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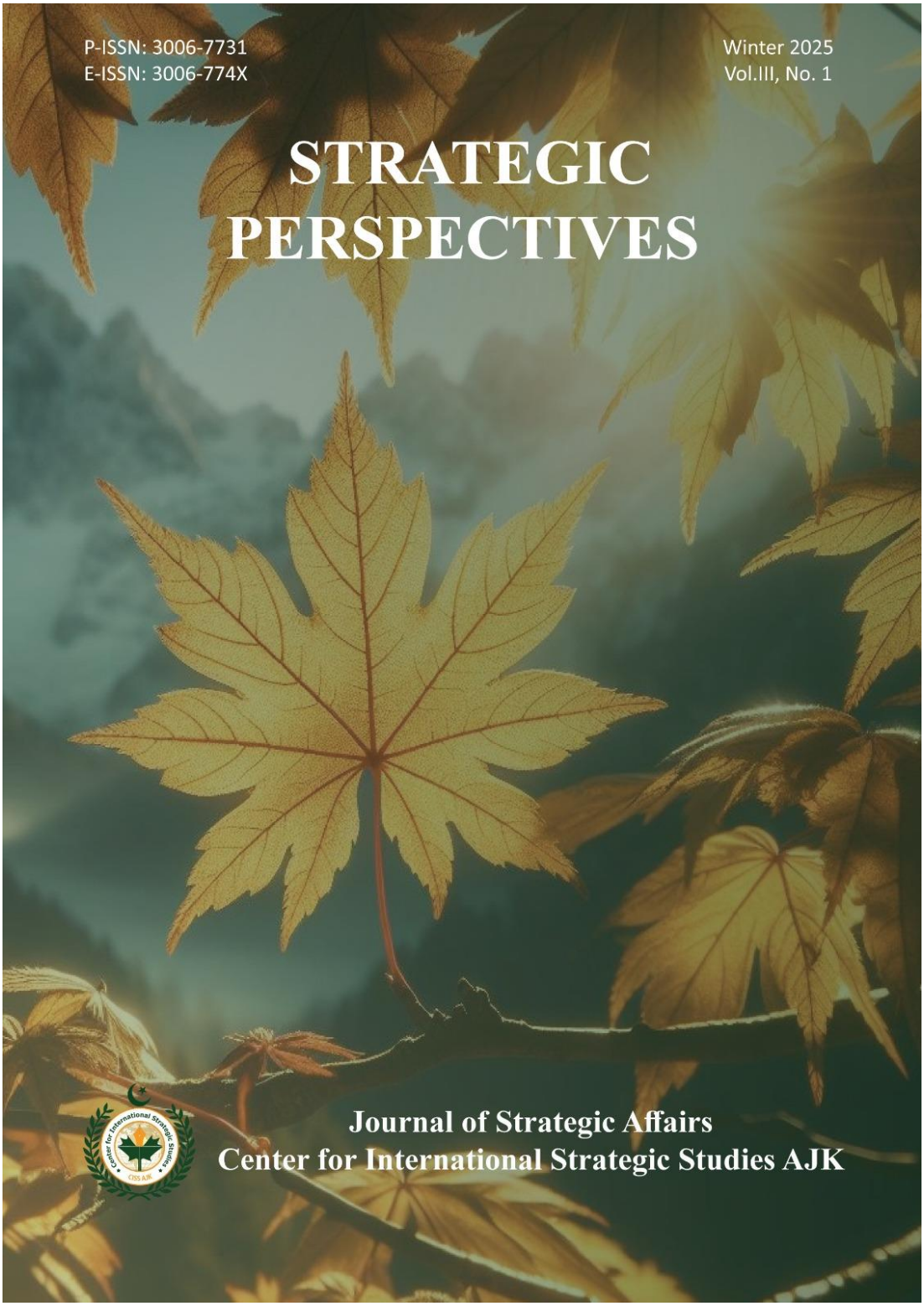

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THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO THE ROOT CAUSES OF TERRORISM:

AN ANALYSIS OF ISIS AND AL-QAEDA IN THE POST-9/11 MIDDLE EAST

Rabbab Abbas Khan and Sarwat Rauf

Theoretical Approaches to the Root Causes of Terrorism: An Analysis of ISIS and Al-Qaeda in the post-9/11 Middle East

Rabbab Abbas Khan and Sarwat Rauf*

Abstract

Coercive non-state actors (NSAs) exploit socio-political-economic disparities to maintain control, gain power, manipulate others, or achieve similar objectives. Their tactics have improved over time with technological advancements. This paper hence reviews theoretical paradigms to understand the fertile ground for violent extremism (VE) and the role of digitalization in transforming the perceived deprivation into organized violence. Ted Robert Gurr theorizes that relative deprivation arises from constant comparisons with others; feeling demoted in any way may lead to violence. Contrasting groups of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda are used as case studies. Findings depict that Al-Qaeda's ideology arises from symbolic deprivation by well-established and educated elites, who portray violence as sacred resistance rooted in the perceived erosion of identity caused by Western cultural dominance. ISIS, conversely, offers direct incentives and hence appeals to economically marginalized Sunni populations through material deprivation. Despite distinct radicalization trajectories, both groups pursue retributive justice through violence for sacred reasons and fulfill their moral duty to accelerate radicalization via social learning, i.e., adopting behaviors by imitating societal actions, and through encrypted propaganda on digital platforms. Since the findings negate the monocausal explanations of terrorism that merely reveal how deprivation is strategically weaponized across distinct contexts, it is argued that a hybrid concept of deprivation, encompassing physical, symbolic, and sectarian aspects, is the main driver of transnational terrorism. It has been intensified by digitalization in efforts to reach the targeted audience and gain support; hence, counterterrorism efforts must combine addressing structural inequalities with strategies to disrupt digital networks of radicalization.

Keywords: Middle East, Counterterrorism, Relative Deprivation Theory, Al-Qaeda, Terrorism, Digital Radicalization, Retributive Justice, ISIS.

* Rabbab Abbas Khan is a PhD Scholar at the National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad and a Visiting Lecturer at International Islamic University, Islamabad. She can be reached at rabab7j@gmail.com.
Dr Sarwat Rauf is an Associate Professor at the National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad. She can be reached at srauf@numl.edu.pk.

Introduction

NSAs have modernized terrorist activities since the end of World War II by integrating technology-driven strategies to execute mass-casualty attacks. To shape public opinion and garner support for recruitment, these groups often seek widespread media visibility to promote their operational tactics. It also spreads fear and legitimizes violent acts as retribution against perceived oppressors. Both ISIS and al-Qaeda exemplify the relative deprivation theory, which argues that structural inequalities and perceived injustice may convert personal grievances into collective violence,[1] especially online. However, in the absence of a universal definition of terrorism, which remains highly contested owing to varying interpretations by states and organizations, each is shaped by historical, ideological, and political factors. It raises a critical question about how to counter it without its clear descriptions.[2]

To analyze the causes of religious extremism of ISIS and al-Qaeda across the Middle East, this paper adopts Schmid's working definition of terrorism, i.e., "a criminal tactic of conflict-waging,"[3] including intentional violent acts against civilians and non-combatants. Regional instability, foreign intervention, and perceived social-economic-political inequalities led to the emergence of these organizations. ISIS[4] has a complex nomenclature, i.e., a complicated naming system, which reflects its evolving identity and history, starting as "Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)."[5] It rebranded after splitting from al-Qaeda during the Syrian civil war as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). 'Al-Sham' refers to "the Levant,"[6] encompassing Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and Palestine; whereas the alternative acronym ISIL (Islamic

[1] Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, 40th anniversary paperback ed. (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), originally published 1970.
[2] Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).
[3] Alex P. Schmid, "Root Causes of Terrorism: Some Conceptual Notes, a Set of Indicators, and a Model," *Democracy and Security* 1, no. 2 (2005): 127–36.
[4] The group is also widely known by its Arabic acronym, Daesh, a term preferred by many governments as a deliberate act of delegitimization. The former French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius stated (as cited in France24), "I do not recommend using the term Islamic State because it blurs the lines between Islam, Muslims and Islamists" (Nasr, 2014). Furthermore, the term Daesh is disliked by the group (Dews, 2015) as it can be interpreted as a pejorative play on words in Arabic, meaning to trample or a bigot (Lister, 2015). Yet, in 2014, after capturing large swathes of territory, the group declared itself a worldwide caliphate and dropped the geographical designation, simply calling itself "The Islamic State (IS)" (Gerges, 2016). The name highlights the influential role of language in shaping perceptions of terrorism and its legitimacy. Either way, this paper employs the acronym ISIS because of its prevailing alignment with academic and media discourse and best distinguishes the group from the general concept of an "Islamic state" and other historical militant organizations.
[5] Fawaz A. Gerges, *ISIS: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).
[6] Fred Dews, "ISIS, ISIL, Islamic State? A Terminology Primer," *Brookings*, September 15, 2015, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/isis-isil-islamic-state-a-terminology-primer/.

State of Iraq and the Levant) is officially used by the US State Department on its list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs).[7]

This research addresses the emergence of ideological extremism in the Middle East, as the selected coercive NSAs have developed high-impact tactics by embracing non-traditional forms of violence through media and the internet as intervening variables. Digital platforms have intensified in terrorism because they can bypass traditional media gatekeepers to directly target vulnerable individuals. Since this makes detection and counteraction harder, it becomes even more essential to understand the root causes of terrorism to formulate effective counterterrorism strategies that can anticipate and respond to these structural and motivational changes.

Applying Ted Robert Gurr's relative deprivation theory, which explains that individuals perceived disparities between expected and actual conditions, whether economic, political, or symbolic, can lead to hopelessness and make them more vulnerable to radicalization and extremist beliefs. The conditions of feeling significantly disadvantaged compared to others can also be worsened by government failures, ultimately attracting them to extremist organizations promising them empowerment, belonging, and the rectification of injustices.[8] While integrating thematic and comparative analysis in understanding modern terrorist techniques, the study answers two critical questions: How do social-political-economic inequalities promote deprivation that motivates ISIS and Al-Qaeda's terrorism, and how do media and the internet transform the perceived deprivation into violence? This addresses a critical gap in understanding how hybrid deprivation (material and symbolic) interacts with digital networks to fuel transnational terrorism.

Methodology

To understand each group's interconnected yet distinct operationalization of relative deprivation, this study employs a qualitative research design in examining the root causes of terrorism through an in-depth case study of ISIS and Al-Qaeda in the Middle East from 2001 to 2017. This temporal scope covers the post-9/11 development of Al-Qaeda, the rise and territorial peak of ISIS, and their subsequent decline. For data collection, this research uses both primary and secondary sources to ensure a comprehensive analysis. Primary data includes original propaganda and official statements from ISIS and Al-Qaeda. Secondary data

[7] United States Department of State, "Foreign Terrorist Organizations," Bureau of Counterterrorism, n.d., https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations/.
[8] Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, 40th anniversary paperback ed. (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), originally published 1970.

comprises academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and reports. Explanations and data from the theoretical framework, historical context, and scholarly interpretation clarify the evolution of Al-Qaeda and ISIS, as well as the socio-political-economic disparities that contributed to their spread across the region.

The data was analyzed using thematic and comparative methods. Applying Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's approach,[9] all data were coded to identify the iterative themes for analysis. The codes to extract themes from pre-defined dimensions coherent with the research questions were reviewed, including social-political-economic deprivation triggers, media exploitation, and grievance mobilization strategies. Subsequently, employing the comparative analysis techniques of Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett,[10] this study is meant to both divergent and convergent elements between ISIS and Al-Qaeda regarding their motivational evolution, predominant structures, and tactical adaptations in recruiting through media strategies.

