers depict an alarming strategic scenario, which is marked by power maximization and weakening of global institutions to enforce non-proliferation laws and regulations. The challenge is intense in the presence of massive proliferation of non-nuclear strategic weapons and EDTs by many states. Therefore, there is an urgent need to reach a multilateral agreement post-New START to strengthen global arms control regime and regulate the EDTs. This imperative becomes even more critical in the context of a shifting global order characterized by emerging multipolarity and accelerated technological competition. As more states invest in and operationalize EDTs, such as hypersonic delivery systems, AI-enabled weapons, and space-based assets, the risk of inadvertent escalation and misperception increases substantially. These technologies often outpace existing legal and normative frameworks, making their unregulated use a significant threat to strategic stability. Furthermore, the erosion of traditional CBMs and verification regimes undermines mutual trust and transparency, making crisis communication and de-escalation more difficult during times of tension. Without a renewed commitment to cooperative security and arms control, one that includes not just nuclear weapon states but also technologically advanced middle powers—the world may find itself entering a new and more dangerous era of strategic competition. Hence, the post-New START period must not be treated as a pause but as an opportunity, a moment to recalibrate the global arms control architecture to reflect the realities of 21st century warfare. This includes institutionalizing norms for responsible development and deployment of EDTs, revitalizing diplomatic channels among major powers, and building inclusive frameworks that bridge the gap between emerging technologies and global security imperatives.

RISE OF POPULISM IN THE POST-TRUTH ERA: A CASE STUDY OF MODI'S REGIME

Saad Riaz and Junaid Khan Jhandad

Rise of Populism in the Post-Truth Era: A Case Study of Modi's Regime

Saad Riaz and Junaid Khan Jhandad[1]

Abstract

India, the world's largest democracy, has witnessed a surge in Hindu majoritarian politics due to populist leaders like Narendra Modi's exploitation of this domain to consolidate their power. Modi has relied on Hindutva ideologies, benefiting from the Bharatiya Jannata Party-Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (BJP-RSS) alliance, especially following the decline of the Congress. Three key events shaped the current political environment: the demolition of the Babri Mosque, the revival of Golwalkar's teachings, and the rise of media-driven 'post-truth' politics. In the post-truth era, political discourse has shifted, allowing for easier manipulation of facts through propaganda, fake news, and populist rhetoric, as the public is more inclined towards emotions and beliefs rather than facts. Despite economic challenges and post-2019 failures in delivering performance, BJP has continued to thrive. The paper explores the rationale behind Modi's rise and manipulation of the traditional political structure, solely depending on right-wing politics in the post-truth age. Despite growing complexities, failure to fulfil promises, and deepening divisions between the rich and the poor, as well as Hindus and Muslims, he has skillfully manipulated vulnerabilities to turn the tide in his favour. It also explores the factors behind Modi's re-election, examining the role of right-wing politics, media influence, and populism in shaping modern Indian politics in the post-truth era.

Keywords: Populism, Post-Truth Era, India, Elections 2024, BJP, Hindu Nationalism

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Introduction

Modern democracy faces acute challenges due to the rise of populism in the era of digitalization and the internet.[2] The populace relies on social media platforms, allowing populist leaders to manipulate and shape public opinion. Digitalization endures drastic changes, manipulation, dis/misinformation campaigns, and even fake news affecting the democratic processes. Though people are supposed to choose their leaders through voting, politicians use selective notions, propaganda, lies, and nationalism to lure voters' perception of power consolidation.[3] In 2024, major democratic nations, including India, Pakistan, Japan, some European states, and the US, went through general elections. Trends in these elections show that parties with anti-immigrant and anti-establishment rhetoric were more likely to win based on their conservative and nationalist agendas.[4] Similarly, the underlying agenda can vary, but the polls show the rise of right-wing politics everywhere. Right-wing populism or politics uses fear of immigrants and even nationalism as rhetoric to influence the appeals of the common people.[5] It emphasizes more on anti-migrant agenda, and uses nationalism, while hatred and fear are the basic tendencies to remain aggressive, which is what people want to hear and believe, immigrants taking their jobs, etc.[6]

2016 was considered to be an unsettling year due to the dissemination of unbelievable fake news, propaganda, delusionary statements, and mis/disinformation campaigns.[7] Moreover, the Oxford Dictionary declared "post-truth" as the word of the year in 2016, as its usage in nexus with politics witnessed an unusual spike.[8] Along with the rise in social media usage and even leaders' dependence on digital media for their campaigns, the manipulation of truth has become more prevalent, especially in democratic nations. During elections, leaders influence the public through

[2] Biller-Andorno, N., Céu Patrão Neves, M., Laukyte, M. et al., "Opinion on democracy in the digital age," *Publications Office of the European Union*, June 20, 2023, accessed January 6, 2025, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/078780.

[3] Ibid.

[4] John Kampfner, "Right-Wing Populism Is Set to Sweep the West in 2024," *Foreign Policy*, December 26, 2023, accessed January 6, 2025, https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/12/26/right-wing-populism-are-set-to-sweep-the-west-in-2024/.

[5] Thomas Greven, "The Rise of Right-wing Populism in Europe and the United States: A Comparative Perspective" *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, May 2016, 2, accessed January 6, 2025, https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id/12892.pdf.

[6] Alexander Hudson and Seema Shah, "Explainer: Populism - Left and Right, Progressive and Regressive," *International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance*, November 21, 2022, accessed January 6, 2025, https://www.idea.int/blog/explainer-populism-left-and-right-progressive-and-regressive.

[7] Kristoffer Ahlstrom-Vij, "Do We Live in a 'Post-Truth' Era?" *Political Studies* 71, no. 2 (June 2023): 2, accessed January 6, 2025, doi:10.1177/00323217211026427.

[8] Oxford Languages "*Oxford Word of the Year 2016*," (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), accessed January 6, 2025, https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/.

promises and sometimes propose overly simplistic solutions to complex problems. However, populist leaders bend the truth, often leading to distrust and a lack of trust in institutions.[9]

The situation worsens when they are caught lying; still, they rely on complex and convoluted justifications. Thus, this trust deficit prompted the public to believe in tempting lies, conspiracy theories, wild stories, and propaganda. Amidst prevailing uncertainty, it became difficult to believe in the facts.[10] Language is used as a tool by populists to mold reality and bend the truth, which increases public anxieties and collective fears. In this way, the truth is manipulated to appeal to emotions and address their concerns.[11]

Events like Brexit and the US presidential election 2016 reflected the use of popular themes to mobilize public appeals and emotions through social media campaigns, bypassing the facts.[12] These events show the existence of an intrusive relationship between populism and post-truth politics, just like an actor and an arena. Consider that Modi, as an actor, drastically relies on populist themes and rhetoric, massively sparking the debate of "Us Vs Them" to increase frustrations and use the element of nationalism to rise to power.[13] Certainly, the arena is the digital media, through which he constantly misleads his audience or population using delusory and dubious statements.[14] Even in the recent elections in 2024, he desperately used Hindu nationalism, ethnic divide, anti-Muslim hatred, and even the film industry for his political campaigns.[15]

The main research puzzle, which this study aims to explore, is how Modi still managed to win elections despite failing to fulfil his previous promises. In every election, he introduced new promises, agendas, and tactics, which enable him to secure victory. While existing literature discusses Modi's rise and his utilisation of right-wing populism, less emphasis has been placed on the methodology he employs, such as manipulation of information and the digital age. In each

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[9] Ward Van Zoonen, Vilma Luoma-aho, and Matias Lievonen, "Trust but verify? Examining the role of trust in institutions in the spread of unverified information on social media," *Computers in Human Behavior* 150 (January 2024): 1, accessed January 6, 2025, doi:10.1016/j.chb.2023.107992.

[10] Chi Luu, "The Collapse of Meaning in a Post-Truth World," *JSTOR Daily*, December 21, 2016, accessed January, 26025, https://daily.jstor.org/collapse-of-meaning-in-a-post-truth-world/.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Jonathan Rose, "Brexit, Trump, and Post-Truth Politics," *Public Integrity* 19, no. 6 (April 2017): 2, accessed January 6, 2025, doi:10.1080/10999922.2017.1285540.

[13] Nikita Sud, "The Actual Gujarat Model: Authoritarianism, Capitalism, Hindu Nationalism and Populism in the Time of Modi," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 52, no. 1 (June 2020): 105, accessed January 6, 2025, doi:10.1080/00472336.2020.1846205.

[14] Ibid, 116.

[15] Sheikh Saalik, "As India's Election Nears, Some Bollywood Films Promote Modi Politics by Embracing Hindu Nationalism," *AP News*, March 22, 2024, accessed January 6, 2025, https://apnews.com/article/india-general-elections-2024-bollywood-modi-nationalism-2aea78fec4324d805d74ddc2bff9f633.

election he relied on different tactics; for example, in 2014, he gained leverage through economic issues and Congress's failed policies, in 2019, he emphasized on the Balakot incident, and in 2024, anti-Muslim campaigns were executed via social media, the film industry, and the demolition of the Babri mosque. Thus, the main aim of this study is to analyse comparatively his techniques and methodology concerning the digital age, which remains the least discussed aspect. The manipulative use of digital media and the internet has jeopardised the traditional political system, leading to the collapse of meaning in a post-truth world, increasing anxiety and prompting many to embrace conspiracy theories.[16]

The paper utilizes qualitative methodology and primary data and secondary data in the form of official documents, statements, research papers, news, reports, and other open-source material to address the primary research question and fill the identified research gap. This research study utilizes descriptive, and explanatory tools to analyze the data.

The first section *"Deciphering Populist Tendencies and Post Truth"*, discusses the integration of post-truth and populism in the contemporary political process, and specifically explores its role in reinvigorating Modi's popularity. The next section, *"Political Spectrum in the Age of Populism"*, explores populism, right and left wing, and especially the spike that has been evident since the evolution of digital and information technologies. The next segment, *"Indian Political Environment and Populism in the Post-Truth Era"*, examines the overall Indian political landscape since the 20th century, the rise of the right-wing nationalist movement, and the reasons behind this increase. The segment, *"Hindu Nationalism: A Prelude to Modi's Rise in India"*, analyses the role of Hindutva and RSS ideology in fostering the growth of the BJP and their connections within the political system. This further emphasizes that Modi's rise to power capitalized on societal vulnerabilities, deepening divides such as Rich vs Poor, Hindus vs Muslims, and Secularists vs Hindu traditionalists, jingoistic policies—anchoring his leadership firmly within right-wing ideology. *"Modi's Political Resilience Amidst Political Setback: A Critical Appraisal"* explains the reasons behind his continued success despite political setbacks, focusing on the policies he previously criticised. However, his party is attempting to repair the damage by adopting alternative populist measures to regain public trust.

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[16] Ranjit Goswami, "India has been a post-truth society for years (and maybe the West has too)," *Ethical Journalism Network*, January 23, 2017, accessed January 8, 2025, https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/india-post-truth-society.

Deciphering Populist Tendencies and Post-Truth

Since the beginning of the information age, digital media has played a crucial role in shaping the public narrative. Maintaining trust in institutions and traditional leaders has become increasingly difficult. By exploiting societal vulnerabilities, populist leaders have reshaped the political landscape, shifting democracies toward authoritarian regimes. Technology has played a significant role in disrupting the truth, leaving the political process behind bars, as there is no need to justify the news or even sources.[17] It is totally up to the reader's and user's instinct to accept or reject the information presented. Thus, the fact does not matter anymore; people tend to believe based on their intuition and moods, and reality is always derailed in the process. That is why populist leaders frame particular news, events, or situations, and the public believes in distorted realities driven by emotions.

Populism emerges with the rise of democracy; it could be described as the shadow of it. One key feature of populism is the 'moralistic imagination of politics', a struggle between good and evil, where the people are portrayed as good, united and innocent, while the elite are depicted as corrupt, dishonest, and selfish.[18] However, simply being anti-elite does not define populism; alongside anti-elitism, it also entails anti-pluralism.[19] This often leads to a dichotomy of 'us vs them', with the people united against the elite, while disregarding diversity and differing opinions. Populists usually speak the language of democracy and claim, "let the people rule." Speaking in this way makes them appear relatable because they are seen as one of the people. But once in power, they tend to foster a 'liberal technocracy', threatening the democratic system.[20] Similarly, Modi exhibits comparable tendencies. Upon rising to power, he portrays himself as a man of the people, representing their will. However, he relied heavily on the digital media, manipulative use of the information age, to sway voters, and became a demagogue.