Theoretical Debates on the Root Causes of Terrorism

The insights and limitations of multidisciplinary theoretical frameworks, including geopolitical, economic-sociological, and biological-psychological perspectives, are reviewed to explore the roots of terrorism and identify practical responses. These debates and their counterarguments assisted in capturing structural grievances, identity politics, and the cognitive processes of groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS's acts of terrorism.

- ***Geopolitical Perspective***

Various theorists have sought to analyze the causes of terrorism through a geopolitical lens. Fawaz A. Gerges, in his book "ISIS: A History," emphasizes that the birth of ISIS was a result of Western colonialism's legacy, specifically through the artificial borders created by the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Hence, it appeared as a saviour against the Western encroachment, seeking to dismantle the imposed division within the Arab-Islamic world. ISIS's rise was also equally propelled by interconnected factors, including regional instability, domestic sociopolitical disenfranchisement, the devastating collapse of Iraq and Syria, anti-Western sentiments, and its oil wealth.[11] Its ambitious ideological commitments, coupled with military strength, extend beyond Samuel Huntington's civilization-based assumptions. He argues in

[9] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101, https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.
[10] Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, Belfer Center Studies in International Security, ed. Steven E. Miller and Jacqueline L. Hazelton (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).
[11] Gerges, *ISIS: A History*.

"The Clash of Civilizations" that cultural and religious identities mainly cause geopolitical conflicts. This notion is often criticized for oversimplifying complex geopolitical dynamics through cultural binaries, thereby obscuring the root causes of these conflicts. He notably predicted a clash between the "Islamic civilization" and the "West,"[12] which inadvertently reinforces Islamophobic discourses, as the rise of Al-Qaeda and ISIS can also be interpreted as part of a broader "clash" between Western and Islamic civilizations. While political conflicts in the Middle East are frequently misinterpreted as civilizational clashes, Edward W. Said recognizes that the endogenous forces, meaning the region's socio-politico-economic realities, can lead to massive clashes.[13] These factors fueled the invasion of Iraq and the Syrian civil war, which subsequently contributed to the growth of Al-Qaeda and ISIS as coercive groups and spread across the Middle East. Therefore, it must be considered, with caution, how Western perceptions of Islam are impacted by characterizing terrorism as a civilizational clash. He asserts that such generalizations can mask nuanced political grievances and promote fear, suspicion, stereotypes, and hostility between different cultural groups.[14]

- ***Economic and Sociological Debates***

Among many scholarly debates, Michael Klare discusses economic or resource-related conflicts. He argues that the depletion of natural resources leads to competition over them, which can lead to war. His assumptions prompt a new debate about whether the race over resource control directly causes terrorism or if it serves as a means to achieve ideological goals.[15] If we connect this idea to ISIS fighting over oil, we can safely say that the oil economy is used to support their broader ideological, political, and religious agenda. For instance, the push for the resurgence of the caliphate system outweighs a simple pursuit of material wealth. Conversely, Gurr stresses the perceived socio-economic inequalities that create a sense of relative deprivation and discontent. People constantly compare their circumstances to those of others to identify discrepancies between their expectations and reality, rather than focusing solely on absolute poverty.

This process primarily occurs within their own social groups. Once they track disparities in wealth, rights, or treatment, it can incite aggression, which may encourage individuals to resort to violence, including terrorism. Therefore, it is understandable that economic factors

[12] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).
[13] Edward W. Said, "The Clash of Ignorance," *The Nation*, October 4, 2001, https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/clash-ignorance/.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Michael Klare, *Resource Wars: The New Landscape of Global Conflict*, 1st ed. (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001).

can exacerbate feelings of relative deprivation, even though this concept encompasses various dimensions in explaining collective violent actions, given the relative nature of deprivation for each person.[16] It is still debated whether economic inequalities or ideological grievances play a more influential role in terrorist recruits. ISIS evidently gained momentum in regions facing an unemployment crisis. For instance, the severity of poor living conditions in Anbar province was recorded at 33.3% in 2014, the highest in Iraq at the time.[17] The Iraqi Ministry of Planning records also back economic vulnerability as a determining factor in the ISIS invasion and prolonged stronghold, as the national poverty rate surged from 15% in 2013 to 22.5% in 2014.[18]

However, critics argue that this theory fails to account for the motivations of terrorists who are not from impoverished backgrounds. They contend that factors beyond absolute poverty or deprivation are important, as many terrorists live above the poverty line and come from middle and educated classes. Regression models from a statistical analysis comparing deceased Hezbollah militants to the general Lebanese population show that the likelihood of participating in Hezbollah's military activities was negatively correlated with poverty and positively correlated with having a secondary education or higher, with 0% illiteracy versus 6% in the broader populace. The authors, however, warn that missing poverty data for many militants means these findings are "suggestive, but not definitive."

Similarly, biographical data of Palestinian suicide bombers revealed that these individuals were not from poor families and had completed high school or attended college more than the general Palestinian population of a similar age. The authors cited that "none of them were uneducated, desperately poor, simple minded or depressed." This pattern is mirrored even historically in the Israeli Jewish settlers who attacked Palestinians in the West Bank in the early 1980s, who were "disproportionately well-educated and in high-paying occupations," including professions such as teachers, engineers, a combat pilot, and a computer programmer.

These statistics indicate that "neither poverty nor education has a direct, causal impact on terrorism."[19] This supports the idea that the leadership of Al-Qaeda is mainly driven by ideological or religious beliefs rather than economic hardship. Figure 1 illustrates the proposed hybrid deprivation model of radicalization by integrating the deprivation types with digital

[16] Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*.
[17] Rajaa Khudhair Al-Rubay, "The Economic and Social Implications of Unemployment on the Aggregate Demand and the Labor Market in Iraq," *Turkish Journal of Computer and Mathematics Education* 12, no. 10 (2021): 3389–3402.
[18] Lawk Ghafuri, "ISIS Caused Massive Spike in Iraq's Poverty Rate," *Rudaw Media Network*, February 16, 2020, https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/160220201.
[19] Alan B. Krueger and Jitka Malečková, "Education, Poverty and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection?," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 17, no. 4 (2003): 119–44, https://doi.org/10.1257/089533003772034925.

amplifiers that each coercive NSA differentially weaponizes to converge as violent transnational terrorist organizations.

Robert A. Pape refutes the simple connection between poverty, education, and terrorism by offering a hypothesis backed by empirical data when examining the root causes of the deliberate use of "suicide terrorism." Pape's study reveals that suicide terrorism is motivated by strategic and political objectives rather than solely by religious extremism or poverty, as is commonly assumed. He asserts it happens in response to foreign military occupation, explicitly aimed *"to compel modern democracies to withdraw military forces from territory that the terrorists consider to be their homeland. Religion is rarely the root cause, although it is often used as a tool by terrorist organizations in recruiting and other efforts in service of the broader strategic objective."*

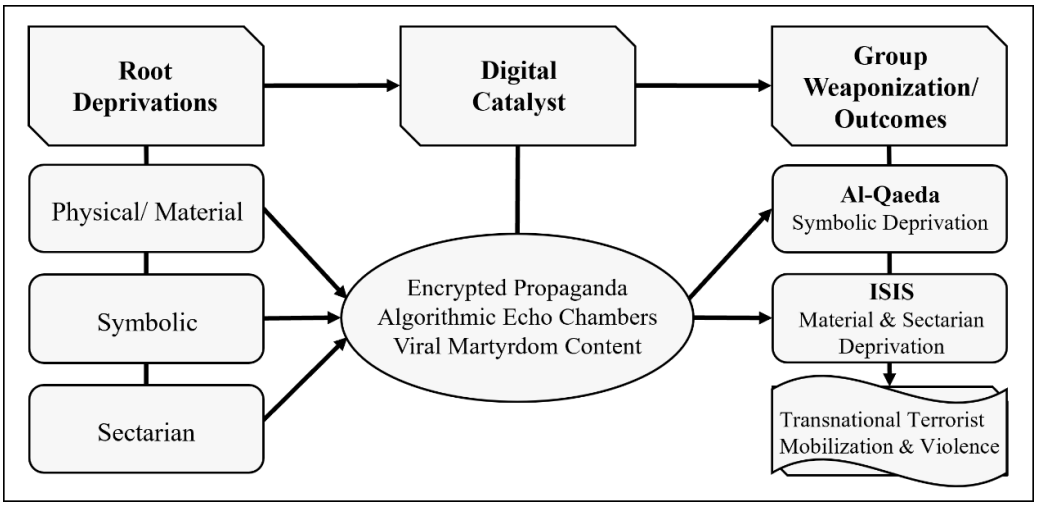

Figure 1: Hybrid Deprivation Model

His work cites instances of Israeli, Russian, Indian, and American occupations causing indigenous resentment, which became the central factor motivating coercive NSAs to carry out suicide bombings as acts of defiance. Pape states, "Even al-Qaeda fits this pattern." Therefore, geopolitical and strategic goals are the primary reasons for terrorism, not the conventional belief that terrorism is driven by ideological or religious fanaticism. Additionally, suicide terrorism possesses a distinctive capacity that makes it the most effective form of violence for mobilizing communities and generating political pressure because of its powerful psychological impact on the targeted audiences.[20]

[20] Robert Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*, Reprint ed. (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2006).

Assaf Moghadam counters Pape's work for overstating the foreign occupation thesis as a primary motivator of suicide terrorism and ignoring that the patterns of globalized suicide terrorism involve a wide range of ideologies and operational strategies, including ideological, religious, and sociocultural factors, all beyond simple occupation. Many instances prove that globalized suicide terrorism extends far beyond a single occupied territory and often targets states without a direct occupation relationship. Therefore, the concept of occupation is just one factor among others in explaining localized, traditional patterns of resistance-based suicide terrorism, such as in Palestine or Lebanon, and among groups like Al-Qaeda. According to Moghadam's framework, Al-Qaeda's attacks are justified as part of a broader, globalized jihad rather than a direct response to occupation.[21]

Bruce Hoffman identifies that religious terrorism fundamentally differs from secular motives because the former often pursues absolute or unwavering goals, which can lead to extreme violence. Since religion drives terrorist organizations with non-negotiable objectives, their missions become sacred and divinely commanded. The leading members of religious terrorism view them as a route to eternal reward, leading to even more extreme acts because dialogue and negotiations become strained by non-compromising principles. It also reduces the effectiveness of conventional deterrence methods in combating religious terrorism, such as avoiding punishment and threatening arrest or death. These measures lack the same dissuasive impact because the coercive groups' unique ideological push for martyrdom makes them resistant.

Secular terrorist organizations are motivated by tangible, compensatory grievances, which they may seek to negotiate and can be dissolved through political or territorial concessions. In contrast, groups like Al-Qaeda demonstrate the strength and resilience of religiously motivated terrorism because the prospect of death through self-sacrifice is viewed not as a deterrent but as a revered, desirable outcome. Their operatives are driven by intangible goals, such as earning paradise and eternal spiritual salvation. Therefore, combating this kind of terrorism requires a complete package of understanding religious, ideological, psychological, and organizational motivations.[22]

- ***Biological and Psychological Debates***

Social learning theorists suggest that behaviors are learned through imitating observed actions. Individuals tend to gravitate toward specific behaviors that may bring them rewards. The same

[21] Assaf Moghadam, "Suicide Terrorism, Occupation, and the Globalization of Martyrdom: A Critique of *Dying to Win*," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 8 (2006): 707–29, https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100600561907.
[22] Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism.*

idea applies to observing and mimicking violent behaviors from peers, mentors, or media figures associated with extremist ideologies.[23] Adrian Raine connects these behaviors to biological factors, such as genetic and neurological conditions. He claims that people with particular brain abnormalities or genetic predispositions might better explain aggressive tendencies, regardless of social influences. Therefore, social learning alone does not comprehensively account for the underlying causes of terrorism.[24] Similarly, Konrad Lorenz believes that humans possess aggression as an inherent drive rooted in biological predispositions.