The confluence of media and disinformation became particularly evident during recent Indo-Pak military standoffs, especially following the Pahalgam incident. During the crises, the media landscape was dominated by extreme jingoism, rumour-mongering, fake news, and disinformation campaigns, all of which significantly harboured a deliberate 'information

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[17] Katharine Viner, "How Technology Disrupted the Truth," *The Guardian*, July 12, 2016, accessed January 8, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/jul/12/how-technology-disrupted-the-truth.
[18] Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), PDF e-book, 19.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid, 11.

warfare.'[21] Thus, the emergence of the post-truth era greatly coincides with the rise of populism in global politics.[22]

People want to hear, see and even believe in fascinating conspiracies created by populist leaders, and technology has provided access to manipulate those vulnerabilities of the target audience.[23] This allowed theories to propagate more speculatively and made people more skeptical about what to believe. Interestingly, leaders are striking through the internet and social media, making the public believe in theories and personifying populist penchants, blowing the traditional political processes.[24]

For decades, innovations and transformations have captured the attention of policy and decision-makers. This is due to their ability to have a drastic impact on warfare. Analysts mention it as a changing character and the constant nature of war.[25] However, technologies have a similar impact on political systems. The digitalization and mediatization of politics have brought enormous changes to their modes. The rise in social media users, cyber-attacks, and propaganda against political opponents, along with growing divisions between social classes and groups, has enabled populist leaders to obscure realities and deepen divisions through xenophobia and fascist rhetoric. The future of politics seems to be based on manipulation, alteration of facts, propaganda, fake news, and deep fake. In war, it is used to break the enemy's will and morale until their ability to resist collapses.[26] However, in politics, it is a form of political engineering, where one seeks the public's attention and turns their support into a vote bank. The purpose lies in taking advantage of the opponent.[27] This is what the analysts refer to as the post-truth era.

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[21] Hannah Ellis-Petersen, "How Social Media Lies Fuelled a Rush to War Between India and Pakistan," *The Guardian*, May 28, 2025, accessed March 8, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/media/2025/may/28/how-social-media-lies-fuelled-a-rush-to-war-between-india-and-pakistan.

[22] Cristóbal R. Kaltwasser et al., "Populism and the Media," *in The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Luca Manucci (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 468.

[23] Viner, "How Technology Disrupted the Truth."

[24] Katherine L. Einstein and David M. Glick, "How exposure to conspiracy theories can reduce trust in government," *The London School of Economics and Political Science*, November 13, 2015, accessed March 8, 2025, Https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2015/11/13/how-exposure-to-conspiracy-theories-can-reduce-trust-in-government/.

[25] Antulio J. Echevarria, "War's Changing Character and Varying Nature: A Closer Look at Clausewitz's Trinity," *Infinity* 5, no. 4 (Summer 2017): 2, accessed March 8, 2025, https://www.militarystrategymagazine.com/article/wars-changing-character-and-varying-nature-a-closer-look-at-clausewitzs-trinity/.

[26] Darran Anderson, "The Grim Future of Urban Warfare," *The Atlantic*, December 11, 2018, accessed March 8, 2025, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/12/technology-will-make-war-even-worse/577723/.

[27] Ibid.

The term post-truth era for the first time was used by the Serbian American Steve Tesich in 1992.[28] In his article titled "A Government of Lies," Tesich criticized the American government for continuously lying to the public, while the public chose to remain submissive. During the first Gulf War, the government emphasized press censorship, allegedly to prevent anti-regime campaigns. Steve criticized the Bush administration for putting the public behind the veil during the war, while the administration projected the measures into the public's best interests.[29] Thus, the public was consciously living in a post-truth era, accepting lies and censorship that ostensibly served American interests. Then, the word resurfaced again in 2004 in the book *The Post Truth Era,* written by Ralph Keyes, where he referred to it as the "circumstance where objective facts have less influence over public opinion than appeals to the emotions and personal belief", which is the post-truth.[30]

In 2016, the Oxford Dictionary selected this word as "word of the year", due to events on both sides of the Atlantic, in the form of Nigel Farage in the UK and Donald Trump in the US, that began to shake democratic system.[31] Analysts called it the most disastrous and the worst year in history due to social upheaval.[32] Social instability, the impact of climate change, the storm in social media due to spikes in users, and lastly, the collapse of morality within societies due to the manipulation of facts and truths, fractured the collective anxieties of state societies.[33] People's trust in public institutions—such as the government, police, and media—has been eroded, leading to institutional decay. An impasse arose due to a surge in an overwhelming amount of unbelievable fake news. Amidst uncertainty, the objective facts became less influential and malleable; the public's trust in institutions is eroding, as they tend to believe what seems right to them and reject objective facts.[34]

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[28] Steve McGrath, "The 'post-truth' lie," *Brodeur Partners*, December 2016, accessed March 8, 2025, https://www.brodeur.com/post-truth-lie/.

[29] Steve Tesich, "A Government of Lies," *The Nation*, January 6, 1992, 13, accessed March 8, 2025, https://archive.org/details/steve-tesich-government-of-lies-article/page/n1/mode/2up?view=theater.

[30] Yael Brahms, "Philosophy of Post-Truth," *The Institute for National Security Studies* 24, no. 2 (April 2021): accessed March 8, 2025, https://www.inss.org.il/publication/philosophy-of-post-truth/.

[31] Kreitner, "Post-Truth and Its Consequences."

[32] Luu, "The Collapse of Meaning in a Post-Truth World."

[33] Ibid.

[34] Seth Gabrielson, "The Post-truth Era: How Institutional Trust Evaporated Overnight," *The Michigan Daily*, September 7, 2024, accessed March 10, 2025, https://www.michigandaily.com/opinion/the-post-truth-era-how-institutional-trust-evaporated-overnight/.

So, what gives rise to the uncertainty and instability on both sides of the Atlantic when the public no longer puts trust in public institutions? This was due to all the episodes the world witnessed in Britain and the United States. Trump in the US, being a right-wing populist leader, was able to get votes for the presidential office. While in Britain, people voted in favor of Brexit, believing in the promises of Nigel Farage during anti-EU campaigns.[35] Unbelievable fake news, propaganda, lies, and false promises successfully watered-down objective facts.

Similarly, despite Trump's dubious statements and claims, many of which were shockingly untrue, his use of political scoring, "alternative facts", and manipulation helped him gain public support and even win elections.[36] Thus, right-wing populism was at its peak, altering objective facts, and the line between truth and deception was far too blurred that it led to the post-truth era. Social media has a serious and perilous role in blurring the lines. Thus, it keeps influencing public opinions and altering their emotions.[37]

The events in 2016 show the rise of right-wing populism in democracies, along with their reliance on social media to connect with the target audience. Thus, populism and the post-truth era have intertwining tendencies, reinforcing each other. However, populism will be further explained in detail in the upcoming section. But emotionally charged rhetoric and appeals, nationalism, religious extremism, and even setting fake news to mesmerize complex situations into simpler ones, are the ways used to compromise facts, which are generally the tools used by politicians in the post-truth era.[38] India is on top of the list, where the state party has been blatantly using tools to suppress freedom and disseminating a controlled narrative, thus justifying its legitimacy to consolidate its power.[39] Modi, famous for right-wing politics, has been in power for decades.[40] Rather than improving the lives of commoners, the fear of identity and security has been implanted

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[35] "Nigel Farage labels £350m NHS promise 'a mistake'*," Good Morning Britain*, June 27, 2016, accessed March 10, 2025, https://www.itv.com/goodmorningbritain/articles/nigel-farage-labels-350m-nhs-promise-a-mistake.

[36] Mustafa Demir, "Populists International (I) - Populists Hand in Hand: Farage and Trump," *European Center for Populism Studies*, February 14, 2021, accessed March 10, 2025, https://www.populismstudies.org/populists-international-i-populists-hand-in-hand-farage-and-trump/.

[37] Alison Flood, "Post-truth' Named Word of the Year by Oxford Dictionaries," *The Guardian*, November 15, 2016, accessed March 10, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/nov/15/post-truth-named-word-of-the-year-by-oxford-dictionaries.

[38] Brahms, "Philosophy of Post-Truth,".

[39] Amrita Singh, "The Chilling of the Fourth Estate After 10 Years of Modi," *Foreign Policy*, May 7, 2024, accessed March 11, 2025, https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/05/07/modi-media-journalists-freedom-press/.

[40] Shireen Mushtaq, Faryal Mazari, and Sabira Ahsan, "Populism in India Under Modi Regime and its Implications for Pakistan," *NUST Journal of International Peace Stability* 7, no. 1 (2024): 35, accessed March 11, 2025, doi:10.37540/njips.v7i1.160.

into their minds.[41] The introduction of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) Bill 2019 is the perfect example of how Modi's BJP vandalizes minorities and is considered a source of threat to the rights of the majority of Indians. This assists him in winning the support of Hindus who are in majority.

Political Spectrum in the Age of Populism

As discussed earlier, the ultimate source of success for populist leaders lies in exploiting the anti-elite and anti-pluralist sentiments, while simultaneously using the democratic system as a façade to establish a liberal technocracy. These leaders then present themselves as uniquely chosen to perform sacred duties, claiming to be the only true representatives of "the actual people". This is the core claim of populism: only those who support them are deemed legitimate. While the rest are labelled as outsiders, anti-nationalist, or even anti-state.[42] A fitting example is Nigel Farage, who celebrated the Brexit victory, despite won by a narrow margin of 52% and opposing 48% were vilified as they were opponents of national interest.[43] The beauty of democracy lies in the existence of pluralistic ideas; however, the populist leader has a tendency to label opposition as a state enemy or even an enemy of public interest.

Thus, in the past few decades, populism has become a more successful political discourse in the liberal democratic world. Cursing the elites for corruption and unwise temptation seems to be an effective way to obtain good results in elections.[44] However, populism is not a new phenomenon, but the internet and social media have played a significant role in propagating popular themes, further adding speculations within societies. People's reliance on the arena, i.e., social media, shows their divergence of interest rather than reliance on traditional media. Social media has become a source of appeasement that appeals to their emotions. Everyone produces their own facts, which have consequences far beyond conventional journalism.[45] On the other hand, anti-elite and anti-establishment rhetoric is more commonly observed during elections, specifically in recent years.

Political entities exploit the vulnerability of societies and extrapolate anti-elite rhetoric through social media, as it has implicitly become the source of direct contact with people.

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[41] Ibid, 43.
[42] Müller, *What Is Populism?* 20.
[43] Tesich, "A Government of Lies," 12.
[44] "Populism and the Media," 468.
[45] Viner, "How Technology Disrupted the Truth."

Therefore, populism is a thin political ideology which ultimately separates society into two groups. The first one is homogenous; those are virtuous and positively characterised people. While the second group is antagonistically negatively connotated, those are the corrupt elites.[46] Thus, populism has three main objectives, including anti-elite, people's centrism, and claims of popular sovereignty.[47]

Referring to its political context, populism has been categorized into right and left wings, respectively. Although both have similar audiences and common adversaries. However, they act on different grounds, such as right-wing populism or politics, are more nationalist or neo-nationalist. Certainly, left-wing politics is more social populism.[48] One more difference that categorizes their approaches is that right-wing populism is anti-elite or establishment. Their propaganda is based on selling the cards of minorities and immigrants, whom they call the reason behind every problem in society, primarily undermining the rights of the majority.[49] While left-wing populism is radical or even can be extremist, and a threat to democracy.[50] The difference lies in their approaches, in their way of mobilizing the public or propagating their agenda. Their mobilization is not pointed towards any specific group, immigrants, minorities, or socially marginalized people. Rather, their movement has a collective approach that includes everyone in a society irrespective of caste, creed, religion, and ethnicity. Such as Kemalism in Turkey or the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela.[51] They adopt an egalitarian approach, swearing to protect minorities and socially marginalized groups.

Right-wing populism is also radical or extremist, but its themes include anti-globalization, nativism, nationalism, or based on protectionist policies. Thus, using the fear of minorities, immigrants, and ethnicities— they tend to be in opposition to the elite or establishment to win the support of the majority groups, for instance; anti-Islamization in Europe or Trump's vows during

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[46] Luca Manucci and Edward Weber, "Why the Big Picture Matters: Political and Media Populism in Western Europe since the 1970s," *Swiss Political Science Review* 23, no. 4 (2017): 316, doi:10.1111/spsr.12267.

[47] Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, "Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America," *Government and Opposition* 48, no. 2 (April 2013): 148, accessed March 12, 2025, doi:10.1017/gov.2012.11.

[48] Jan-Werner Mueller, "What's Left of Left-Wing Populism?," *Columbia Center for Contemporary Critical Thought*, February 13, 2019, accessed March 12, 2025, https://blogs.law.columbia.edu/praxis1313/jan-werner-mueller-whats-left-of-left-wing-populism/?cn-reloaded=1.

[49] Hudson and Shah, "Explainer: Populism - Left and Right, Progressive and Regressive."

[50] Mueller, "What's Left of Left-Wing Populism?,"

[51] "Left-Wing Populism," *European Center for Populism Studies*, accessed March 13, 2025, https://www.populismstudies.org/Vocabulary/left-wing-populism/.

the 2016 presidential elections, which were to protect American society from the influx of immigrants.[52] They literally are ethnocentric or even xenophobic; for them, identity and security are significantly important to keep their society, culture, or even the state from being invaded by outsiders.[53] These events heuristically endorse populism in the age of post-truth.

Both right and left-wing populism pose threats to liberal democracies. Such leaders are supposed to be elected through the democratic process, but choose to be authoritarian. In Europe and the US, recent trends show the rise of right-wing populism. The conservative and extremist parties are gaining momentum, having a common theme, fearmongering based on Islamophobic and xenophobic views.[54] On both sides of the Atlantic, leaders are using themes, i.e., anti-immigrants, protection of traditional values, and even anti-globalization.[55] However, in India, which is considered the world's largest democracy, right-wing parties have chosen to rely on similar themes in order to win the support of a large audience, which is Hindu majoritarian.

Modi consecutively, for the third time in a row, formed a government in the Center but with the assistance of coalition parties, which shows his thriving nature in the Indian political system, using populist rhetoric.[56] Throughout his political career, Modi has benefited significantly from emotionally charged, anti-Muslim and anti-Pakistan narratives, effectively amplified through the Indian Godi media.[57] The media played a central role in reinforcing communal divisions, often portraying a stark contrast between Hindus and Muslims. This narrative was further supported by legislative initiatives with clear anti-Muslim undertones, such as the CAA of 2019, the National Register of Citizens (NRC), and the abrogation of Articles 370 and 35A.[58] These actions were not only politically strategic but also aimed at consolidating support from the Hindu majority by appealing to religious sentiments and fostering a sense of communal identity and appeasement. Similarly, this time the theme was the same as the previous ones, i.e., right-wing politics, but the methodology transformed and differed from the 2014 and 2019 elections.

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[52] Nolan D. McCaskill, "Trump promises wall and massive deportation program," *Politico,* August 31, 2016, accessed March 13, 2025, https://www.politico.com/story/2016/08/donald-trump-immigration-address-arizona-227612.
[53] "Right-Wing Populism."
[54] Mojta, "The Rising Tide of Right-Wing Populism Across the Globe."
[55] Luu, "The Collapse of Meaning in a Post-Truth World."
[56] "India's Narendra Modi Sworn in As Country's Prime Minister for a Third Term," *Al Jazeera*, June 9, 2024, accessed March 13, 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/6/9/indias-narendra-modi-sworn-in-as-countrys-prime-minister-for-a-third-term.
[57] Mushtaq, Mazari, and Ahsan, "Populism in India Under Modi Regime and its Implications for Pakistan," 41.
[58] Mushtaq, Mazari, and Ahsan, "Populism in India Under Modi Regime and its Implications for Pakistan," 42.

The 2024 election witnessed an unsurprising shift, from economic bluffing in 2019 to an anti-Pakistan stance, and in this one, a further emphasis on Hindu nationalism and anti-Muslim rhetoric, with the added use of the film industry as a tool.[59] For the first time, Bollywood was used to produce films that promoted his boldness and purposes, such as "Swatantra Veer Savarkar", which was in the Indian theatres a few weeks before the national votes.[60] Thus, Narendra Modi cemented his power and harnessed nationalism by propagating Hindutva ideology among Indians. This will be further explained in detail in the upcoming section. But before discussing Modi's method of harnessing power, this article will specifically look at the way historically Indian leaders in the past tried to mobilize Hindu nationalism rhetoric through the propagation of right-wing politics.

Indian Political Environment and Populism in the Post-Truth Era

Two elements greatly influence the current Indian political structure; the first is the M.D. Golwalkar's teachings, in which his famous writings "We or Our Nationhood" are based on extremist and nationalist assumptions, portrayed Muslims and Christianity as hostile or disloyal to the state.[61] Similarly, the demolition of the Babri masjid in 1992 turned out to be a major reason behind the rise of the BJP in the mainstream political structure alongside the Congress.[62] In the 1980s, Indian politics underwent a significant transformation as Congress declined in prominence. This shift facilitated the RSS's involvement in reforming the political landscape, paving the way for the BJP's ascent. The fall was mainly due to the economic crisis, incompetence, and even the inability to resolve communal riots in India, which were on the rise during the 1980s.[63] It was for the first time in India after partition that right-wing political parties grabbed the public's attention. Even during pre-partition times, Congress was a dominant party striving to rid itself of British rule. However, despite the formation of the RSS in 1925, its policies were not aligned with Gandhi's or Nehru's secularism policies.[64] Contrarily, they were against dividing India and aspired for Hindu

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[59] Jessie Yeung and Rhea Mogul, "A 'tidal change' in Bollywood: How the world's largest film industry veered to the right during the Modi era," *CNN*, May 17, 2024, accessed March 14, 2025, https://edition.cnn.com/2024/05/17/style/india-elections-bollywood-modi-bjp-influence-intl-hnk-dst/index.html.

[60] SAALIQ, "As India's Election Nears, Some Bollywood Films Promote Modi Politics by Embracing Hindu Nationalism."

[61] M. S. Golwalkar, *Bunch of Thoughts* (Sahitya Sindhu Prakashana, 2000), 52.

[62] Zahid Hussain, "Rise of virulent nationalism," *Dawn*, August 14, 2019, accessed March 15, 2025, https://www.dawn.com/news/1499428.

[63] Marium Fatima, Ghulam A. Murtaza, and Arshi S. Hashmi, "Rise of Right-Wing Indian Nationalism: Implications for South Asia," *Margalla Papers*, 23, no. 2 (2019): 15, accessed March 15, 2025, 15-70.

[64] Fatima, Murtaza, and Hashmi, "Rise of Right-Wing Indian Nationalism: Implications for South Asia," 3.

nationalist policies in India, where minorities would remain submissive to Hindutva ideology. The main objective of RSS was the centralization and even forceful interpretation of Hinduism in India. RSS even believed that the decentralization of Hinduism was the real reason behind the 1200-year-long Muslim rule in India. Thus, RSS was introduced to secure the identity and re-glorify Hinduism in the subcontinent.[65]

The contradiction in policies between the RSS extremist group and the India National Congress (INC) led to the assassination of Gandhi in 1948. His pluralistic ideas and inclusive vision, which allowed followers of religions such as Christianity and Islam to practice their faiths peacefully, became one of the reasons for his assassination. Thus, his vision of a secular India, where people of all faiths could coexist, was tragically buried along with him. However, his vision fell short after his assassination by RSS party member Nathuram Godse.[66] RSS was entrenched in the philosophy of Hinduism and protectionism while considering Muslims and Christians -the aliens- as they were considered outsiders who were allegedly ruling in India and over Hindus for centuries.[67] Congress was largely accused of having an appeasement policy towards Muslims, specifically their notion that India belonged to every nation was rejected by their opposition. However, the BJP countered by propagating the concept of the two-nation theory, embedding themselves as the actual saviours of the Hindu religion and history.

Pragmatically, the propagation initially could not seize the support of Indians. But during the 1980s, when economic and other issues worsened and were intertwined with ethnonationalism, the BJP got an opportunity to rise in mainstream politics.[68] Thus, for the first time, the events assisted them in winning eighty-five seats at the Center. For four decades, Congress was the only ruling party in India, and their policies based on secular India were initially accepted among natives.[69] However, the transition was imminent after the drastic failure of Congress to deal with serious economic and other internal issues. This provided an opportunity for right-wing parties to reappear in Indian mainstream politics, thus leading to the propagation of Hinduism ideologues.

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[65] Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Sangh Parivar: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2005), 13.
[66] Fatima, Murtaza, and Hashmi,
"Rise of Right-Wing Indian Nationalism: Implications for South Asia," 3.
[67] Ibid, 16.
[68] Anil Kumar Vajpayee, "Emergence of the BJP – Confusion Regarding Causes," *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 4 (1990): 492, accessed March 15, 2025, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41855518.
[69] "Overview of Indian Politics Since Independence, 1947-present," *NAU*, accessed March 15, 2025, https://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~sj6/314HND01.htm.

In the coming decades, Indian politics experienced a drastic shift. First, the decline of Congress in India due to its persistent failures. Second, the rise of regional parties such as the BJP in contrast to Congress. Third, the emergence of right-wing politics in India enabled Modi to come into power in 2014 by using Hindu rhetoric and populist sentiments. The 'Made in India' slogan was promoted to address economic issues along with anti-Muslim rhetoric narratives.[70] Thus, India witnessed a major shift in its political environment, giving rise to religious parties using rhetoric with a tendency to mobilize Hindu voters. Similarly, Hindu nationalists narrowed down the perception of a nation to its culture, using culture-specific terminologies, such as the prevailing ideas of Hindutva, to create India as a pure Hindu nation.[71] However, Muslims were excluded from their culture as they fell short of fulfilling their criteria. Right-wing parties used a false sense of security to propagate the threat emanating from Muslims. Their loyalty was doubted, which allowed the government to reevaluate the appeasement policies and adopt the protectionist policies, thus excluding the Muslims. This all happened after their inclination toward extremism and radicalization, mixing religious sentiments with politics.[72] The political rival of these nationalist parties believed that the phenomenon was to terrorize India using saffron and the authoritarian majoritarianism of right-wing Hindu parties.

Thus, it is obvious that the rise of right-wing parties resulted from Congress's failure to deliver its promises, which even gave rise to the populist parties in India. The false sense of security and identity issues, which are the underlying rhetoric of right-wing parties, were used in nexus with the common issues using a hardline approach. Such parties blatantly exploit vulnerabilities that shattered the political environment within the state, quenching a more regressive stance against political opponents.

However, social media and the internet brought further speculations in Indian politics.[73] Modi's BJP effectively utilized social media platforms as a key driver of its political campaigns, helping secure widespread public support. This contributed to a more polarized and complex Indian society, which continues to grapple with deep-rooted issues, particularly unemployment,

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[70] Rajiv Kumar, "Reflections on the Dynamics of Party System," in *Great Transition in India* (Delhi: University of Delhi, 2020), 175, https://www.worldscientific.com/doi/pdf/10.1142/9789811222344_0009?rsltid=AfmBOoqTXB_R2pVSnsCWS3x MjZKCecIZaF9kLirSQgK_3ExFxBoX-ts1.

[71] Fatima, Murtaza, and Hashmi, "Rise of Right-Wing Indian Nationalism: Implications for South Asia," 3.

[72] Ibid, 17.

[73] Mushtaq, Mazari, and Ahsan, "Populism in India Under Modi Regime and its Implications for Pakistan," 40.

which remains a major challenge for the youth. Upon coming to power, Modi made sweeping promises, some of which were widely seen as unrealistic. While the ideological foundation of right-wing politics remained consistent, the methodology employed by the BJP evolved significantly. This shift was partly driven by the failure to address pressing economic issues, including the unmet promise of creating one million jobs per month.

The 2024 general elections, however, dealt a significant blow to Modi's political narrative, forcing a recalibration of his approach. Notably, he has started adopting policies he once dismissed, such as offering free electricity to farmers, a move that could place additional strain on the country's fiscal balance.[74] That is right-wing politics, mobilizing the voters using religious and nationalist sentiments, but in return, blowing up the whole system. This is further discussed in the upcoming section, the way he exploited religious differences for political gain cost him in the 2024 elections and forced him to take a defensive stance.