This explains that since aggression is instinctive and can be triggered under certain conditions as a survival mechanism, it can also potentially lead to violent acts[25] such as terrorism. However, this view does not entirely seem to explain terrorism either, because it is an established reality that cultural and societal norms can channel and regulate aggression; additionally, terrorism often stems from cultural, political, and ideological marginalization, which influences the intensity and motivation behind acts of violence. This opens the door to a new debate that terrorism is better understood through political, ideological, and socio-economic lenses. Leon Festinger proposes a cognitive dissonance hypothesis, which posits that mental discomfort arises when an individual holds two or more conflicting beliefs, concepts, or values simultaneously.

This mental unease compels people to seek consistency in their views of the world, creating a clash between their beliefs and societal realities. To reduce this dissonance, individuals may adjust their beliefs or behaviors, often leading them to take radical actions rather than merely observing and imitating others. Nevertheless, it explains that terrorists often experience cognitive dissonance, striving to reconcile conflicting beliefs and ultimately rationalizing their radicalization.[26] Some people may experience a disconnect between their personal values and their peer group's actions, sparking another debate about whether terrorism is primarily fueled by personal psychological struggles or by collective identity and social bonds.

Critics propose that group dynamics and peer pressure, especially the desire to conform to group values, have a stronger correlation to violent behavior than individual cognitive

[23] Saul McLeod, "Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory," *Simply Psychology*, February 1, 2024, https://www.simplypsychology.org/bandura.html.
[24] Adrian Raine, *The Psychopathology of Crime: Criminal Behavior as a Clinical Disorder* (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 1993).
[25] Konrad Lorenz, *On Aggression*, First Edition (Harper Paperbacks, 1974).
[26] Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford University Press, 1957).

dissonance. To alleviate this discomfort of self-uncertainty, one might resort to violence while following the groups that offer clear and distinct identities. Specifically, if the group offers a strong sense of belonging, followers with a high sense of identity centrality can be convinced that violence is the only way to resolve conflicts and defend the group's identity, and by extension, their own self-concept.[27]

Another psychological theory that contradicts social learning theory is the frustration-aggression theory, which emphasizes the potential for personal frustration to lead to aggression. In extreme cases, frustration can be manifested as terrorism, even without social modeling. It mainly occurs when individuals or groups are unable to achieve their goals,[28] as after the United States invaded Iraq, the Sunni exclusion from the socio-political domains alienated them. The frustration of targeted marginalization led many of them to join ISIS. Others, however, argue that this theory fails to account for the strategic[29] and ideological aspects of terrorism.[3031] For instance, Al-Qaeda's leadership clearly states its political or religious goals, indicating that it wages a calculated (strategic) war for ideological dominance rather than simply lashing out from personal frustration.

Thematic Analysis

Applying Braun and Clarke's qualitative coding process, this section presents the resultant recurring themes for each group, and a detailed comparative discussion of these themes follows in the subsequent section. The core themes demonstrate varying forms of relative deprivation, motivating different disenfranchised individuals to join these terrorist organizations. To illuminate the motivations behind terrorist acts, this study also examined how digital platforms spread extremist narratives to recruit and turn personal deprivation into collective violence.

- ***Al-Qaeda***

The United States' entry into the Middle East and the continued foreign presence bred frustration and welcomed radical ambitions in the region. Sageman's study on jihadists shows that most of the jihadists came from privileged, educated, and socially connected backgrounds. The profile of educated and affluent leadership within Al-Qaeda also evidences symbolic deprivation as an absolute goal for them, one that transcends typical political aims in pursuit

[27] Michael A. Hogg and Janice Adelman, "Uncertainty–Identity Theory: Extreme Groups, Radical Behavior, and Authoritarian Leadership," *Journal of Social Issues* 69, no. 3 (2013): 436–54, https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12023.
[28] John Dollard et al., *Frustration and Aggression*, Frustration and Aggression (Yale University Press, 1939).
[29] Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*.
[30] Moghadam, "Suicide Terrorism, Occupation, and the Globalization of Martyrdom: A Critique of Dying to Win."
[31] Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism.*

of sacredly aspirational mandates.[32] Figures like Ayman al-Zawahiri, with a medical background, exemplify this by professionally standing in contrast to the radical revolutionary path.[33] The perception of civilizational annihilation arose from foreign invasion, prompting them to weaponize perceptions of cultural erosion and justify violence as a necessary form of existential self-defense mechanism.[34] Al-Qaeda, with its strong anti-Western sentiments, frames the West as the architect of Muslim deprivation.

Dimension	Themes	Supporting Data
Primary Form of Grievance	Symbolic and Civilizational Deprivation	Focus on defending global Muslim identity from Western cultural erosion; leadership profiles (e.g., bin Laden, al-Zawahiri) showing high education/ wealth
Mobilization Narrative	Global Jihad as Defensive Duty	Framing violence as a sacred, strategic obligation to protect the Ummah; rhetoric responding to drone strikes, Abu Ghraib
Media/Propaganda Strategy	Centralized, Elite-Oriented Messaging	Use of professional media wing (As-Sahab); production of ideological treaties and leader statements for long-term legitimacy

Table 1: Themes Identified for Al-Qaeda

Therefore, the group's pursuit of a non-negotiable global Jihad ideology legitimizes violence as a divine command to safeguard Islam from perceived threats, like infidel influence or Western hegemony, and to establish a state governed by religious principles, akin to a caliphate form of governance.[35] The ideological message was disseminated through a highly centralized media apparatus, i.e., Al-Qaeda's official production wing, as-Sahab (The Clouds). Its goal was to symbolically convey the group's ideology, legitimize authority, and resonate with its target audiences.[36] Allowing foreign intervention also illuminates the unstable state-society relations. Here, the Middle Eastern states are perceivably blamed for Al-Qaeda's

[32] Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).
[33] Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*.
[34] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, First Ed. edition (Vintage Books, 1979).
[35] Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*.
[36] David K. Lyons, "Analyzing the Effectiveness of Al Qaeda's Online Influence Operations by Means of Propaganda Theory" (master's thesis, The University of Texas at El Paso, 2013), https://www.utep.edu/liberalarts/nssi/_files/docs/theses1/analyzing-the-effectiveness-of-al-qaeda-s-online-influence-operations-lyons.pdf.

struggle against forces they believe are responsible for their deprivation. Overall, when identity threats intensify, the sense of theological obligation against oppressors activates as a psychological defense mechanism to rectify injustices. Table 1 shows themes for Al-Qaeda.

- ***ISIS***

ISIS emerged from a triad of interconnected drivers, including economic grievances, social alienation, and retributive justice against local and global forces perceived to oppress Muslim communities. It strategically exploits tangible material deprivation to recruit impoverished and unemployed citizens, as evidenced by the high regional unemployment rates documented in Table 2 for 2014 and 2016. ISIS's leveraged events include Sunni marginalization post-2003 US invasion of Iraq, the dismantling of the Ba'athist state in Iraq, and Syria's economic collapse, followed by civil war.[37]

Governorate	2014		2016	
	Unemployment	Economic activity	Unemployment	Economic activity
Dahuk	15	33.7	28.1	34.5
Nineveh	12.8	36.4	000	000
Sulaymaniyah	12.3	37.2	19.4	35.8
Kirkuk	5.2	42.2	28.7	27.6
Erbil	11.2	43.8	22.2	41.4
Diyala	17.9	35.9	12	31.6
Al, Anbar	33.3	33.1	000	00
Baghdad	19	39.9	18.6	38.2
Babylon	21.3	34.1	11	45.8
Karbala	12.2	40.4	12.1	37.7
Salah ad Din	15.3	35.6	16.3	33.5
Al, Najaf	10.6	39.1	16.4	38.6
Al, Qadisiya	21	40.7	21	33.4
Al, Muthanna	12	31.6	26	31.6
Dhi Qar	31	36.7	34.8	29
Maysan	28.7	37.7	29.2	33.4
Basra	22.7	33	25.5	39.7

[37] Gerges, *ISIS: A History*

Total	17.6	37.3	20.4	36.6

Table 2: Unemployment rate among youth aged 15-24 in Iraqi provinces from 2014 to 2016[38]

ISIS's wealth accumulation through oil smuggling, taxation, and looting enabled it to fund a sophisticated governance system during its territorial control. Its "total revenue rose from a little less than $1 million per month in late 2008 and early 2009 to perhaps $1 million to $3 million per day in 2014."[39] To maintain area occupation and secure loyalty, it highly paid its fighters and administrative workers+ Similarly, the collective social or sectarian oppression of the Sunni sect promoted a homogenous end goal among radicalized members, which ISIS capitalized on by positioning itself as a refuge for the targeted marginalized. Table 3 presents the group's identified themes.

Dimension	Themes	Supporting Data
Primary Form of Grievance	Material and Sectarian Deprivation	Exploitation of poverty/ unemployment in Iraq/ Syria; mobilization based on Sunni political exclusion post-2003
Mobilization Narrative	Retributive Justice and Sectarian Crusade	Framing violence as righteous vengeance against Shia ("Rafidah") and the West; showcasing brutality as empowerment
Media/Propaganda Strategy	Decentralized, Viral Mobilization	High-volume output on social media (e.g., 46,000^{+} Twitter accounts in 2015); use of graphic videos and glossy magazines (Dabiq)

Table 3: Themes Identified for ISIS

ISIS aims to bring together both local and global oppressed recruits who feel entitled to unmet socio-economic and political rights under its umbrella, transforming their isolation into extremist solidarity. By tapping into collective resentment, frustration, and anger, it forms a unified force seeking retributive justice against those they blame for their hardships to correct perceived power imbalances and restore dignity. ISIS labels the Shia community "al-Rafida"

[38] Recreated by the authors from data in the Ministry of Planning, Central Bureau of Statistics (2014, 2016), as cited in Rajaa Khudhair Al-Rubay, "The Economic and Social Implications of Unemployment on The Aggregate Demand and The Labor Market In Iraq," *Turkish Journal of Computer and Mathematics Education* 12, no. 10 (2021): 3389–3402.

[39] Ana Swanson, "12 Ways ISIS Gets Funding," *World Economic Forum*, November 23, 2015, https://www.weforum.org/stories/2015/11/12-ways-isis-gets-funding/.