Hindu Nationalism: A Prelude to Modi's Rise in India

Initially, RSS was formulated to reanimate Hindutva and protect the Hindu ideologues. Thus, they needed a political party that allured their cause and ensured the execution of social and political goals. During the pre-partition era, RSS was introduced to counter the Khilafat Movement and even opposed Congress politics; and were particularly against the Independence Movement, which, according to their claims, was not part of their ambitions.[75] It is worth mentioning that Hinduism is not synonymous with the word Hindutva. Both are quite different; their context, interpretation, and even the purpose does not align. Hinduism is a religion or spiritual dogma, which every Hindu, no matter what side they belong to—center, left, or right, they are part of this religion.[76] Regarding Hindutva, it is the ideology of RSS first coined by V.D. Savarkar in 1923. Not every Hindu follower adopts this ideology, especially the intellectual and liberal classes deny the propagation of the extremist ideology and the right-wing approach. But to those with rightist leanings, RSS was able to propagate that Muslims are the source of a threat to their identity, and

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[74] Krishna N. Das and Aftab Ahmed, "Modi's populism after India election reversal puts public finances at risk," *Reuters*, September 02, 2024, accessed March 16, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/india/modis-populism-after-india-election-reversal-puts-public-finances-risk-2024-08-30/.

[75] Jaffrelot, The Sangh Parivar, 1.

[76] A. G. Noorani, "What is Hindutva?," *DAWN*, December 10, 2016, accessed March 16, 2025, https://www.dawn.com/news/1301496; Arvind Sharma, "On the Difference Between Hinduism and Hindutva," *Asian Philosophies and Religions* 25, no. 1 (Spring 2021): 43, accessed March 16, 2025, https://www.asianstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/on-the-difference-between-hinduism-and-hindutva.pdf.

that is why unification was necessary for survival.[77] It propagates Hindu nationalism and supremacy in the subcontinent and its premises. Also, it advocates the majoritarian Hindu rule, and proponents of "Hindu Rashtra"—protection of its culture and religions, etc.[78]

The purpose of discussing Hindutva is to understand the significance of the BJP and RSS nexus in Indian politics. BJP is a right-wing political party promoting Hindutva and its teachings, which are even part of its election manifesto. The nexus is not new, however, RSS and BJP collaborated in 1996, and since then, this ideology has been sworn into their manifestos.[79] Analysts believe that Hindutva poses a serious threat to democracy and secularism in India, sworn to promote Hindu nationalism rather than Indian nationalism.[80] The tactic that maximises their power is the cultural reconstruction to unify and strengthen their common identity, transforming religion into a more unified and systematic way. Thus, cultural nationalism is the core of Modi's campaign, which has been widely used since 2014. The purpose behind that is to unite the Hindus under one flag, using 'saffron terrorists' to win their support and the Lok Sabha elections.[81] This was done having harsh stances against the Muslim and Christian populace, and even the absence of strong opposition allowed the BJP to morph into an authoritarian regime.

Modi successfully filled the power vacuum in Indian politics, as the Congress grew weaker, which is left-wing party committed to the idea of secular India. Through a staunch political campaign, Modi and his BJP managed to shift the public discourse towards an "us vs them" narrative, often framed under the radical and religious lines—Hindus vs Muslims. Throughout the campaign, he politicised Hinduism, in nexus with domestic issues, i.e., economy. This polarised Indian society, introducing new complexities and fueling radicalization, dynamics that ultimately bolstered his political career and helped secure his victory in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections.[82] RSS and BJP have always been credited for three things—first the demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992, second, the Gujrat incident under the leadership of Modi, third, the revival of Golwalkar's and his teachings on "We or Our Nationhood Defined," which totally reflects fascism

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[77] Fatima, Murtaza, and Hashmi, "Rise of Right-Wing Indian Nationalism: Implications for South Asia," 21.
[78] Ibid, 25.
[79] Noorani, "What is Hindutva."
[80] Amit Singh, "Hindutva Fascism Threatens the World's Largest Democracy," *The Loop*, October 31, 2022, accessed March 16, 2025, https://theloop.ecpr.eu/hindutva-fascism-is-threatening-the-worlds-largest-democracy/.
[81] Fatima, Murtaza, and Hashmi, "Rise of Right-Wing Indian Nationalism: Implications for South Asia," 9.
[82] Ibid, 10.

aspired through Hitler's Nazism in Germany, Casteism and Islamophobia.[83] Throughout his campaign, he used religious vulnerabilities, embedded with identity threats and was able to win the support of Hindu majoritarians.

The second most important factor that helped him win the elections is the mediatization of politics. That is the tendency of populist leaders to attract public attention using blurred, half messages, and even an emotional tone and simplistic content through digital platforms, while continuously undermining the facts.[84] Mediatization is the convergence of political and media logic, in which populist leaders grab the attention of viewers, while the media increase their viewership. Thus, it is a direct relationship; both entities are beneficiaries in terms of commercialization and politicization.[85] Conversely, parties that continue to rely on traditional political processes have lost ground, a weakness that has cost them significantly during elections. In the presence of a weak opposition and increasingly controlled media networks, the Modi regime has successfully brought many major media houses under its influence. As a result, mainstream media tends to remain uncritical of Modi's policies, often targeting the opposition and minority groups while remaining silent on pressing national issues. For instance, the 2023 Manipur crisis, marked by violent ethnic clashes, exposed the government's failure to act decisively, yet received minimal critical coverage from mainstream outlets.[86] The Godi media is exceptional in covering the lies and failures of Modi's regime; it only broadcasts "Mann ki bat", things which he likes and which favour his regime.[87] Therefore, logic and rationality always suffer and even derail during the mediatization.

The South Asian region is renowned for conflict between two major nuclear powers and is often embroiled in cross-border conflicts between India and Pakistan. In this environment, the role of media is extremely significant; it serves as the primary source during times of crisis and heightened tensions.[88] News broadcasting and information circulation can easily alter public perception. In India, the number of people with access to TV in homes has increased from 830

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[83] Shamsul Islam, "Golwalkar's We or Our Nationhood Defined: A Critique," *Academia*, 2006, accessed March 16, 2025, https://www.academia.edu/676511/Golwalkar_s_We_or_Our_Nationhood_Defined_A_Critique.

[84] "Populism and the Media," 468.

[85] Ibid, 469.

[86] Amrita Singh, "The Chilling of the Fourth Estate After 10 Years of Modi," *Foreign Policy*, May 7, 2024, accessed March 16, 2025, https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/05/07/modi-media-journalists-freedom-press/.

[87] Ibid.

[88] Dr.Asma Shakir Khawaja and Shumaila Zahoor, "Indian Media: Feeding the War Hysteria or a Peace Dividend?," *NDU Journal* 34 (2020): 148, accessed March 16, 2025, https://ndujournal.ndu.edu.pk/site/article/view/71/56.

million in 2016 to 890 million in 2020.[89] Additionally, there are 900 private TV channels, half of which are dedicated to news broadcasts.[90] Similarly, 465 million people have access to internet services, making India a leader in broadcasting infrastructure worldwide.[91]

With such a vast population accessing information technologies, it has also become a breeding ground for disinformation, fake news, and rumour bombs.[92] Modi's BJP has reportedly controlled news channels, utilising emotionally charged rhetoric and hyper-nationalist narratives that are disseminated among the public.[93] The use of digital media as a vehicle for disinformation campaigns, fake news, and jingoistic narratives against Pakistan is quite evident, especially during the Uri attacks in 2016, the Pulwama crisis, and the post-Pahalgam incidents. Mentioning the post-Pahalgam incidents, which led to the most dangerous confrontation of the decade, the Indian media launched its own war, which analysts referred to as 'a deliberate disinformation war'.[94] The "Godi Media" resembles a platform for jingoistic rhetoric and anti-Pakistan and anti-Muslim narratives, creatively serving to provide political cover for the Indian leadership. This highlights the effective use of media in the age of post-truth, employing populist and ultra-nationalist rhetoric.

This is how the media has been utilized for Modi's political advantage, undermining facts and neglecting rationality, blatantly misleading the public through unnecessary and dubious statements, and targeting the opposition and minorities.[95] Independent analysis shows that under Modi's regime, the media willingly serves the Hindu nationalists and the BJP's policies, and that is why the word "Godi Media" has been widely used.[96] But the dreadful thing is that the public seems to believe such dubious statements. The post-Pulwama and Pahalgam periods are the best examples of the initiation of deliberate disinformation campaigns, creating a war-jingoistic environment, and attempting to capitalise on the opportunity in the form of a vote bank. Modi, back in 2014, promised that he would reform the economy, provide one million jobs under the

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[89] Tanushree Basuroy, *Number of Indians with access to television as of 2020, by age group (in millions)*, (STATISTA, 2023).

[90] "India profile-Media," World South Asia, *BBC News*, April 29, 2019, accessed March 16, 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12557390.

[91] Ibid.

[92] Hammad Sarfraz, "India's use of misinformation debunked," *Express Tribune*, September 26, 2021, accessed March 16, 2025, https://tribune.com.pk/story/2322010/indias-use-of-misinformation-debunked.

[93] Ibid.

[94] Michael Kugelman, "Why Disinformation Surged During the India-Pakistan Crisis," *Foreign Policy*, May 14, 2025, accessed March 16, 2025, https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/05/14/india-pakistan-crisis-disinformation-media/.

[95] Ravish Kumar, "India's Media – Captured and Censored," *Al Jazeera*, March 28, 2024, accessed March 17, 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/program/the-india-report/2024/3/28/indias-media-captured-and-censored.

[96] Ibid.

"Made in India" narrative.[97] Failure to comply with promises forced him to change the underlying themes to anti-Pakistan in 2019. Thus, he continued to rely on populist narratives. Turning the tables through the use of media and controlled narratives, lambasting Pakistan while mining the tensions between the two states, was a disproportionate political stunt.[98] Even though India lost tactically, it was able to convert the propaganda and false narratives into political scoring. A large number of the Hindu population believed that Modi taught a real lesson to Pakistan; thus, the BJP's stunt satisfied the majority of Hindu nationalists.[99] This assisted him in winning elections with even greater margins. Most analysts believed that the mandate in the 2019 elections was a referendum on Modi's nationalist Hindutva policies.[100]

Therefore, in the upcoming years, Modi's Hindutva policies took a harsh turn. Revoking articles 370 and 35A of the Indian constitution regarding Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK) and then CAA—reforms to declare Muslims, illegal settlers who were residents for centuries.[101] These events have sparked controversy and exposed his ambition to use alternative means to appease Hindu majoritarian, socially marginalizing minorities. Therefore, it is obvious that Modi's overwhelming usage of media to launch propaganda campaigns against minorities, suppressing their rights, assisted him in consolidating his power. On the other hand, even members of the opposition party were arrested, for instance, Rahul Gandhi was arrested in a defamation case and sentenced for making strong remarks against Modi.[102] Thus, no one could be safe from Modi's aggressive campaigns to win the hearts and minds of the Hindu population.

Modi's Political Resilience Amidst Political Setback: A Critical Appraisal

The fall of Fascism and Nazism in Italy and Germany shows that a cult built on propaganda, lies, and populist rhetoric to mobilise nationalistic fervour is likely to encounter public wrath.[103] These

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[97] Maria A. Habib, "After India Loses Dogfight to Pakistan, Questions Arise About Its 'Vintage' Military," *The New York Times*, March 3, 2019, accessed March 17, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/03/world/asia/india-military-united-states-china.html.
[98] Soutik Biswas, "War' and India PM Modi's Muscular Strongman Image," *BBC*, March 6, 2019, accessed March 17, 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-47439101.
[99] Soutik Biswas, "Narendra Modi V Imran Khan: Who Won the War of Perception?," *BBC*, March 1, 2019, accessed March 17, 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-47414490.
[100] Soutik Biswas, "India Election Results 2019: Narendra Modi Secures Landslide Win," *BBC*, May 23, 2019, accessed March 17, 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-48347081.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Benjamin Soloway, "Did the Brutal Death of Mussolini Contribute to Hitler's Suicide?," *Foreign Policy*, April 28, 2015, accessed March 18, 2025, https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/04/28/did-the-brutal-death-of-mussolini-contribute-to-hitlers-suicide/.

are extreme examples in which these leaders had to face harsh circumstances in response to what they had done with their populations. Similarly, Modi can be exemplified in this, considering himself a "man sent by God," following his interview just before the elections, to portray himself as the righteous of all.[104] Certainly, despite failures in governance and worsening conditions for the public, Modi's political bluffs and continuous emphasis on domestic flaws have sustained his influence. Though he fell short of securing a simple majority of 272 seats in the last elections. Still, he thrived and amid a staunch campaign, he managed to secure seats, continued to dominate Indian politics, and formed a coalition government to claim premiership for the third consecutive time.[105]

However, the post-2019 era was full of failure and constant devastation; the population faced severe circumstances during COVID-19. It was even declared the second most affected state due to the pandemic, and the death toll was around 1.15 million.[106] The actual number was even higher, according to international media and organizations. The reason behind the increasing number of deaths includes discrimination based on caste, religion, and gender, harsh and severe lockdowns, and even a lack of proper health facilities. To avoid criticism, the government asked X (formerly Twitter) and other media blogging websites to filter the anti-government tweets and posts.[107] Similarly, the media houses were quiet in severe situations, and only controlled narratives and news were broadcasted. Freedom House 2021 report stated that authorities even filed criminal charges against citizens, journalists, students, and health workers who criticized the government for failing to control the pandemic, under the colonial era sedition law acts and the IT Act 2000.[108]

In Modi's "New India," the press has become more dependent on the government, rather than operating independently and criticizing his policies. No matter what happens, the media is supposed to remain quiet and support the agenda. Modi hates being questioned and even hates it

[104] Sangeeta B. Pisharoty, "By Ascribing Divinity Unto Himself, Modi Emulates None Other Than Hitler," *The Wire*, May 24, 2024, accessed March 18, 2025, https://thewire.in/politics/by-ascribing-divinity-unto-himself-modi-emulates-none-other-than-hitler.
[105] Soutik Biswas, "India Election 2024: Why Modi Failed to Win Outright Majority," *BBC*, June 4, 2024, accessed March 18, 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c977g8gl5q2o.
[106] Yashraj Sharma, "India's Hidden COVID Deaths: Was the Toll in 2020 Eight Times Higher?," *Al Jazeera*, July 20, 2024, accessed March 18, 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/7/20/did-covids-first-wave-kill-eight-times-more-indians-than-announced.
[107] "India Covid: Anger as Twitter Ordered to Remove Critical Virus Posts," *BBC,* April 26, 2021, accessed March 18, 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56883483.
[108] India: Freedom in the World 2021, (Washington D.C.: Freedom House, 2021), https://freedomhouse.org/country/india/freedom-world/2021.

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when the media tries to challenge his narratives.[109] That is why he and even members of the BJP never answer the questions of the media. Similarly, fake news, lies, rumour bombs, propaganda, lies, and even disinformation campaigns are the ways Indian media relies on to alter the truth and facts. Criticism is almost nonexistent; whoever does so have to face charges. Even Rahul Gandhi had to face charges for making defamatory remarks about Modi.[110] Under Modi's regime, not only did Muslims have to suffer, but Christians had to face violence, especially in Manipur, which is among the examples of state-backed violence against minorities.[111] His policies, especially those of marginalizing Muslim populations and even the fear of constitutional amendments that will totally alienate the poor from society, have resulted in a reverse gear to his popularity. Moreover, the inability to address the economic issues unbelievably vowed during the 2014 elections regarding employment opportunities, is still an issue the populace is facing.[112]

After 2024 election his popularity took a noticeable hit, and he had to face significant backlash. This forced him to resort to traditional tactics to mask his incompetence in handling economic-related issues. For instance, recently his coalition parties started to distribute cash handouts, free electricity to farmers, and even debt waivers, although he previously criticized these policies.[113] Analysts warned that these policies could further strain the fiscal balances, pushing the state towards serious economic challenges. Thus, for short-term gains, a long-term debacle is awaiting. Modi has lost his credibility and firm grip in Indian politics, Maya Tudor believes that "in the heart of Hindu land, despite a large number of his voters, Modi could not convert the large Hindu population into his vote bank, thus it is a moral and political loss for the BJP."[114]

Therefore, despite his policies and his autocratic way of governing the largest democracy in the world, he still managed to form the government in the 2024 elections. This shows his political mantra and skillfully using propaganda, populist rhetoric, and even controlled media, his

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[109] Sanjay Kumar, "Press in Chains: Fear and Trolling in Modi's 'new India'," *DAWN*, February 10, 2022, accessed March 18, 2025, https://www.dawn.com/news/1673816.
[110] Krishnadas Rajagopal, "Supreme Court Stays Rahul Gandhi's Conviction in 'Modi Surname' Remark Criminal Defamation Case," *The Hindu*, August 4, 2023, accessed March 18, 2025, https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/sc-stays-rahul-gandhis-conviction-in-modi-surname-remark-criminal-defamation-case/article67157567.ece.
[111] "India: Freedom in the World 2021."
[112] Biswas, "India Election 2024: Why Modi Failed to Win Outright Majority."
[113] Das and Ahmed, "Modi's populism after India election reversal puts public finances at risk."
[114] Hannah E. Petersen, "Modi Loses Parliamentary Majority in Indian Election," *The Guardian*, June 5, 2024, accessed March 18, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jun/04/india-election-results-narendra-modi-bjp.

ambition of turning India into a Hindu nationalist nation. Swiftly turning the narrative in his favor, with staunch social media and digital campaigns, Modi was able to claim victory in the elections. This shows that his populist themes are still working in manipulating the Indian political structure with more transformative techniques.

Conclusion

Following the recent elections, Modi's party has shifted gears and reverted to conventional politics—an approach he often criticised. The purpose was to gain the lost ground through unequivocal promises. Similarly, his politics is around winning the support of Hindu voters and pundits using nationalist and Hindutva rhetoric. One of the main aspects of his staunch campaign is using digital media for information control and propagation of populist rhetoric. Similarly, in his previous campaign, fear of losing the voters, Modi's focus shifted to winning the trust of Hindu voters. For this, he designed narratives, promoted movies that upsurged Hinduism, promoted anti-Muslim narratives and even took the initiative to win the support of Hindu pundits, such as the construction of the Ayodhya Temple in Uttar Pradesh. This allowed him to cover up his failure and the promises he made during previous elections, such as economic reforms, employment opportunities, etc. Despite facing serious economic issues during his reign, he was reelected, which shows his success in manipulating the Indian political system using populist themes and narratives in the age of post-truth. The post-truth era exposes human biases and their beliefs on emotions rather than logic and facts. Even cultures with strong practices surrender in front of technology. Though he failed to comply with promises, huge numbers of Hindu voters still believe in his unbelievable fake promise, which he designed to attract the masses. Economic issues, such as unemployment, are still out there, the rich-poor distinction has further increased the gap, and despite the controversial constitutional amendments, his party is thriving. The article concludes the case study of Modi's constantly shifting themes to maintain dominance in Indian politics. However, media houses and the internet have largely favoured him, playing a manipulative and excessive role in the political system. Meanwhile, issues such as unemployment, healthcare, and other fundamental problems continue to plague many, especially middle-class Indians.

FORGING NEW FRONTIERS:

INDIA-GCC ENGAGEMENT UNDER THE ACT WEST POLICY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR PAKISTAN

Sardar Jehanzaib Ghalib and Muhammad Ahmad Khan

Forging New Frontiers: India-GCC Engagement under the Act West Policy and Implications for Pakistan

Sardar Jehanzaib Ghalib and Muhammad Ahmad Khan[1]

Abstract

Since its independence, India has aimed to strengthen its ties with Gulf countries. The launch of its Act West policy has remained the cornerstone of New Delhi's strategy to deal with Gulf countries. The policy's objective was to strengthen bilateral ties through economic, political, and increased diplomatic outreach. India's influence in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region has significantly grown under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The main research question this study explores is: What are factors impacting Indian relationship with the Gulf States? Through a neoclassical realism perspective, this study analyses the interplay of systemic influences and domestic leadership factors in shaping India's foreign policy towards GCC States. It employs a qualitative methodology along with secondary data analysis. This article concludes India's deepening engagement with the Gulf countries does not inherently come at the expense of Pakistan, as each state holds its own strategic, economic, and cultural value. In today's multipolar and interest-driven international system, relationships are increasingly non-exclusive and transactional.

Keywords: India-GCC Engagement, Middle East Diplomacy, Regional Power Dynamics, Pakistan's Strategic Response, Act West Policy

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Introduction

West Asia is strategically a critical region, and India's diplomatic relations were officially initiated following its independence; however, they remained at a low level until India liberalized its economy following the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the post-World War II era, relations remained complicated due to the India-Pakistan rivalry, which later improved in the post-Cold War era. The twenty-first century's inception marked the introduction of India's 'Look West Policy' under the Manmohan Singh administration.[2] These relations have further deepened under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. After coming into power, Modi realized the potential of Middle Eastern states and made the most foreign visits to Gulf countries to secure India's national interests. With Narendra Modi in power, New Delhi's foreign policy emphasis has shifted towards the Middle East, especially towards the GCC states, to accomplish its strategic aspirations. Their heightened relationship has resulted in significant implications and challenges for Pakistan. This demonstrates India's desire to limit Pakistan's influence in the region by strengthening its ties with these states.

India's expanding engagement with Gulf countries—through strategic initiatives like India-Israel-UAE-US (I2U2), digital infrastructure collaboration, clean energy partnerships, and logistics corridors such as India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)—reflects a shift in regional diplomacy toward technology-driven and innovation-based cooperation. This transformation positions India as a key partner in the Gulf's economic diversification and long-term strategic planning. In contrast, Pakistan's role remains largely rooted in traditional sectors such as labor export and security cooperation, with limited participation in emerging technological frameworks. This growing asymmetry risks reducing Pakistan's strategic relevance in a Gulf region increasingly defined by digital connectivity, high-tech partnerships, and multi-aligned diplomacy.

Sudhanshu, in "Analyzing Present Cultural Relevance between India-West Asia Relations"[3], highlights the cultural synergy between India and West Asian nations, which is the

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[2] Sanjaya Baru, "India and the World – Economics and Politics of the Manmohan Singh Doctrine in Foreign Policy" (Working Paper, National University of Singapore, 2008), https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/media/isas_papers/Working%20Paper%2053%20-%20Email%20-%20India%20and%20the%20World%20-%20Manmohan%20Singh%20Doctrine.pdf.

[3] Sudhanshu Tripathi, "Analyzing Present Cultural Relevance between India - West Asia Relations," *Annals of Social Sciences & Management Studies*, no. 1 (May 24, 2018).

progeny of the relations built in civilization time. India and West Asia share a religious and cultural coherence that makes them affectionate towards each other.

Kumaraswamy highlights in "Middle East: On the Agenda or The Next Leader of India?"[4] that after the Arab Spring, India is facing a policy challenge. The next leader, Modi, must implement policy changes to engage with the politics of the West Asian region, promoting stability and securing its interests.

In the book "Emerging Trends in West Asia: Regional and Global Implications," Roy argues that West Asia has undergone specific internal and external changes, including American withdrawal, major power politics, and regional rivalry. Arab states should emerge as pivotal entities, recognizing each other's importance and forming a regional bloc. India also holds a pivotal role in relations with the Arab countries, based on historical, geostrategic, geopolitical, and economic factors. Efficiently explaining India's approach, the book lacks a clear theoretical framework for relating to the matter.

While considerable scholarship has examined Pakistan's traditional relations with Gulf countries—focusing on labor migration, religious affinity, and defense cooperation—there is a noticeable gap in the literature concerning the evolving nature of Gulf-India relations in the context of emerging technologies, strategic connectivity, and minilateral frameworks such as I2U2 (India-Israel-UAE-US). Existing studies often treat Gulf engagement with South Asia through a binary lens of religious or geopolitical alignment, overlooking how technological collaboration, digital public infrastructure, and transregional logistics corridors are redefining power projection and influence in the region. Moreover, India's integration into digital and innovation ecosystems within the Gulf—such as AI research partnerships, fintech hubs, and clean energy cooperation—has not been sufficiently analyzed from a comparative South Asian perspective. What are factors impacting India's relations with Gulf States and what are the implications for Pakistan's geopolitical and economic relevance in the Gulf?

The research adopts a qualitative method and utilizes secondary data in the form of official documents, statements, research papers, news, reports, and other open-source material to address the primary research question and fill the identified research gap.