(rejectionist apostates),[40] "a derogatory term for the Shia used by Sunnis since early Islam."[41] Severe violent actions, such as beheadings and suicide bombings, were legitimized as righteous vengeance through mythologized empowerment narratives. Particularly, the killing of Shias was explicitly propagated through their official Dabiq magazine as a religious duty backed by divine authority.[42] It pioneered large-scale social media mobilization and propaganda, running tens of thousands of Twitter accounts to circulate its narratives, with its most influential accounts gaining over 46,000 followers.[43]

Comparative Analysis

Both NSAs possess global reach and influence and operate extensively across the region, unlike localized terrorist groups. The catalytic role of media sophistication has helped validate their worldwide propaganda of relative deprivation and improved their overall transnational operational capabilities. As-Sahab, for instance, Al-Qaeda's central propaganda wing, has rapidly produced ideology-focused high-quality professional videos that resonate with people feeling symbolically deprived and seeking ideological approval. Its rhetoric mostly attracted educated Muslim diasporas experiencing status deprivation.[44] ISIS, on the other hand, distinguished itself from Al-Qaeda's controlled channels by not just broadcasting radical messages through its Dabiq magazine[45] but also building digital environments at a relentless pace. It produced viral videos that glorified martyrdom and violence and attracted youth seeking empowerment through action.[46] They did so by relying on algorithmic amplification on social media and gaming platforms to build self-reinforcing echo chambers, condensing months or years of work into days.[47]

This vast online reach helped it recruit "more than 40,000" foreign fighters globally by drawing individuals from "100 countries."[48] It also gave the group an immediate edge in expanding its reach, which is likely to increase with the advent of AI-generated content and

[40] Cole Bunzel, "From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State," *The Brookings Institution*, March 19, 2015.
[41] Cole Bunzel, "The Kingdom and the Caliphate: Duel of the Islamic States," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 18, 2016, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2016/02/the-kingdom-and-the-caliphate-duel-of-the-islamic-states?lang=en.
[42] The Carter Center, *Overview of Daesh's Online Recruitment Propaganda Magazine, Dabiq* (The Carter Center, 2015).
[43] J.M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan, *The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS Supporters on Twitter* (Brookings, 2015).
[44] Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*.
[45] The Carter Center, *Overview of Daesh's Online Recruitment Propaganda Magazine, Dabiq* (The Carter Center, 2015).
[46] Berger and Morgan, *The ISIS Twitter Census.*
[47] Gabriel Weimann, "Terrorist Migration to the Dark Web," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, no. 3 (2016): 40–44.
[48] Al Jazeera, "5,600 'Have Returned Home' from ISIL-Held Areas," October 24, 2017, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/24/5600-have-returned-home-from-isil-held-areas.

encrypted networks on the dark web. Secured communication methods on top of these, including encrypted applications such as Telegram and WhatsApp, have complicated the work of law enforcement agencies because app developers and even hackers often find it difficult to intercept readable content. This digital innovation has effectively revolutionized recruitment strategies, enabling jihadis to communicate with potential recruits in familiar ways. The emerging trends of digital use for radicalization pose heightened threats, including the potential use of weapons of mass destruction.[49]

While groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS have a transnational reach, the dominant Western media narrative used to explain them often falls back on reductive cultural explanations. Said's Orientalism highlights how Western framing tends to worsen divisions and complicate radicalization rather than addressing the root issues. The West commonly depicts Eastern societies as inherently barbaric, irrational, and exotic, establishing a misleading divide between the "civilized" West and the "backward" East.[50] Coverage of Al-Qaeda and ISIS often reflects orientalist stereotypes that depict Eastern barbarism, entirely ignoring the underlying grievances that motivate their actions. Although these portrayals justify foreign interventions, they also empower terrorist groups with a sense that they are the defenders against Westernization through their own media platforms.

In any case, Al-Qaeda preserved its ideology through patience and deliberate adjustments to its operations, rhetoric, and alliances in accordance with shifting regional dynamics, rather than pursuing rapid territorial control. ISIS, in contrast, redefined jihadism with its strict interpretation of Sharia law and prioritized immediate territorial control (2014-2017).[51] ISIS not only exploited material deprivation but also applied economic pragmatism to address absolute poverty by luring impoverished, often less-educated recruits,[52] with high salaries. The exploitation of tangible injustice is a stark contrast to Al-Qaeda's educated elites and their identity-centric appeal, rather than solely material grievances. The differences between them peaked in 2014 when al-Zawahiri, the long-time ideological leader of Al-Qaeda and successor to Osama bin Laden, condemned the caliphate declaration by ISIS as premature and reckless. He also dismissed sectarian violence against Shia Muslims as counterproductive in gaining broader support for a caliphate system and promoting pan-Islamic (Ummah) unity.[53][54]

[49] Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*.
[50] Said, *Orientalism*.
[51] Berger and Morgan, *The ISIS Twitter Census*.
[52] UNDP, *Journey to Extremism in Africa* (United Nations Development Programme, 2017), https://www.undp.org/africa/publications/journey-extremism-africa.
[53] Gerges, *ISIS: A History*.
[54] Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*.

Despite their differences, both groups exhibit anti-Western attitudes, Salafi-jihadist foundations, and aim to establish a caliphate, but diverge in strategies, recruitment, and ideological execution. They share the theme of retributive justice for ritualizing violence as a moral rebalancing mechanism. Propaganda in both cases portrays vengeance as heroic, legitimizing violence like beheadings, suicide bombings, and hostage executions as righteous retaliation. For Al-Qaeda, this often-meant direct retaliation for Western actions, and even Osama bin Laden declared such acts a duty to repel the aggressor.[55] By positioning itself as a traditionalist and gradualist force, it aimed to preserve its compromised identity; meanwhile, the other extended retribution into sectarian crusade,[56] targeting the disenfranchised socio-economic individuals. Table 4 displays the points at which these terrorist outfits converge and diverge.

Aspect	Convergence	Divergence
Root Cause/ Ideology	–Born from Salafi-jihadist ideology post-9/11 –Goal of establishing a caliphate –Anti-Western, anti-apostate regime stance	–**Al-Qaeda:** Prioritizes symbolic deprivation (identity, dignity) –**ISIS:** Prioritizes material and sectarian deprivation (poverty, Sunni exclusion)
Recruitment/ Membership	–Global recruitment using digital propaganda –Appeal to individuals seeking purpose/vengeance	–**Al-Qaeda:** Targets educated, middle-class diasporas –**ISIS:** Recruits economically marginalized youth and foreign adventurers, often with direct incentives
Tactics	–Use suicide terrorism and spectacular violence –Justify violence as a form of retributive justice	–**Al-Qaeda:** "Long-game" strategy, violence as a means to provoke and exhaust enemies over time –**ISIS:** Immediate state-building (2014-2017), violence as a tool for governance and sectarian purification

[55] Bruce Lawrence, ed., *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden* (VERSO, 2005).
[56] Muhammad Al-'Ubaydi et al., *The Group That Calls Itself a State: Understanding the Evolution and Challenges of the Islamic State* (The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2014).

Media/ Propaganda	– Sophisticated use of digital platforms to radicalize and inspire – Propaganda frames perpetrators as heroic avengers	– **Al-Qaeda:** Centralized, top-down messaging (e.g., As-Sahab) focused on ideological authority – **ISIS:** Decentralized, viral model using social media algorithms for rapid, broad recruitment
Relationship/ Rivalry	– Shared ideological roots; ISIS originated as an Al-Qaeda affiliate	**Fundamental split in 2014:** Al-Qaeda criticized ISIS's brutality and premature caliphate declaration as strategically reckless and harmful to the broader jihadist cause

Table 4: Comparison of ISIS and Al-Qaeda

Conclusion

Pape's logic on suicide terrorism partially fits with this study, as it accurately focuses on economic and political grievances but insufficiently addresses the struggles of educated supporters advocating for the ideological absolutism of groups like Al-Qaeda. Their prioritized objectives were never solely about the territorial withdrawal of foreign occupation but centered on an existential defense of identity against cultural erosion. Likewise, Huntington's clash of civilizations focuses more on cultural schisms but underestimates the symbolic and other dimensions of deprivation. It also does not explain the fractures within civilization, such as Sunni-Shia sectarian clashes, which ISIS exploited far more ruthlessly than any civilizational binary. Hence, applying such lenses is empirically flawed in reaching the root causes of terrorism. Analysis of Al-Qaeda and ISIS's religious radicalization trajectories following the 9/11 attacks, for the same ambitions of retributive justice against the oppressors, challenges the singular narratives of terrorism causality. Instead, it reveals that radicalization is a complex process that is neither deterministic nor monolithic in nature. Each group weaponizes distinct manifestations of deprivation, symbolic for Al-Qaeda, material and sectarian for ISIS. Using Gurr's foundational framework, this study proposes a synergy of hybrid relative grievances by incorporating tangible and intangible injustices while acknowledging the deterministic role of media catalysts in the process. Since both organizations exploited the digital ecosystem to infuse their heroic vengeance with powerful force, counterterrorism strategies must also consider dismantling digital spaces that legitimize violence through counter-narratives. However, this approach alone is insufficient, exactly as relying purely on kinetic-militarized

responses is doomed to fail in building inclusive societies. Effective deradicalization primarily depends on addressing underlying disparities in the social, economic, and political sources of resentment among affected populations.

THE HYPERSONIC MISSILE RACE:

AN ANALYSIS OF GLOBAL DYNAMICS AND SOUTH ASIAN SECURITY STABILITY

Ghazala Yasmin Jalil and Muskan Moazzam

The Hypersonic Missile Race: An Analysis of Global Dynamics and South Asian Strategic Stability

Ghazala Yasmin Jalil and Muskan Moazzam*

Abstract

Hypersonic weapons represent a new genre of weapons that are significant because of their ability to maneuver once launched, their hypersonic speed, and the capacity to penetrate ballistic missile defense (BMD) systems. The paper examines the implications of the hypersonic missile race in the global and regional context using a realist theoretical framework centered on the security dilemma and arms racing. The main findings suggest that hypersonic weapons are destabilizing because they compress decision windows, complicate deterrence strategies, and escalate the risk of an arms race. However, at the global level, the effectiveness of hypersonic weapons is likely to differ across various actors. At the regional level, hypersonic weapons would be far more destabilizing due to proximity and shorter decision timelines. Furthermore, it would increase the risk of an Indian preemptive strike and foster a false sense of confidence among decision-makers that hypersonic missiles could execute a successful counterforce strike, while existing BMD systems would intercept any Pakistani counterstrike. This dynamic significantly undermines the established deterrence relationship. Furthermore, the deployment of hypersonic weapons would exacerbate the regional security dilemma; as India enhances its strike capabilities, Pakistan would feel compelled to pursue counter-hypersonic technologies and adjust its doctrinal posture to ensure survival, inadvertently heightening suspicion and instability. It concludes that there is a need for mechanisms to counter destabilizing effect of hypersonic weapons at global and regional levels.

Keywords: Hypersonic Missiles, Deterrence, South Asia, Strategic Stability, Ballistic Missile Defence, Arms Race, Security Dilemma.

* Ghazala Yasmin Jalil is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad. She can be reached at ghazala.jalil@issi.org.pk.
Muskan Moazzam is a Research Associate and Sub Editor at the Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad. She can be reached at muskanmoazzam@issi.org.pk.

Introduction

The pursuit of hypersonic missiles has become a concern over the past decade or so due to their speed, which exceeds Mach 5 (five times the speed of sound), and their ability to maneuver after launch, making it difficult for existing missile defense systems to target them.[1] The United States, Russia, and China have led early hypersonic weapons development. India has also entered the fray with the development of the High-Speed Technology Demonstrator Vehicle (HSTDV). Other countries pursing hypersonic technologies include France, Japan, South Korea, Turkey, while Australia is collaborating with the US on hypersonic research and development initiatives.[2]

The emergence of a new competition in hypersonic weapons poses intricate problems for international security. The maneuverability and speed of these missiles are unprecedented, reducing the efficacy of existing missile defense and jeopardizing the already delicate balance of deterrence by major states. Russia and China are one such example whose hypersonic projects are considered by them as a means to counter and penetrate the US's missile defense systems. This will, in turn, trigger a chain reaction, as other states may respond by pursing hypersonic and counter-hypersonic missiles, and the arms race will continue to gain momentum. Moreover, many states envision both a conventional and nuclear role for the hypersonic missiles. The inability to distinguish conventional from nuclear payloads in real time increases the risk of catastrophic miscalculation.