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[4] P. R. Kumaraswamy, "Middle East: On the Agenda for the Next Leader of India?" German Marshall Fund of the United States (2014), issue 27.

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The paper is divided into three sections; the initial part includes a brief literature review, the theoretical framework used to analyze the research question, and the approach employed by Narendra Modi to enhance bilateral relations. The middle section covers how the relationship commenced, its progress, and the variables that became crucial in strengthening ties between both parties. The final section discusses the implications for Pakistan, concluding the discussion.

Theoretical framework

The appropriate framework for analyzing India's Act West Policy is provided by Neo-classical Realism, which has three levels of analysis. In traditional Realist schools, the primary objective is to serve the state's national interests in a world driven by chaos and lacking a central authority.[5] Neo-classical Realism is among these schools and, from an ontological perspective, is the theory predicated on an objective comprehension of the state as the sole rational actor in the international landscape.[6] While it acknowledges that the international system is anarchic, it argues that states do not always respond to external threats or opportunities uniformly. Instead, internal dynamics filter or mediate how states interpret and respond to those systemic pressures, leading to variation in foreign policy behavior.

It considers only the state-centric discussion or the structure to be systematically critical. Its epistemological stance, however, is dependent on empirical explanation. While leaders are subjective and interpret the international situation from their own perspectives, objectivity is never compromised by their subjective nature. The prioritization of national interest remains fundamental. Everything is evaluated in terms of its relative value and materiality.

India's 'Act West' policy which complements its well-known 'Act East' policy represents New Delhi's strategic pivot toward engaging more proactively with West Asia, particularly the Gulf countries. This engagement is shaped by both systemic (structural) factors and domestic variables, aligning with the framework of neo-classical realism; it explains that the foreign policy of nations is contingent upon systematic factors. However, internal factors within the state also influence it.

The state leader serves as an intervening variable between systematic and domestic factors because they are the ultimate decision-makers. This is why one state behaves differently when the

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[5] James Ladyman, "What is structural realism?" *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science 29*, no. 3 (1998): 409-424.

[6] Gustasay Meibauer, "Neorealism, neoclassical realism and the problem(s) of history," *International Relations 37*, no.2 (2021): 348-369, doi: https://doi.org/10.1177/00471178211033943 (Original work published 2023)

leader changes over time. Neo-classical realism explains the domestic and system-level factors that drive Indian foreign policy towards Gulf countries. India's influence is expanding beyond its region to become more actively engaged in the international arena while simultaneously trying to contain Pakistan and China under the Modi regime.

Background of Look West Policy

Manmohan Singh initiated the Look West policy to engage with West Asia, especially the Gulf countries. In 2005, Indian National Security Adviser M.K. Narayanan stated, "the key focus in our external relations today is ensuring the stability and security of the region, comprising the arc of nations from the Gulf to East Asia."[7]

Similarly, Manmohan Singh said, "We must come closer to our western neighbours in the Gulf."[8] In 2006, Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud visited India to strengthen bilateral ties.[9] In return, PM Singh visited Saudi Arabia in 2010 and signed the Riyadh Declaration. Both countries showed concerns about countering surging terrorism and extremism. They also agreed to counter issues of money laundering, arms trafficking, and human trafficking, to share information related to piracy and narcotics, and to coordinate on economic cooperation.

Under the influence of the 'Look West' policy, PM Manmohan Singh also visited Oman and Qatar and signed Memorandum of Understanding (MoUs). India signed an MoU in defence, security, energy, and social development with Qatar.[10] India also configured its relations with regional countries against terrorists and piracy in the Indian Ocean region (IOR).

In the 2008 visit to Oman, PM Singh signed a 100-million-dollar agreement to strengthen tourism, health, telecommunication, and urban infrastructure.[11] In 2009, the Vice President of Kuwait, Hamid Ansari, visited India to sign agreements on the Educational Exchange Programme, the Cultural Exchange Programme, and the Agreement on Cooperation in Science and

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[7] Kadira Pethiyagoda, "India-GCC Relations: Delhi's Strategic Opportunity," *Brookings Doha Center*, February 22, 2017, accessed January 25, 2025, https://www.brookings.edu/research/india-gcc-relations-delhis-strategic-opportunity/.

[8] Prasanta Kumar Pradhan, "Accelerating India's 'Look West Policy' in the Gulf," *Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses* 8 (2011).

[9] Harsh V. Pant, "India and the Middle East: A Fine Balance," in *India Foreign Policy* (Manchester University Press, 2016): 161-178

[10] Ibid.

[11] Pradhan, "Look West Policy."

Technology.[12] India realized the importance of bilateral relations with GCC during the Arab Spring when West Asian countries criticized its 'Hands-off Policy.'[13]

Structural Factors

Within the neoclassical realist framework, foreign policy behavior is shaped by both international structural constraints and domestic-level intervening variables. However, in case of India's growing engagement with the Gulf countries, several key structural factors such as international distribution of power, regional re-alignments, and shifting geopolitical alliances have been decisive in pushing New Delhi toward a more active, multidimensional relationship with the Gulf monarchies. These structural pressures operate independently of India's domestic politics or economic conditions and reflect changes in the broader international environment that have enabled and incentivized India to recalibrate its policy toward the Gulf region.

The first and most salient structural factor is the gradual decline of unipolarity and the erosion of US hegemony in the Middle East.[14] For decades, the United States played the role of the principal security provider in the Gulf, shaping the strategic choices of regional powers and limiting the room for maneuver for other external actors.[15] However, over the past decade, the US has shown signs of strategic fatigue and retrenchment from the Middle East, focusing its attention on the Indo-Pacific and great power competition with China.[16]

This shift has created a structural vacuum an absence of a dominant stabilizing power in the Gulf, which has allowed secondary powers like India, China, and Russia to expand their influence.[17] India has responded by deepening diplomatic engagement, increasing military-to-military exchanges, and expanding strategic dialogues with Gulf states, capitalizing on the greater autonomy afforded to regional actors in a less tightly managed international order.

For instance, India is enhancing its military ties with the Gulf Countries. India and Saudi Arabia signed defence agreement in 2014 when Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman visited

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[12] Ibid.

[13] Ranjit Gupta, "India's Relations with West Asia: A New Era Dawns," *Middle East institute*, March 07, 2017, https://www.mei.edu/publications/indias-relations-west-asia-new-era-dawns.

[14] Ellias Aghili Dehnavi and Mobin Karbasi, "The Reasons for the Decline of American Hegemony and Its Impact on China's Regional Policies in the Middle East," Ravista 2, no. 1 (2020): 1–12, https://doi.org/10.36097/rsan.v1i37.1274.

[15] Huangtuo Chen and Hongsong Liu, "India's Gulf Policy in the Context of China-U.S. Strategic Competition," *Asian Review of Political Economy* 4, no. 1 (2025): 6, https://doi.org/10.1007/s44216-025-00048-6.

[16] Ibid.,13.

[17] Md. Muddassir Quamar, "India and the Gulf: Regional Security and India's Multialignment Policy," *Asian Politics & Policy* 15, no. 2 (2023): 274–94, https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12682.

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India, paving the way for military and security cooperation. In addition, both formed a Joint Committee on Defence Cooperation. In 2017, the first group of Saudi Cadets joined India's defence training institutes from the Royal Saudi Armed Forces.[18] Both countries also signed agreements for the production of defence spare parts.

Similarly, India and the UAE signed a defence agreement in 2017 and officials from both the countries participated in defence exhibitions in the UAE and India, respectively. The two sides agreed in 2018 to sign a defence agreement, which would enable them to cooperate in conducting joint exercises and manufacturing defence-related parts. In 2018, the navies of both countries conducted the first naval exercise, "Gulf Star-1."[19] The Air Forces of both countries had already conducted a second Joint exercise, "Desert Eagle-2," in Abu Dhabi.[20]

On the other hand, Oman and India have a mutual maritime security interest. Both countries have agreed that Oman will give India access to its 'Duqm Port,' allowing it to use its facilities to maintain India's vessels. The port will enable India to patrol the region and watch 'Chinese Vessels.'[21]

India does not have direct military ties with Bahrain unlike other GCC countries. In April, Indian Minister of External Affairs, S Jaishankar, met his Bahraini counterpart to discuss security issues. Both sides agreed to cooperate in maritime security, cyber-security, and counter-terrorism.[22] In 2008, India and Qatar signed a defence pact to cooperate in the maritime domain.[23] The agreement allowed cooperation in countering terrorism and procuring the supply lines. India maintains its warships in the region to ensure the safe passage of trade vessels. In recent years, the India-GCC relationship has expanded beyond energy and trade to encompass political and security dimensions including strategic partnerships with Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Qatar.

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[18] Dr. Muhammad Mudassir Quamar, "Growing Indo-Gulf Defence and Future Prospects," *Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses,* October, 2019, accessed March 24, 2025, https://idsa.in/system/files/news/growing-indo-gulf-defence-cooperation.pdf.
[19] Ibid.
[20] "Exercise Desert Eagle-2 Concludes," India Strategic, June, 2016, accessed March 24, 2025, https://www.indiastrategic.in/Exercise_Desert_Eagle-II_Concludes.htm.
[21] Quamar, "Indo-Gulf Defence."
[22] "India, Bahrain agree to bolster defence and security cooperation," Hindustan Times, April 07, 2021, accessed March 24, 2025, https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-bahrain-agree-to-bolster-defence-and-security-cooperation-101617818189266.html.
[23] Mo Hineidi, "Qatar and India continue to strengthen Military ties," *Future Directions International*, October 2, 2013, accessed March 24, 2025, https://www.futuredirections.org.au/publication/qatar-and-india-continue-to-strengthen-military-ties/.

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A second major structural driver is the rise of China and its assertive push into the Gulf region, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).[24] Over the past decade, China has significantly expanded its economic, technological, and even security presence in the Gulf.[25] It has signed comprehensive strategic partnerships with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, constructed critical infrastructure such as ports and industrial zones, and emerged as one of the largest buyers of Gulf oil. Beijing's digital and security diplomacy, particularly its promotion of 5G technologies and surveillance systems, has also gained traction in the region.[26]

For India, this presents a systemic challenge. China's entrenchment in the Gulf threatens to marginalize India's strategic space and potentially constrain its access to energy, markets, and maritime routes.[27] Thus, India's outreach to the Gulf can be interpreted as a balancing strategy against China's rising influence, an attempt to offer Gulf states a credible and autonomous partner that is not part of the Sino-American competition but nonetheless capable of strategic depth.[28] In short, China's Gulf policy has created external pressure on India to reinforce its own strategic relevance in the region.

India and China's Major Projects in Gulf Countries

Country	Indian-led Project	Value & Scope (India)	Chinese-led Project	Value & Scope (China)
UAE	Etihad Rail – L&T and Power China JV for freight terminal construction	Part of 605 km rail network; L&T engaged in freight infrastructure	Habshan–Fujairah Oil Pipeline – built by China Petroleum Engineering	360 km, $3.3 billion oil pipeline bypassing Strait of Hormuz

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[24] "China's Belt and Road Initiative: Views from the Ground," *Political Geography* 82 (2020): 102225, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2020.102225.

[25] Roa Al Shidhani and Saranjam Baig, "Balancing Power and Prosperity: China's Geo-Economic Engagement with the Gulf Cooperation Council," *Asian Review of Political Economy* 3, no. 1 (2024): 20, https://doi.org/10.1007/s44216-024-00040-6.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Mohamed Bin Huwaidin, "China and India's Soft Rivalry in the Gulf Region," *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 18, no. 1 (2022): 6–20, https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2022.2054505.

[28] Ibid.

UAE	IMEC	Logistics, energy, and port connectivity from India to Europe via Gulf	Al Sweihan Solar Plant – modules supplied by Jinko	Part of large-scale UAE solar initiative with Chinese tech inputs
Saudi Arabia	IMEC – integration of Saudi ports under corridor project	Enhances Saudi-Asia trade integration via multimodal logistics	King Salman Maritime Complex – by China Power Construction Group	$4.3 billion total cost; one of world's largest shipyards
Saudi Arabia	—	—	ACWA Power–Silk Road Fund JV (renewables)	>$10 billion Chinese investment in Saudi wind/solar energy
Across GCC	IMEC – multi-country corridor (UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman)	Boosts strategic and trade connectivity across Asia-Gulf-Europe	Red Sea utility infrastructure; Neom green hydrogen project	$1.3 billion Red Sea utility system; $8.4 billion H2 JV
Across GCC	—	—	Various utility-scale solar, desalination, and digital projects	Strategic tech infrastructure across multiple Gulf states

Another key structural factor is the emergence of a multipolar regional order in the Gulf. The Middle East is no longer dominated by binary Cold War-style alignments.[29] Instead, a growing number of middle and rising powers, Turkey, Iran, Israel, India, China, and Russia, are simultaneously seeking influence, with Gulf States recalibrating their foreign policies accordingly.[30] This fluid environment provides structural space for India to engage more flexibly. Gulf states are no longer tied to one camp and are actively pursuing strategic diversification to maximize their autonomy.[31]India benefits from this trend, as its policy of strategic autonomy and issue-based alignment fits neatly into the emerging logic of Gulf foreign policies. The structural decentralization of influence in the Gulf allows India to operate as an independent actor.[32]

The geopolitical centrality of the Gulf in global energy markets and maritime trade is another systemic factor that structurally binds India to the region.[33] The Gulf remains the global epicenter of oil and gas production and export, and over 60% of India's hydrocarbon needs are met by Gulf suppliers.[34] Even as India diversifies its energy mix and invests in renewables, the structural dependence on Gulf oil, due to logistical proximity, existing infrastructure, and long-term contracts, continues to anchor the relationship.[35]

More importantly, the Gulf's strategic geography, sitting at the intersection of the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf, and the Red Sea, makes it central to India's maritime security and trade calculus.[36] With a growing volume of Indian trade transiting through the Gulf's critical chokepoints, including the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb, India has structural incentives

[29] Alexandre Kateb, "The GCC's Multipolar Pivot: From Shifting Trade Patterns to New Financial and Diplomatic Alliances," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/05/the-gccs-multipolar-pivot-from-shifting-trade-patterns-to-new-financial-and-diplomatic-alliances?lang=en.
[30] Ali Bakir and Nayef Al-Shamari, "The Art of Hedging: Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE Manoeuvres amid US–China Great Power Competition," *Third World Quarterly* 46, no. 7 (2025): 773–94, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2025.2509574.
[31] Ahmed A. Shahbaz and Allan Hassaniyan, "The Growing Autonomy for GCC States' Foreign Policy and Structural Changes in the Balance of Power in the Region," *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 18, no. 4 (2024): 321–39, https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2025.2480007.
[32] esennett, "India-Gulf Relations Are Muted—but Mobilizing," *Atlantic Council*, June 3, 2025, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/india-gulf-relations-are-muted-but-mobilizing/.
[33] Abdalftah Hamed Ali and Monged Abdalla, "Energy Transitions Era: Geopolitical Characteristics and Connotations in the Arab Gulf States," *Sustainable Futures* 10 (December 2025): 100808, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sftr.2025.100808.
[34] Lakshmi Priya, "Rebooting India-GCC Energy Partnerships: Hydrogen as a Fuel for the Future," *Strategic Analysis* 47, no. 3 (2023): 235–52, https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2023.2247768.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Abel Meza et al., "Disruption of Maritime Trade Chokepoints and the Global LNG Trade: An Agent-Based Modeling Approach," *Maritime Transport Research* 3 (2022): 100071, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.martra.2022.100071.

to ensure political stability, freedom of navigation, and security cooperation in the region.[37] This maritime interdependence is not a domestic choice but a reflection of global economic geography and trade logistics, making the Gulf indispensable to India's long-term geostrategic planning.

Saudi Aramco, the state-run oil company, and the Ministry of Oil in India have agreed to build an oil refinery in Bina, Madhya Pradesh, to refine 300,000 barrels per day.[38] India's crude oil imports reached an all-time high of approximately 4.67 million barrels per day in 2023, reflecting the nation's growing energy demands.

Table 1 India's crude oil imports from West Asian countries

Country	Oil Import b/d
Kuwait	213,000
Oman	9,000
Qatar	43,000
Saudi Arabia	650,000
UAE	490,000
Iran	4674,455
Iraq	950,000

Source: Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas: Economics and Statistics Division [39]

The Abraham Accords and the changing intra-regional balance within the Gulf constitute another important structural development.[40] The normalization of relations between Israel and several Gulf states, most notably the UAE and Bahrain, has created new alignments that are externally driven and have strategic implications for India.[41]

The Accords have effectively ended the previous binary in which Gulf states avoided overt cooperation with Israel.[42] This opens new avenues for trilateral and minilateral engagements

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[37] Ibid.

[38] Quamar, "Indo-Gulf Defence."

[39] "Indian Petroleum and Natural Gas Statistics 2015-16," Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas: Economics and Statistics Division (Government of India, 2016).

[40] Loubna Madani, "Reassessing Peace: The Implications of the Abraham Accords for Conflict Resolution in the Gulf Region," *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 18, no. 3 (2024): 260–81, https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2024.2416845.

[41] Ibid.

[42] "The Abraham Accords: Israel–Gulf Arab Normalisation," *Strategic Comments* 26, no. 8 (2020): iv–v, https://doi.org/10.1080/13567888.2020.1853892.

involving India, such as the I2U2 initiative.[43] These emerging structures are not of India's making but are international alignments to which India must adapt to remain relevant.[44] Thus, India's closer relations with Israel and its simultaneous outreach to the UAE and Saudi Arabia are structurally facilitated by this broader realignment in the Middle East.

Moreover, technological multipolarity, the dispersal of innovation and digital infrastructure across multiple global hubs has become a structural driver of India-Gulf convergence.[45] Gulf states especially the UAE and Saudi Arabia, are investing heavily in digital infrastructure, AI, fintech, and green technologies.[46] India, as a rising technological power with a massive IT sector and successful space program, fits well into the Gulf's vision of economic diversification under frameworks such as Saudi Vision 2030 or the UAE Centennial Plan 2071.[47]

These structural trends toward post-oil economies offer India opportunities not because of internal drivers alone, but because the Gulf states themselves are structurally repositioning their economies to reduce dependence on hydrocarbons and traditional Western partnerships.[48]

Moreover, maritime and regional security dynamics present structural challenges and opportunities that have drawn India closer to the Gulf.[49] From piracy in the Arabian Sea to the threat of naval confrontations near the Strait of Hormuz and the potential spillover of conflict from Yemen, the broader regional security environment creates shared vulnerabilities.[50]

These are not rooted in India's domestic considerations, but in the structural reality of being geographically proximate to a volatile region. As a result, India has increased naval deployments in the Western Indian Ocean, signed agreements for port access (e.g., Duqm in Oman), and

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[43] "Abraham Accords Boost India's Prospects in the Middle East," accessed March 24, 2025, https://www.wilsonquarterly.com/quarterly/_/abraham-accords-boost-indias-prospects-in-the-middle-east.
[44] Ibid.,12.
[45] Sujata Ashwarya, "India's National Role Conception and Relations with GCC Countries under Modi: A Focus on Saudi Arabia," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 58, no. 4 (2023): 535–55, https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096231162104.
[46] "Towards a Tech Exporting Gulf: How the AI Revolution Is Reshaping Defence and Politics in the GCC States | ISPI," accessed July 22, 2025, https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/towards-a-tech-exporting-gulf-how-the-ai-revolution-is-reshaping-defence-and-politics-in-the-gcc-states-205613.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Narayanappa Janardhan, "Non-Ideological, Strategic Convergence of the Gulf States' 'Look East' and India's 'Think West' Policies," *Journal of Arabian Studies* 12, no. 2 (2022): 160–84, https://doi.org/10.1080/21534764.2022.2313772.
[49] Shishir Upadhyaya, "India's Defence Cooperation with the GCC: Role for the Indian Navy," *Strategic Analysis* 48, no. 2 (2024): 109–21, https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2024.2357519.
[50] Ibid.

engaged in joint military exercises with Gulf states.[51] These moves are shaped by systemic threats to the global commons and regional order, not simply by India's internal political preferences.[52]

From a neoclassical realist standpoint, the improvement in India-Gulf relations is significantly driven by structural changes in the international system. The decline of US hegemony, China's rise, the multipolarization of the Middle East, shifts in global energy and trade patterns, and emerging technological and maritime dynamics—all constitute external pressures and opportunities that have compelled India to adopt a more strategic and sustained engagement with the Gulf. While domestic variables shape the pace and tone of this policy, the structural imperatives of the post-unipolar world order remain the primary engine of transformation in India-Gulf relations.

Domestic Factors Affecting India-Gulf Relations

According to the neoclassical realist theory of international relations, a state's foreign policy is shaped not only by the constraints and opportunities of the international system (structural factors) but also by internal, domestic-level variables.[53] These domestic factors—such as political leadership, elite perceptions, economic interests, national identity, bureaucratic capabilities, and the role of societal actors, serve as intervening variables that filter and mediate the state's response to systemic pressures.[54]

In the context of India's deepening engagement with the GCC states, these domestic factors have played a central role in converting international opportunities into actual policy shifts. While structural changes, such as US retrenchment, China's rise, and the multipolarization of the Gulf, created the external space for India to act, it is the domestic landscape that has provided the motivation, coherence, and institutional capacity to pursue closer ties with Gulf states like the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Qatar.

One of the most significant domestic factors has been the ideational and strategic orientation of India's political leadership, particularly under Modi.[55] Since assuming office in

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[51] "Oman-India Relations: Exploring the Long-Term Migration Dynamics," in *ResearchGate*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-6821-5_7.

[52] Ibid.,13.

[53] Jeffrey W. Taliaferro et al., eds., *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[54] Ibid.,24.

[55] "India as a Leading Power | Carnegie Endowment for International Peace," accessed March 22, 2025, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2016/04/india-as-a-leading-power?lang=en.

2014, Modi has embraced an activist and outward-looking foreign policy that frames India as a "leading power" rather than just a reactive or balancing actor. Modi's personal diplomacy and emphasis on strategic autonomy have led to a prioritization of the Gulf within India's extended neighborhood policy.[56]

His visits to the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Qatar often with high-profile economic and cultural agendas have marked a clear break from previous governments' more passive Gulf engagement. Modi was the first Indian prime minister to visit the UAE in over three decades and the first to receive Saudi Arabia's highest civilian honor. These symbolic gestures, backed by sustained institutional engagement, reflect how leadership-level vision has acted as a domestic catalyst for transforming India-Gulf ties from energy dependence to strategic partnership.

A second key domestic variable is the size and importance of the Indian diaspora in the Gulf, which exceeds nine million people, making it one of the largest overseas Indian populations globally. These expatriates not only serve as a bridge between India and the Gulf states but also generate substantial remittances. GCC has a significant Indian Diaspora, which benefits India in terms of remittances. The Gulf countries host 9 million Indian diasporas, which sent around $45.1 billion in remittances back to India in 2024, compared to $38 billion in 2018.[57] The Gulf countries host a significant portion of the Indian diaspora, but these workers have faced numerous problems in times of crisis. Like during the first Gulf War, India conducted the largest-ever evacuation operation, "Vande Bharat," to get the Indian diaspora out of conflict-surrounded Kuwait.[58] Around 1.5 lac Indians were evacuated in the operations. To improve the living conditions of its diaspora, India has signed MoUs with Gulf countries.

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[56] Ibid.

[57] Tridivesh Singh, "India's Gulf Remittances in the age of Covid-19," *Future Directions International*, August 05, 2020, accessed August 27, 2021, https://www.futuredirections.org.au/publication/indias-gulf-remittances-in-the-age-of-covid-19/.

[59] "Which Gulf countries allow travel from India now," *The Week*, May 25, 2021, accessed August 27, 2021, https://www.theweek.in/news/world/2021/05/25/explainer-which-gulf-countries-allow-travel-from-india-now.html.

Table 2 Indian Diaspora in the Gulf Countries[59]

Country	Indian Diaspora
UAE	3.86 million
Saudi Arabia	2.46 million
Qatar	745,000
Oman	779,000
Kuwait	1 million
Bahrain	323,000

The welfare of this diaspora has thus become a priority for Indian domestic politics, especially in states like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh, where many families rely on Gulf remittances.[60] This has translated into increased diplomatic sensitivity and responsiveness. The Modi government has institutionalized the protection of Indian workers through labor agreements, grievance redressal mechanisms, and direct outreach during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic or regional conflicts. In this context, India's foreign policy toward the Gulf is shaped not merely by external calculations, but by a domestic need to protect the economic and social well-being of its citizens abroad.