The hypersonic missiles also have profound regional implications, particularly in South Asia. The development of this technology by India has become a new variable in the nuclear equation with Pakistan, further destabilizing an already fragile nuclear milieu. Since the existing missile flight time within the region is between 5 and 10 minutes,[3] the hypersonic missile may significantly reduce it, leading to higher risks of inaccuracy and preemptive strikes. This kind of imbalance may confer a perceived advantage for India in the regional deterrence equation, posing a new security dilemma for Pakistan.

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[1] UK Parliament, Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST), "Hypersonic Missiles," POSTnote 696 (June 2023), https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/POST-PN-0696/POST-PN-0696.pdf.
[2] Kelley M. Sayler, "Hypersonic Weapons: Background and Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service Report R45811, updated August 12, 2025, https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/R/PDF/R45811/R45811.53.pdf.
[3] Zia Mian, R. Rajaraman, and M. V. Ramana, "Early Warning in South Asia—Constraints and Implications," *Science & Global Security* 11 (2003): 109–150, https://scienceandglobalsecurity.org/archive/sgs11mian.pdf.

The Hypersonic Missile Race: An Analysis of Global Dynamics and South Asian Strategic Stability

It is imperative to examine implications of hypersonic missiles development. The paper examines their nature, impact on the global and regional deterrence policy, as well as how additional arms races can be introduced. Specifically, the paper examines the implications of hypersonic weapons on strategic stability globally and the potential impact on South Asia's India-Pakistan deterrence equation.

The scholarly debate on hypersonic weapons is primarily divided into two schools of thought regarding global strategic stability. The first group, characterized by Speier et al. Altmann and Reif, argues that the combination of unpredictable flight paths and extreme velocity creates "warhead ambiguity" and "target ambiguity," significantly shortening decision-making timelines and increasing the risk of inadvertent nuclear escalation.[4] Conversely, a second group of scholars, such as Cunningham, suggests that for states like China and Russia, hypersonic glide vehicles (HGVs) may actually be stabilizing by ensuring the penetration of US BMD systems, these weapons restore the "mutual vulnerability" necessary for deterrence, effectively neutralizing the perceived advantage of a first-strike capability protected by an interceptor shield.[5]

However, much of this global literature remains focused on the major power triad US-Russia-China, often treating South Asia as a peripheral concern. Within the regional context, Sultan and Khursheed have begun to map the specific risks to the Indian-Pakistani dyad, focusing on the reduction of flight times to under five minutes and the risk of escalation.[6] Ayesha Abbasi argues that India's pursuit of hypersonic weapons technology is driven primarily by a quest for global prestige.[7] Despite these initial inquiries, a significant gap remains: existing regional studies often focus on technical specifications rather than the Realist security dilemma – specifically, how the perceived efficacy of India's BMD, when coupled with hypersonic offensive capabilities,

[4] R. H. Speier et al., *Hypersonic Missile Nonproliferation: Hindering the Spread of a New Class of Weapons* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2137.html, Kelsey Reif, "Hypersonic Advances Spark Concern," *Arms Control Today*, January/February 2018, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2018-01/news/hypersonicadvances-spark-concern, Jürgen Altmann, "New Military Technologies: Dangers for International Peace and Security," *Themenschwerpunkt* 38, no. 1 (2020): 36–42.

[5] Alan Cummings, "Hypersonic Weapons: Tactical Uses and Strategic Goals," *War on the Rocks*, November 12, 2019, https://warontherocks.com/2019/11/hypersonic-weapons-tactical-uses-and-strategic-goals/, F. S. Cunningham and M. T. Fravel, "Dangerous Confidence? Chinese Views on Nuclear Escalation," *International Security* 44, no. 2 (2019): 61–109.

[6] Dr. Adil Sultan and Itfa Khursheed, "Hypersonic Weapons in South Asia: Implications for Strategic Stability," *IPRI Journal* 11, no. 1 (2021): 18, https://journal.ipripak.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Article-3-IPRI-Journal-XXI-1.pdf.

[7] Ayesha Abbasi, "Indian Quest for Hypersonic Missiles in South Asia and Disruption of Strategic Stability in the Indo-Pak Dyad," *IPRI Journal* 23, no. 2 (2023): 37.

creates an asymmetric "window of opportunity" that threatens Pakistan's second-strike survivability. This study advances the debate by moving beyond the binary "stabilizing vs. destabilizing" argument. It seeks to contribute to a comparative analysis that juxtaposes the potential of restoring stability at the global level with the existential instability at the regional level.

This study's main question is: How does the international development of hypersonic missile technologies shape deterrence dynamics, and how does it affect deterrence between India and Pakistan? This paper argues that the deterrence effects of hypersonic weapons are context-dependent. While hypersonic development can reinforce deterrence at the global level by improving penetration and survivability, it simultaneously creates new challenges. In South Asia, India's pursuit of hypersonic capabilities risks compressing decision-making timelines and intensifying action–reaction dynamics.

The study employs a qualitative policy analysis to examine implications of hypersonic missiles at the global and regional levels. It draws on a comprehensive review of the literature on hypersonic weapons development worldwide and in South Asia, supported by a mix of primary and secondary sources, including open-source defense data, expert commentary, and strategic assessments. The analysis focuses on action–reaction dynamics and arms racing patterns of security dilemmas.

The paper is organized into three sections. First, it establishes the discussion within a theoretical framework to provide a structural basis for analysis. This is followed by an examination of hypersonic developments among leading powers, the US, China, and Russia, as well as the specific advancements made by India. The analysis then shifts to the global and regional implications of these weapons, focusing on the compression of the OODA loop and concluding with strategic options for Pakistan.

Theoretical Framework

This paper uses the concept of the security dilemma to explain why arms competition often intensifies even in the absence of aggressive intent. As John Herz originally described it, the security dilemma refers to a situation where "the attempt of one state to increase its security leads others to feel less secure," pushing all sides toward greater insecurity.[8] Robert Jervis later captured

[8] John H. Herz, *Political Realism and Political Idealism: A Study in Theories and Realities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).

the same logic by noting that "many of the means by which a state tries to increase its security decrease the security of others."[9] The central assumption behind this framework is that states operate under conditions of uncertainty in an anarchic international system. Because intentions cannot be observed with confidence, even defensive measures are interpreted through worst-case assumptions. When this logic is combined with the arms racing action–reaction model, the result is a self-reinforcing cycle in which each side's efforts to avoid vulnerability make restraint appear increasingly risky.[10]

This dynamic is visible in the international development of hypersonic missile technologies. The pursuit of hypersonic systems by the United States, Russia, and China is driven by concerns about penetrating missile defenses, preserving strategic credibility, and avoiding technological lag, yet these efforts simultaneously heighten mutual threat perceptions. The same logic carries into regional settings.

The deployment of missiles with hypersonic capabilities within the South Asian region introduces a distinct challenge. The already tense nuclear environment between India and Pakistan could be further destabilized by the perceived advantage that hypersonic missiles might offer one side. This could lead to a situation where states, fearing a potential first strike with hypersonic weapons, might be tempted to adopt a more aggressive posture, potentially lowering the threshold for nuclear escalation. In the context of India and Pakistan, the development of hypersonic missiles and the presence of BMD "increases effective resolve of India in a crisis with Pakistan, where it would be willing to take greater risk to prevail in a crisis".[11]

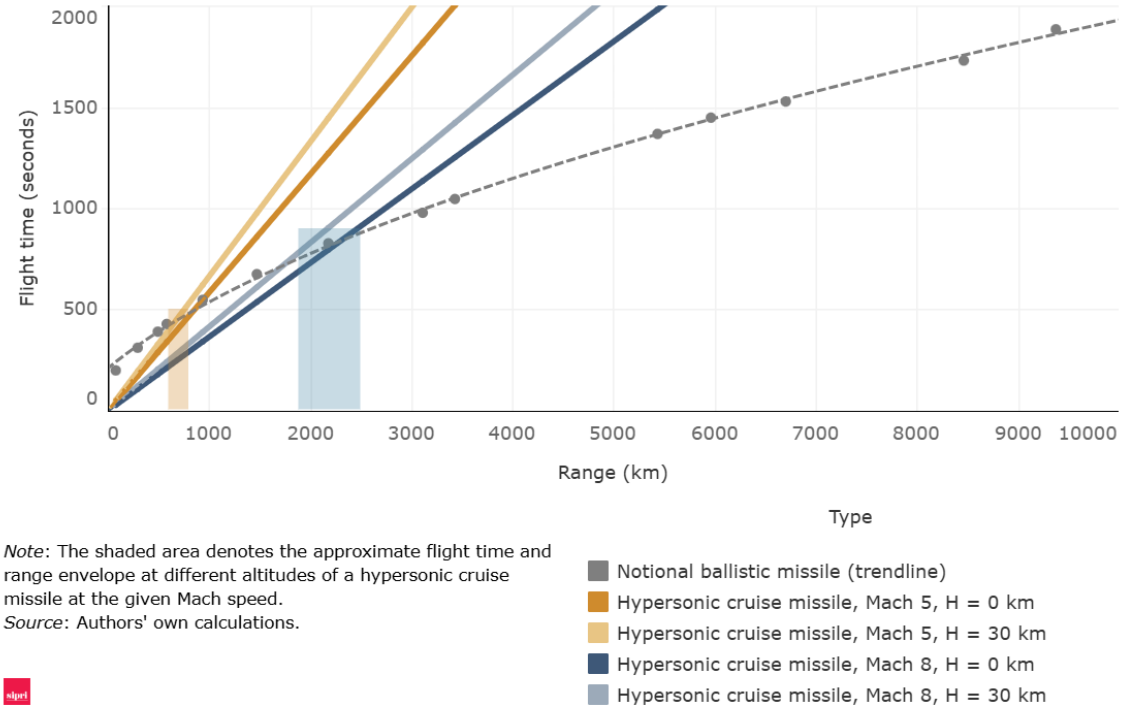
Hypersonic Weapons: Types and Characteristics

Hypersonic weapons are a novel category of weaponry. They are characterized by extremely high speed, which is above Mach 5 or 6,450 km/h. The countries most technologically advanced in missile development, such as Russia, have even reached a speed of Mach 27.[12] Hypersonic-speed

[9] Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (January 1978): 167–214.
[10] hiping Tang, "The Security Dilemma: A Conceptual Analysis," *Security Studies* 18, no. 3 (2009): 587–623, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410903133050.
[11] Ghazala Yasmin Jalil, "Indian Missile Defence Development: Implications for Deterrence Stability in South Asia," *Strategic Studies* 35, no. 2 (Summer 2015), http://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Ghazala.35-No.2.pdf.
[12] "Russia Says Its New Weapon Is 27 Times Faster Than the Speed of Sound," *Military Times*, December 27, 2018, https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2018/12/27/russia-says-its-new-weapon-is-27-times-faster-than-the-speed-of-sound/.

ballistic missiles of the US and Russia are not new. However, compared to the past hypersonic prototypes, these missiles have impressive maneuverability even after launch. For instance, their ability to redirect during flight makes tracking and interception very difficult and renders existing missile defense systems outdated.

There are two types of hypersonic missiles: First, Hypersonic Glide Vehicles (HGVs): The hypersonic glide vehicles are attached to existing intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) for initial launch. Second, Hypersonic Cruise Missiles (HCMs): they are continuously propelled by rockets or advanced air-breathing engine, allowing them to operate at low altitudes and exhibit high maneuverability, unlike HGVs.



Note: The shaded area denotes the approximate flight time and range envelope at different altitudes of a hypersonic cruise missile at the given Mach speed.
Source: Authors' own calculations.

Fig. 1[13]

[13] Kolja Brockmann and Markus Schiller, "A Matter of Speed? Understanding Hypersonic Missile Systems," February 4, 2022, https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-backgrounder/2022/matter-speed-understanding-hypersonic-missile-systems.

The Hypersonic Missile Race: A Global Overview

While the leading players in the development of hypersonic missiles are moving at a fast pace, other countries are also catching up, including Australia and India. This section explores the motivations and programs of key players in this race.

- ***The Development of Hypersonic by the US***

The US initiated hypersonic weapon development under its Conventional Prompt Global Strike (CPGS)[14] program in the 2000s and is investing heavily in research and development efforts spread across the branches of the military. The US primarily envisages a conventional role for hypersonic weapons, which means that they need to be more precise to be effective. The Pentagon's budget reflects the growing importance of hypersonic weapons, with funding increasing from $2.6 billion in fiscal year 2020 to $3.9 billion in FY2026, for hypersonic research. Meanwhile, the Missile Defense Agency's (MDA) FY2026 request for hypersonic defense was $200.6 million.[15]

A key role in the development of hypersonic weapons is played by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA). It is collaborating on the Tactical Boost Glide (TBG) and the Hypersonic Air-breathing Weapon Concept (HAWK) with the Air Force, focusing on an air-launched hypersonic cruise missile. By 2028, Virginia-class submarines might be equipped with the US Navy's Conventional Prompt Strike (CPS), which combines a hypersonic glider with a booster launched from the submarine. With a range of 2,770 km, the Long-Range Hypersonic Weapon (LRHW) of the Army uses a similar glide vehicle idea to that of the Navy.

Using hypersonic glide vehicle technology, the AGM-183 Air-Launched Rapid Response Weapon (ARRW) of the Air Force can launch from the air and have a 1,600 km range. The ARRW program encountered several test failures. The Air Force did not request procurement funding for it in its 2025 budget. However, as of mid-2025, the Air Force has indicated a renewed interest in reviving the ARRW program. The US hypersonic missile development has faced setbacks, and some high-ranking officials have raised concerns about the cost and rationale behind these

[14] James M. Acton, "Conventional Prompt Global Strike and Russia's Nuclear Forces," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 4, 2013, accessed August 26, 2025, https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2013/10/conventional-prompt-global-strike-and-russias-nuclear-forces?lang=en.

[15] Congress.gov, "Hypersonic Weapons: Background and Issues for Congress," October 23, 2025, https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R45811.

programs. These critiques emerged following failed Air Force hypersonic boost-glide vehicle tests in 2021.

The US emphasizes hypersonic missile's role in deterring adversaries and maintaining long-range strike options. This focus on maintaining dominance aligns with the third offset strategy,[16] aiming to secure US military superiority over competitors and to maintain an edge in deterrence. Former Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and former Commander of US Strategic Command General John Hyten, stated hypersonic missiles could enable "responsive, long-range, strike options against distant, defended, and/or time-critical threats when other forces are unavailable, denied access, or not preferred".[17] According to the US National Defense Strategy, through hypersonic weapons, the US "will be able to fight and win the wars of the future".[18] There is also considerable criticism of hypersonic systems, which are said to "lack defined mission requirements, contribute little to US military capability, and are unnecessary for deterrence".[19]

There is also considerable investment in counter-hypersonic weapons capabilities. The MDA is pursuing sea-based Glide Phase Intercept (GPI) to be operational by 2032. In May 2024 plans were finalized to co-develop GPI with Japan. The MDA is also developing the Hypersonic and Ballistic Tracking Space Sensor (HBTSS) to detect and intercept incoming missiles. MDA requested $76 million for HBTSS in FY2025.[20] The US administration under President Donald Trump is also pursuing "Golden Dome" missile defence system at a cost of $175bn which envisages space-based interceptors that envisage countering hypersonic missiles as well.[21]

The US hypersonic and counter-hypersonic technology has followed a classis action-reaction dynamic whereby it aimed to maintain a technological edge over adversaries.

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[16] Sander Ruben Aarten, "The Impact of Hypersonic Missiles on Strategic Stability: Russia, China, and the US," *Militaire Spectator* 189, no. 4 (2020): 185.
[17] Kelley M. Sayler, "Hypersonic Weapons: Background and Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service Report R45811 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, February 2024).
[18] U.S. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, January 19, 2018), https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018%20National%20Defense%20Strategy%20Summary.pdf.
[19] Ibid
[20] Kelley Sayler, "Hypersonic Weapons: Background and Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service Report R45811, October 24, 2025, https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R45811.
[21] "Trump's 'Golden Dome' Defence Plan Includes Space Missiles, Lasers: Report," *Al Jazeera*, August 13, 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/13/trumps-golden-dome-defence-plan-includes-space-missiles-lasers-report.

US Hypersonic Missiles

Title	FY2023 Request ($ in millions)	FY2023 Enacted ($ in millions)	PB2024 ($ in millions)	Schedule
Conventional Prompt Strike (CPS)	1,205	1,230	901	Platform deployment in FY2025
Hypersonic Air-Launched OASuW (HALO)	92	152	96	Field by FY2029
Long-Range Hypersonic Weapon (LRHW)	806	872	943	Field two additional batteries by FY2027
AGM-183 Air-Launched Rapid Response Weapon (ARRW)	115	115	150	Complete prototyping and flight testing in FY2024

Fig. 2 [22]

- ***Russia: Countering Missile Defenses of the US***

Russia began developing hypersonic technology in the 1980s in reaction to the US Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), popularly referred to as Star Wars. However, these initiatives fizzled out. Following the US's withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM Treaty),[23] the program saw a rebirth in 2001. From Russian perspective, hypersonic weapons were required to neutralize the missile defense systems of the US in Eastern Europe, which it saw as undermining deterrence. In his 2018 speech to the Federal Assembly, Russian President Putin revealed a variety of hypersonic weapons under development and clearly linked it to the potential danger presented by the missile defense of the US.[24] Putin said that the US did not pay any heed to Russian protests over fielding of US missile defence systems in Europe and elsewhere and stated "No one listened to us then. So, listen to us now." [25] Russian President Vladimir Putin and other officials time and

[22] Kelley M. Sayler, *Hypersonic Weapons: Background and Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service Report R45811 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, February 2024), 10.
[23] Pavel Podvig, "Did Star Wars Help End the Cold War? Soviet Response to the SDI Program," *Science & Global Security* 25, no. 1 (2017): 3–27, https://scienceandglobalsecurity.org/archive/sgs25podvig.pdf.
[24] Vladimir Putin, "Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly," March 1, 2018, President of Russia (official website), http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/messages/56957.
[25] "Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly," March 1, 2018

again raised objections to US deployment of missile defence systems and also indicated that they would engage in offensive countermeasures to defeat US missile defences.[26]

Russia prioritized hypersonic missile development as a reaction to the US missile defence systems because it saw the systems as creating strategic instability. Russia boasts several hypersonic systems, including the Avangard, Kinzhal, and Tsirkon missiles, each offering distinct capabilities and deployment options. Russia has been manufacturing several systems in that regard, each with unique capabilities:

Russian Hypersonic Missiles

Missile System	**Type**	**Platform**	**Speed**	**Range**	**Warhead / Payload**
Avangard (HGV)	Hypersonic Glide Vehicle	Mounted on ICBMs (UR-100NUTTKh, future Sarmat)	Mach 20–27	Intercontinental	Strategic nuclear payload
3M22 Tsirkon (Zircon)	Hypersonic Cruise Missile	Ship- and submarine-launched	Mach 8–9	~1000 km (≈ 625 miles)	Conventional / tactical
Kh-47M2 Kinzhal	Air-Launched Ballistic Missile	MiG-31K, Tu-22M3 aircraft	Up to Mach 10	~2000 km (≈ 1200 miles)	Conventional or nuclear

Fig. 3[27]

Russian hypersonic technology development can be traced to the perceived threat from the US missile defence deployments, and the withdrawal from the ABM treaty, deepening its security dilemma vis a vis the US. Subsequently, the US hypersonic and counter hypersonic as well as BMD developments follow from perceived Russian threat, fueling an action-reaction cycle of arms racing and deepening their security dilemmas.

- ***China's Hypersonic Weapons: A Response to Perceived Threats***

China's growing hypersonic missile program stems from a complex security calculus. A key factor is the perceived threat posed by the US hypersonic development and advanced missile defense

[26] Stephen J. Cimbala, *The United States, Russia and Nuclear Peace* (Springer: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 52.
[27] Kelley Sayler, "Hypersonic Weapons: Background and Issues for Congress," October 24, 2025.

systems. Chinese officials have time and again expressed concerns with US missiles defence deployments. Scholarly literature often iterates Chinese concerns that US hypersonic weapons could potentially neutralize its nuclear deterrent through a decapitating first strike.[28] Moreover, US missile defense capabilities raise concerns about China's ability to retaliate effectively. This creates a security dilemma for China, prompting it to bolster its own hypersonic arsenal.

Chinese Hypersonic Weapons

Missile System	Type	Platform	Speed	Range	Warhead / Payload
DF-17	Hypersonic Glide Vehicle–Mounted MRBM	Road-mobile launcher	Estimated Mach 5–10	~1500 miles (≈ 2400 km)	Conventional (potential nuclear option debated)
DF-41 (HGV-configured variant)	ICBM capable of carrying Hypersonic Glide Vehicle	Silo-based, road-mobile, rail-mobile ICBM	Potential Mach 20+ (boost-glide)	Intercontinental	Nuclear
DF-ZF (WU-14)	Hypersonic Glide Vehicle	Launched on DF-17 and DF-21 boosters	Mach 5–10	~1200 miles (≈ 2000 km)	Conventional / nuclear capable
Starry-Sky 2 (Xing Kong-2)	Hypersonic Wave-Rider (powered hypersonic vehicle)	Rocket-boosted experimental testbed	Mach 5–6 (tested)	Undisclosed	Experimental payloads

[28] Tong Zhao, "Conventional Challenges to Strategic Stability: Chinese Perception of Hypersonic Technology and the Security Dilemma," Carnegie–Tsinghua Center for Global Policy, July 23, 2018, https://carnegietsinghua.org/2018/07/23/conventional-challenges-to-strategic-stability-chinese-perceptions-of-hypersonic-technology-and-security-dilemma-pub-76894.

Missile System	Type	Platform	Speed	Range	Warhead / Payload
YJ-21 (Air-Launched)	Hypersonic Anti-Ship Missile	H-6K bombers (air-launched)	Estimated Mach 8–10	~1500 km	Conventional (anti-ship)
YJ-17 (Surface-Launched)	Hypersonic Anti-Ship Ballistic Missile	Ground-based launchers	Likely Mach 8+	Estimated ~1000–1500 km (unconfirmed)	Conventional (anti-ship)
YJ-20 (Surface-Launched)	Hypersonic Anti-Ship Ballistic Missile	Ground-based launchers	Likely Mach 8+	Estimated similar to YJ-17 (unconfirmed)	Conventional (anti-ship)
CJ-1000	Hypersonic Land-Attack Cruise Missile (scramjet-powered)	Ground-launched / platform adaptable	Hypersonic (scramjet; Mach 5+)	Estimated medium-to-long range (details unpublicized)	Conventional

Fig. 4[29]

This technological race carries profound global and regional security implications.

- ***India: Entering the Fray***

India has also entered the hypersonic missile race with two key programs under the Defense Research and Development Organization (DRDO). The High-Speed Technology Demonstrator Vehicle (HSTDV) focuses on indigenous development, while the BrahMos-II project is being developed in collaboration with Russia.