Another important domestic factor is India's economic policy orientation, particularly its emphasis on foreign investment, export growth, and energy security. The Gulf region plays a critical role in all the three. The UAE and Saudi Arabia have emerged as key sources of foreign direct investment (FDI) in sectors ranging from infrastructure to digital technology and renewable energy. Sovereign wealth funds from these countries are investing in India's roads, ports, logistics hubs, and clean energy projects. These investments align with domestic economic priorities like "Make in India" and "Digital India," providing both capital and expertise.

In addition, the Gulf has become an important market for Indian goods and services, particularly in pharmaceuticals, engineering, and food products. The UAE's inclusion of India in its free trade agreements and the signing of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement

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[59] "Which Gulf countries allow travel from India now," *The Week*, May 25, 2021, accessed August 27, 2021, https://www.theweek.in/news/world/2021/05/25/explainer-which-gulf-countries-allow-travel-from-india-now.html.
[60] "Diplomacy as Diaspora Management: The Case of India and the Gulf States | Ifri," accessed July 22, 2024, https://www.ifri.org/en/papers/diplomacy-diaspora-management-case-india-and-gulf-states.

(CEPA) in 2022-mark significant milestones.[61] These economic engagements are not dictated by international structure alone; they reflect India's internal drive to modernize its economy, reduce current account deficits, and generate employment through external economic integration.[62]

Gulf Country / Investor	Investment Type / Sector	Amount / Scope	Source & Year
United Arab Emirates (ADIA)	Sovereign wealth fund in GIFT City	USD 4–5 billion (GIFT City), USD 3 billion (FY 2023–24)	Reuters, Morung Express (2024)
UAE – State-level (Uttar Pradesh)	Industrial corridor & aquaculture (Aquabridge Holdings)	USD 461 million in Unnao	Times of India (2024)
Kuwait Investment Authority (KIA)	Sovereign wealth fund investments	Over USD 10 billion since 2008	Morung Express (2024)
Saudi Arabia – PIF	Equity investments in Jio & Reliance Retail	USD 2.8 billion (USD 1.5B in Jio, 1.3B in Reliance)	Reuters (2025)
Saudi Arabia – PIF	Planned long-term strategic investment	Targeting up to USD 100 billion	Reuters (2025)

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[61] "Trade Potential of India UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA)," ResearchGate, March 26, 2025, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/390316236_Trade_Potential_of_India_UAE_Comprehensive_Economic_ Partnership_Agreement_CEPA.

[62] Ibid.

Qatar	Energy sector investment	USD 5 billion (2008 agreement)	Wikipedia (India–Qatar relations)
Other Gulf – NRIs	Real estate investment in India	Rising investment flows (value unspecified)	Times of India (2025)
Remittances – UAE	Worker remittances to India	USD 13.8 billion (2022)	Wikipedia (Remittances to India)
Remittances – Saudi Arabia	Worker remittances to India	USD 11.2 billion (2022)	Wikipedia (Remittances to India)

Closely related to this is the growing role of Indian states in shaping foreign policy outcomes, particularly in the economic domain. Indian federalism has undergone a transformation in recent years, with subnational governments playing an active role in economic diplomacy.[63] States such as Gujrat, Maharashtra, and Andhra Pradesh have engaged Gulf investors directly, offering incentives, setting up investment summits, and facilitating infrastructure projects.[64]

This decentralization of foreign economic engagement reflects a domestic political evolution in which state-level actors are now stakeholders in India's Gulf policy.[65] The interplay between central foreign policy institutions and state-level economic agendas have added coherence and depth to India's outreach.[66]

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[63] Tridivesh Singh Maini, "Role of Indian State Governments in Furthering India-UAE Ties?," *The Geopolitics*, June 2, 2023, https://thegeopolitics.com/role-of-indian-state-governments-in-furthering-india-uae-ties/.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Editor, "Paradiplomacy and India: The Growing Role of States in Foreign Policy - South Asia@LSE," *South Asia@LSE* -, January 12, 2017, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2017/01/12/paradiplomacy-and-india-the-growing-role-of-states-in-foreign-policy/.
[66] Ibid.

The bureaucratic and institutional capacity of the Indian state has also improved significantly in recent years, particularly in the realm of foreign policy and diaspora management.[67] The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Indian embassies in Gulf capitals, and specialized agencies like the India Development Foundation of Overseas Indians (IDF-OI) have become more responsive, professionalized, and technologically enabled.[68] This enhanced institutional capability allows India to sustain long-term diplomatic engagements, monitor regional developments, and respond effectively to emerging challenges.[69] Unlike in previous decades when capacity constraints limited India's foreign policy ambitions, today's institutional architecture facilitates more proactive and coherent engagement with Gulf partners.

India's domestic identity discourse has also played a subtle but important role in shaping the optics and narratives around its Gulf outreach.[70] While India officially maintains a secular foreign policy, the Modi government's emphasis on civilizational diplomacy and cultural soft power has found resonance in the Gulf.[71] The projection of India as a tolerant, pluralistic civilization with deep Islamic heritage has helped reassure Gulf monarchies, particularly when bilateral ties are tested by domestic controversies or communal tensions.[72] The celebration of shared cultural heritage, the promotion of Urdu, Arabic, and Islamic scholarship in India, and the careful cultivation of religious diplomacy have all helped maintain a positive domestic image of India-Gulf engagement, even among domestic constituencies that are otherwise skeptical of India's Muslim world outreach.[73]

Moreover, the growing strategic community and foreign policy establishment within India has created a more informed and consistent policy environment.[74] Think tanks, academic institutions, former diplomats, and retired military officials have contributed to a nuanced understanding of the Gulf's strategic importance, allowing policymakers to make decisions that

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[67] Surupa Gupta et al., "Indian Foreign Policy under Modi: A New Brand or Just Repackaging?," *International Studies Perspectives* 20, no. 1 (2019): 1–45, https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/eky008.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Abbas Ahmad Rather, "Considering How India's Middle East Policy Has Changed and Remained Consistent Since 2019 Under Modi Government," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 60, no. 4 (2025): 2515–26, https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096231218446.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Ibid.

[73] Ian Hall, "The Hindu Right and India's Religious Diplomacy," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 22, no. 3 (2024): 1–10, https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2024.2375839.

[74] "Whither India-Gulf Strategic Ties?," Middle East Institute, accessed March 26, 2025, https://www.mei.edu/publications/whither-india-gulf-strategic-ties.

are domestically rooted but globally informed.[75] This expanding intellectual infrastructure ensures that India's Gulf policy is not driven solely by short-term political calculations but is anchored in a long-term strategic culture that values partnerships beyond the traditional Western-centric axis.

Lastly, India's electoral politics particularly the BJP's desire to demonstrate global leadership and economic strength to its domestic voter base has also reinforced the Gulf outreach. Diplomatic victories, investment pledges, and high-profile state visits are often showcased domestically as symbols of India's rising status and international respect. These optics are important in a political culture where foreign policy is increasingly a subject of public debate and national pride. Thus, domestic political incentives converge with strategic imperatives to sustain India's active engagement with the Gulf.

Implications for Pakistan

India's deepening engagement with the Gulf countries does not inherently come at the expense of Pakistan, as each state holds its own strategic, economic, and cultural value. In today's multipolar and interest-driven international system, relationships are increasingly non-exclusive and transactional. Gulf states, particularly the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, are recalibrating their foreign policies not on the basis of ideological alignment or religious solidarity, but on national interest, economic diversification goals, and global connectivity. India's growing role in the Gulf—through trade partnerships, defense dialogue, technological collaboration, and infrastructure investment—is a reflection of its rising economic weight and diplomatic assertiveness, rather than a deliberate attempt to displace Pakistan. However, this shift does raise concerns in Islamabad, especially given the perception that Gulf capitals are growing more silent on issues like Kashmir, or more open in celebrating ties with New Delhi.

Still, it would be reductive to interpret Gulf-India engagement as a zero-sum game against Pakistan. Pakistan remains a vital partner for Gulf countries in several domains. With over 9 million Pakistani workers residing in the Gulf, Pakistan plays a critical role in sustaining Gulf labor markets, especially in construction, logistics, and services. Remittances from the Gulf— especially from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, constitute a significant portion of Pakistan's foreign exchange earnings, contributing to macroeconomic stability. Moreover, Pakistan has deep-rooted defense cooperation with several Gulf monarchies. It has historically provided military training,

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[75] Ibid.

advisory personnel, and at times security support to countries like Saudi Arabia, reflecting a trusted strategic relationship. These dimensions are not easily replaceable, even as India expands its footprint. Culturally and religiously, Pakistan also shares a deeper affinity with Gulf societies, often playing a bridge role in intra-Muslim dialogues or regional Islamic forums.

The regional landscape is evolving and Gulf countries are now guided more by pragmatism than loyalty. Their focus has shifted toward securing energy transition partnerships, technological modernization, and diversified global trade routes. India's ability to deliver on these fronts— through initiatives like the IMEC, cooperation in digital public infrastructure, and large-scale investment partnerships—positions it as a desirable partner. This inevitably creates a more competitive diplomatic environment for Pakistan, which must now work harder to project stability, openness to trade, and regional relevance.

The fact that India is being invited to minilateral frameworks such as I2U2 signals that its diplomatic architecture is evolving toward strategic convergence with key Gulf and Western players. For Pakistan, this means recalibrating its own foreign policy by focusing on economic diplomacy, regional trade integration, and positive engagement with Gulf modernization agendas such as Saudi Vision 2030 and the UAE Centennial Plan 2071.

Nonetheless, Pakistan's relevance has not diminished—it has evolved. Gulf capitals continue to recognize Pakistan's role as a regional stabilizer, a trusted security partner, and a crucial link to both South and Central Asia. What is required is not defensive posturing, but a proactive strategy from Pakistan to engage Gulf countries on new terms—beyond remittances and religious fraternity—toward economic co-creation, climate cooperation, skilled labor exports, and food and energy security partnerships. Gulf monarchies, too, understand that stability in South Asia requires constructive ties with both India and Pakistan, especially as regional flashpoints such as Afghanistan and Iran remain volatile. In this context, India's improved ties with the Gulf should not be viewed as a strategic threat, but as part of a broader regional rebalancing. If Pakistan adapts strategically, it can remain a central pillar in the Gulf's long-term calculations.

In essence, India's rising profile in the Gulf reflects changing regional priorities, not a rejection of Pakistan. Each country brings distinct value to the table, and Gulf states are increasingly capable of managing multi-aligned foreign policies without choosing one over the other. The challenge for Pakistan is to respond not with insecurity, but with strategic innovation—

enhancing its value proposition to the Gulf through credibility, reform, and long-term economic vision.

Conclusion

India's foreign policy with the GCC countries has improved significantly under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The bilateral relations since 2014 have shown a strategic shift due to growing Indian energy imports from the GCC states, the increasing influence of its diaspora, and Modi's closeness with the GCC countries' leadership. India's advantages in defence ties, commercial accords, and diplomatic visibility are essential, but a closer look reveals that new problems are emerging. The recent Qatar spy case and India's delicate balancing act between Israel and Arab countries show some internal conflicts that could make it hard for India to keep its West Asian policy going for a long time. Additionally, regional changes, like Iran's return to regional diplomacy and strengthening links between China and the Gulf, could complicate India's strategic calculations. The realignment is not accidental. It stems from India's continuous efforts in diplomacy and economic strength. The Arab states prefer India these days due to its robust economy, strong security position, and political reliability which are lacking in the case of Pakistan. Pakistan suffers financially because of India's growing presence in its economy, and faces military-related threats from India's growing regional alliances. India's alliances in defence with nearby countries and its port access give it security at sea while posing a challenge to Pakistan's influence in the IOR. Considering the evolving geopolitical scenarios, Pakistan's leadership can gain an advantage vis-à-vis India by modifying its regional stance and policy outlook towards GCC countries. Sticking to old ideological thinking in Pakistan's foreign policy could mean it is left behind in a part of the world focused on practical and strategic choices. The best way forward is to stick to its new foreign policy adopted in 2023. This has yielded positive outcomes for the Pakistani state, and if it continues, it is expected to bring more closeness between the GCC states and Pakistan.