The HSTDV development started in 2008. It first reaches a height of up to 20 km using scramjets, and it can achieve Mach 6. June 2019 saw its first successful test, and September 2020

[29] Prateek Tripathi, *How Hypersonic Weapons Are Redefining Warfare*, Observer Research Foundation, May 2, 2024, https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/how-hypersonic-weapons-are-redefining-warfare, Kelley Sayler, "Hypersonic Weapons: Background and Issues for Congress," October 24, 2025, https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R45811, Gordon Arthur, "Xi's Military Parade Reached Climax with Flaunting Display of Strategic Weapons," *Asian Military Review*, September 12, 2025, https://www.asianmilitaryreview.com/2025/09/xis-military-parade-reached-climax-with-flaunting-display-of-strategic-weapons-foc/#.

saw another one in which it reached Mach 6 at a height of 30 kilometers. India conducted a test in January 2023.[30] India most recent test of HSTDV in November 2024, was designed to carry payloads for ranges exceeding 1,500 km.[31] It has been reported that the HSTDV could be employed for launching long-range cruise missiles as well as hypersonic ones. The development of the HSTDV pilot itself is said to have cost the DRDO $4.5 million.[32] In order to develop the HSTDV into a weaponized platform that can carry conventional or strategic warheads, DRDO plans to carry out additional testing.

India and Russia collaborated on BrahMos-II, their other hypersonic project, which is said to be modeled after the Russian Tsirkon. The anticipated range of the hypersonic cruise missile is 290 kilometers, and its payload capacity is 300 kg. With a combined investment of $250 million, both nations aim to achieve Mach 6 speeds using scramjet technology.[33] The project is anticipated to be deployed in 2028, although it has had multiple delays.

While India's hypersonic program may take another three to four years to mature, its potential impact is significant. These weapons could threaten regional security, particularly for Pakistan, exacerbate existing tensions, and heighten Pakistan's security dilemma.[34]

- ***Other Countries***

There is an increasing horizontal spread of hypersonic technology. Germany and UK are now investing in hypersonic missile technology, as are other nations including France and Japan. While South Korea is also entering the race fearing a threat from North Korea's hypersonic capabilities. Australia is also working on developing hypersonic technology in collaboration with the US.

[30] Prateek Tripathi, "How Hypersonic Weapons Are Redefining Warfare," *Observer Research Foundation*, May 2, 2024, https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/how-hypersonic-weapons-are-redefining-warfare.
[31] "India's Successful Test of Hypersonic Missile Puts It Among Elite Group," *Dawn*, November 17, 2024, https://www.dawn.com/news/1872984/indias-successful-test-of-hypersonic-missile-puts-it-among-elite-group.
[32] Mike Yeo, Nigel Pittaway, Usman Ansari, Vivek Raghuvanshi, and Chris Martin, "Hypersonic and Directed Energy Weapons: Who Has Them, and Who's Winning the Race in the Asia Pacific?" *Defense News*, March 15, 2021, https://www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2021/03/15/hypersonic-and-directed-energy-weapons-who-has-them-and-whos-winning-the-race-in-the-asia-pacific/.
[33] Richard H. Speier, George Nacouzi, Carrie Lee, and Richard M. Moore, *Hypersonic Missile Nonproliferation: Hindering the Spread of a New Class of Weapons* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017).
[34] Ghazala Yasmin Jalil, "India Joins the Global Hypersonic Missile Race," *ISSI Issue Brief*, January 16, 2025, https://issi.org.pk/issue-brief-on-india-joins-the-global-hypersonic-missile-race.

Hypersonic Weapons: A Double-Edged Sword for Global Security

Hypersonic weapons represent a paradigm shift in weapons development due to their unmatched speed and maneuverability. Hypersonic weapons introduce a new layer of complexity to international security. This technology presents both opportunities and challenges for deterrence and stability globally.

Hypersonic missiles are distinguished by their significantly shorter flight durations, which give their targets little time to respond.

Comparative Flight Times: Subsonic vs. Hypersonic Missiles

Missile System	Speed	Approx. Range Used in Example	Estimated Time to Target
Kalibr Cruise Missile (Russia)	Subsonic (~Mach 0.8)	1500 - 2,500 km	~2 hours
Kh-47M2	Hypersonic	2,000 km	~11 minutes
Kinzhal (Russia)	(up to Mach 10)	460-480 Km	~2.33 minutes
Avangard HGV (Russia)	Hypersonic (Mach 20–27)	6,000 km	~20 minutes
US Hypersonic Strike Systems (general)	Hypersonic (Mach 8+)	1,100 km	~9 minutes

Fig. 6[35]

The consequence is a significantly compressed decision window for potential targets. Traditional defense strategies rely on the Observe-Orient-Decide-Act (OODA) loop to assess threats and formulate responses. This drastically reduces the amount of time that the targeted countries have to identify, assess, and react to an assault. This shortened decision-making period raises the possibility of error and unintentional escalation between the nuclear powers.

[35] Alan Cummings, "Hypersonic Weapons: Tactical Uses and Strategic Goals," *War on the Rocks*, November 12, 2019, https://warontherocks.com/2019/11/hypersonic-weapons-tactical-uses-and-strategic-goals/.

Observe Orient Decide and Act (OODA) loops[36]

The tremendous speed, compressed decision window, and shortened reaction times associated with hypersonic weapons injects a new element of danger into nuclear deterrence. Some experts worry that a nation such as China, which has few systems for early detection, could only have three minutes' notice before a Mach 10 missile at 20 kilometers above the ground hits a target. On the other hand, a Mach 6 hypersonic weapon gives you just eleven minutes to respond.[37] The US has weapons system under the Conventional Prompt Strike program, the LRHW and ARRW that can strike China. According to some accounts "the Hypersonic Technology Vehicle 2 (HTV-2) is planned to have a strike range of about 17,000 km, which could reach China if launched from the continental United States. Even shorter-range systems like the Advanced Hypersonic 30 Weapon (AHW), which has a planned range of about 8,000 km and a tested range of over 3,800 km, can reach targets deep in China when launched from Guam."[38]

Such compressed decision windows significantly heighten the risk of miscalculation. With nuclear powers involved, misinterpreting an attack could have catastrophic consequences. Nations may be encouraged to take a launch-on-warning stance and possibly contemplate preemptive strikes as a result of the pressure to act swiftly. The threshold for using nuclear weapons could be

[36] Author's own analysis, based on Alan Cummings, "Hypersonic Weapons: Tactical Uses and Strategic Goals," *War on the Rocks*, November 12, 2019, https://warontherocks.com/2019/11/hypersonic-weapons-tactical-uses-and-strategic-goals/.
[37] Tong Zhao, "Conventional Challenges to Strategic Stability: Chinese Perception of Hypersonic Technology and the Security Dilemma," *Carnegie–Tsinghua Center for Global Policy*, July 23, 2018, 6, https://carnegietsinghua.org/2018/07/23/conventional-challenges-to-strategic-stability-chinese-perceptions-of-hypersonic-technology-and-security-dilemma-pub-76894.
[38] Ibid.

lowered by this weakening of deterrence, which could also make unintentional launches more likely.[39]

Because of their speed and agility, hypersonic weapons present a serious threat to current missile defense systems. Unlike traditional ballistic missiles with their parabolic arc-like trajectory, hypersonic missiles pose a significant threat due to their ability to achieve speed and maneuverability. This combination makes them incredibly difficult to intercept. Ballistic missile defense systems rely on early detection and predictable trajectories for successful interception. However, hypersonic missiles can evade detection until mere minutes before impact, significantly reducing reaction time. For example, a 3,000-kilometer-range long-range ballistic missile may be picked up by a surface-based radar about 12 minutes before it strikes. In contrast, the same radar would only have about 6 minutes to identify an incoming hypersonic glide vehicle (HGV) – a crucial difference that severely limits defensive capabilities.[40] This cuts down the detection and response duration markedly. This enables states with hypersonic missiles to penetrate an adversary's missile defense systems.

Hypersonic weapons provide a means for China and Russia to overcome the missile defenses of the US and reinstate the fundamental principle of nuclear deterrence - the idea of mutually assured destruction. The efficiency of Russia's nuclear weapons, especially its capacity to react in the event of a second strike, is seen as threatened by the missile defense systems of the US especially after the development. At the moment the US has limited boost phase, midcourse and terminal interception capabilities with Ground Based Interceptors (GBIs) deployed in at Fort Greely, Alaska, and Vandenberg Space Force Base, California.

Irrespective of US claims, these systems have some limited capabilities to intercept Russian missiles. In Russia's view, missiles with hypersonic capabilities offer the most reliable means to bypass US defenses and restore the credibility of its nuclear deterrent. China shares similar concerns regarding the missile defense systems of the US and its advanced conventional arms. While Russia's second-strike capability is less vulnerable due to a large nuclear force of estimated 5,459 warheads, China with a modest nuclear arsenal comprised of estimated 600 weapons is more

[39] Jeffrey Hill, "Hypersonic Highly Maneuverable Weapons and Their Effect on the Deterrence Status Quo," in *Assessing the Influence of Hypersonic Weapons on Deterrence*, ed. Paige Cone, *The Counter-proliferation Papers, Future Warfare Series* no. 59 (Maxwell AFB, AL: USAF Center for Strategic Deterrence Studies, Air University, June 2019), 68.

[40] R. H. Speier et al., *Hypersonic Missile Nonproliferation: Hindering the Spread of a New Class of Weapons* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017), 3, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2137.html.

vulnerable.[41] China worries that such systems fielded by the US could render China's smaller nuclear arsenal vulnerable to a preemptive attack, potentially undermining its ability to retaliate. This perception drives China's pursuit of hypersonic weapons as a means to strengthen its nuclear deterrence posture.[42] Tong Zhao, an expert from China states: "Beijing's efforts to follow Washington's example in developing hypersonic technology are then causing US suspicion about China's intentions. Many in Washington see China's growing hypersonic capability as a new military threat and believe the US should take measures to counter such threat. Such action-reaction dynamic is fueled by lack of accurate understanding about the nature of and motivation behind each other's programs and contributes to existing security dilemma".[43]

Hypersonic weapons also play a part in the A2/AD strategy. For countries like Russia and China using an A2/AD strategy can deploy hypersonic missiles to make the cost of intervening in a contested region unacceptably high for an adversary. For countries like the US hypersonic weapons are seen as a way to negate or pierce the enemy's A2/AD defenses. Thus, a typical security dilemma is created when big states develop hypersonic arms.

[41] Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda, "World Nuclear Forces," in *SIPRI Yearbook 2025: Armament, Disarmament and International Security* (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025).
[42] Tong Zhao, "Conventional Challenges to Strategic Stability: Chinese Perceptions of Hypersonic Technology and the Security Dilemma," *Carnegie–Tsinghua Center for Global Policy*, July 23, 2018, https://carnegietsinghua.org/2018/07/23/conventional-challenges-to-strategic-stability-chinese-perceptions-of-hypersonic-technology-and-the-security-dilemma-pub-76894.html.
[43] Tong Zhao, "Conventional Challenges to Strategic Stability: Chinese Perception of Hypersonic Technology and the Security Dilemma," *Carnegie–Tsinghua Center for Global Policy*, July 23, 2018, 22, https://carnegietsinghua.org/2018/07/23/conventional-challenges-to-strategic-stability-chinese-perceptions-of-hypersonic-technology-and-the-security-dilemma-pub-76894.html.

Detection of Ballistic missiles Vs Hypersonic Glide Vehicles

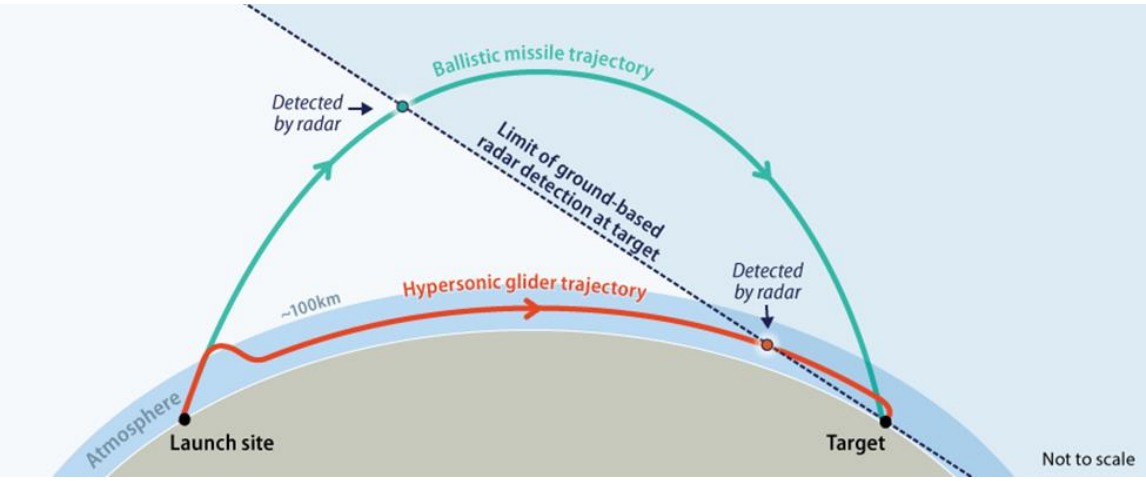

Fig 7[44]

Competitors view each country's quest for hypersonic capabilities as a threat and increase their investments in both this technology and counter-hypersonic defenses. This action-reaction cycle fuels an arms race with potentially destabilizing consequences. The US feels threatened by Russian and Chinese hypersonic weapons which are already deployed and seeks to augment its deterrence. The US is especially working on counter-hypersonic technology to be fielded in the late 2020s. It is also collaborating with allies to develop technology to defeat hypersonic weapons. Japan and the United States inked a deal in May 2024 to work together on the Glide Sphere Interceptor, a new missile defense system that will be deployed by the middle of the next decade to combat the threat posed by hypersonic missiles.[45]

The development of hypersonic missiles by other states like Japan, Australia, Germany, France, and UK will further complicate the deterrence calculations of Russia and China. While the development of hypersonic capability complicates, North Korea is a source of concern for the US and its allies especially the neighboring South Korea, which is pursuing hypersonic weapons of its

[44] Kelley M. Sayler, *Hypersonic Weapons: Background and Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service Report R45811 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, February 2024).
[45] "Japan, US to Develop Missile Defense System to Counter Hypersonic Weapons Threat," *Associated Press*, May 16, 2024.

own. Thus, this creates a domino effect of threat perceptions and subsequent hypersonic weapons development fueling destabilising arms race.

The other factor that can lead to destabilization is the issue of hypersonic missiles with conventional warheads, which brings up issues diluting the difference between conventional and strategic warfare. A devastating nuclear counterattack could occur if a hypersonic attack is mistakenly identified with a conventional or nuclear warhead.

Development of hypersonic missiles leads to complex conditions as far as international deterrence is concerned. On one hand, such weapons also give Russia and China certain security, as it might be possible to defeat the US missile defense and bring both countries to the same level. However, hypersonic missiles are more rapid. This is why there are more chances of misperception and unexpected escalation. It also enhances security dilemma among the major powers. This further aggravates the existing security tensions and leads to the emergence of a new arms race, which can accomplish development to even new heights of advanced counter-hypersonic missile systems.

Hypersonic Weapons: A Threat in South Asia

The hypersonic missile race takes a different angle in South Asia as the Indian race on this technology adds turmoil to an already volatile area. Pakistan and India, two nuclear-armed nations with a long history of distrust and conflict, make South Asia different from the rest of the world. Hypersonic missile introduction in this case would impact and alter the regional balance of power and the current deterrence calculations.

The introduction of hypersonic missiles in South Asia by India, could create a significant power imbalance. Hypersonic weapons' speed and maneuverability would give India a potential first-strike advantage. India might use hypersonic missiles to undertake a surprise attack with the goal of destroying Pakistan's strategic stockpile before a counterattack could be carried out. Any remaining counter missiles can, in theory, be intercepted with its missile defense systems. The literature provides support that the target state may be disarmed before it can respond if hypersonic missiles are utilized against countries with weak strategic capabilities.[46] India is also abandoning its policy of No First Use.[47]

[46] Speier et al., *Hypersonic Missile Non-Proliferation*, xi.
[47] Kumar Sundaram and M. V. Ramana, "India and the Policy of No First Use of Nuclear Weapons," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 1, no. 1 (2018).

The development of precision attack weaponry and India's shift towards a preemptive stance against Pakistan are also supported by the literature.[48] In order to support that goal, it is also creating a specialized military space program. Furthermore, India is shifting its policy against Pakistan from one of countervalue to one of counterforce. The development of hypersonic missiles by India is consistent with that strategy. This is particularly concerning for Pakistan. The threshold for nuclear war might be significantly lowered by the possibility of a use-it-or-lose-it scenario. Thus, this is extremely disruptive in South Asia, which is a fragile nuclear region.

The present missile flight durations of 5–10 minutes between India and Pakistan are frighteningly low. Hypersonic technology would drastically slash this window, potentially reducing it to few minutes. This compressed timeframe significantly reduces Pakistan's reaction time, heightening the risk of miscalculations and unintended escalation. As a result, the threat of nuclear conflict in South Asia intensifies. A Pakistani analyst, Adil Sultan,[49] says that in a conflict, "the Indian military planners could employ these weapon systems against Pakistan's short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) 'Nasr' for two apparent reasons: One, it will deter Pakistan from the early deployment of its tactical nuclear weapons and create space for India's Cold Start Doctrine (CSD); and secondly, the use of hypersonic weapons with conventional warheads, from an Indian perspective, could reduce the justification for nuclear retribution from the Pakistani side".[50]

[48] Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang, "India's Counterforce Temptations: Strategic Dilemmas, Doctrine, and Capabilities," *International Security* 43, no. 3 (Winter 2018/19).
[49] Adil Sultan, "Emerging Doctrines and Technologies in South Asia: Implications for Strategic Stability," *Strafasia*, September 9, 2020, https://strafasia.com/emerging-doctrines-and-technologies-in-south-asia-implications-for-strategic-stability.
[50] Adil Sultan, "Emerging Doctrines and Technologies in South Asia: Implications for Strategic Stability."

Comparison of Supersonic and Hypersonic Missile Flight Times

Type	Speed in Mach	Speed Km/ sec	Time(minutes) Delhi to Lahore
Sub-sonic (Nirbhay)	0.8	0.27 km/ sec	26.17
Supersonic Agni - I	2.5	0.86 km/ sec	8.21
Hypersonic Cruise Missile	Mach 7	2.40 km/ sec	2.94

Fig. 8[51]

When we look at hypersonic technology globally versus in South Asia, the security dynamics tell two very different stories. On the global stage, it is not just China and Russia building hypersonic to beat US defenses; the US is technically in the same boat, pushing concepts like the "Golden Dome" because Russia possesses some of the world's most advanced missile shields. However, the superpower equation is stabilized by sheer volume. Russia and the US have thousands of warheads, and since no interceptor system has a 100% success rate against that kind of saturation, mutual destruction is still assured. China, with its smaller arsenal compared to them, faces a different calculation, but the South Asian reality is unique.

While India's push for hypersonic missiles and ballistic missile defense is technically inspired by these international trends and prestige, its strategic aim is apparently Pakistan-centric, driven by deep-rooted tensions over territory and water issues. In this regional setting, where flight times are short and arsenals are smaller, India's missile defenses do not just modernize its military; they fundamentally challenge Pakistan's nuclear deterrence, creating a dangerous imbalance.

Hypersonic also fit into Indian precision strike weaponry category which it can use to exercise preemptive strike option against Pakistan should it chose to. One Pakistani analyst puts it aptly: "development of these missiles having shorter and intermediate ranges feed India's counterforce temptations … Shourya HSW (hypersonic weapon) with its 750km range can easily

[51] Adil Sultan and Itfa Khursheed, "Hypersonic Weapons in South Asia: Implications for Strategic Stability," *IPRI Journal* 11, no. 1 (2021).

target all of Pakistan's strategic locations - thus augmenting a counter-force mission against Pakistan. Similarly, BrahMos is also 'uniquely tailored' for a counterforce role".[52] Many analysts and decision makers in Pakistan believe that Indian hypersonic weapons are targeted against Pakistan.

All things considered, hypersonic missiles would give India a major advantage in the strategic deterrent equation, possibly jeopardizing Pakistan's capacity to conduct a guaranteed counterattack in an emergency. It exacerbates Pakistan's security predicament and presents new security concerns. It will probably trigger a new arms race because Pakistan would develop countermeasures.

Options for Pakistan

There are a number of strategic options available to Pakistan. One option is to make quantitative adjustments to its nuclear arsenal. Increasing the number of warheads would ensure a credible response even if India attempts a surprise attack. This would ensure that some nuclear weapons survive an Indian first strike, and Pakistan can still have a counter strike capability.

Pakistan could also combine increase in number of weapons with strategies like mobility, dispersion, and camouflage of its nuclear forces. Some analysts endorse this approach: "Pakistan could work on further improving the mobility of its SRBMs besides increasing their numbers with a greater mix of missiles with conventional and nuclear warheads. This is likely to complicate adversary's calculation, but it also raises the possibility of unintended escalation".[53]

To be able to fend off India's hypersonic missiles and preemptive counterforce temptations, Pakistan must bolster its sea-based nuclear deterrence. The Babur-3 cruise missile with 450 km range was tested in 2017.[54] This is especially aimed at circumventing missile defense systems. However, for a robust second-strike option, Pakistan needs to diversify its sea-based platforms. By

[52] Ayesha Abbasi, "Indian Quest for Hypersonic Missiles in South Asia and Disruption of Strategic Stability in the Indo-Pak Dyad."
[53] Adil Sultan and Itfa Khursheed, "Hypersonic Weapons in South Asia: Implications for Strategic Stability," *IPRI Journal* 11, no. 1 (2021): 18, https://journal.ipripak.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Article-3-IPRI-Journal-XXI-1.pdf.
[54] Ghazala Yasmin Jalil, "Missile Race in South Asia: Security Challenges for Pakistan in the 21st Century," *Strategic Studies* 40, no. 1 (2020): 51.

providing Pakistan with a guaranteed second-strike capability, it would dissuade India from making any preemptive moves.

To counter India's hypersonic edge, Pakistan may consider developing its own hypersonic capabilities. Pakistan could invest in scramjet research and development to create its own hypersonic missiles. However, this path is expensive and technologically demanding. While hypersonic weapons offer advantages in penetrating defenses and restoring deterrence balance, the significant costs and technological hurdles remain a challenge.

Conclusion

The advent of hypersonic weapons casts a shadow over global and regional security landscapes, impacting nuclear deterrence, accelerating arms races, and strategic stability. Globally, it is a double-edged sword. For Russia and China, hypersonic weapons offer a potential path to restoring deterrence by penetrating US missile defenses. However, the hypersonic missiles would likely lead to an arms race too as nations scramble for superior speed and countermeasures. This competition leading to a deadly arms race with ever-faster and more sophisticated hypersonic weapons. They are destabilizing since sheer speed of these weapons leaves less time for detection and reaction, heightening the risk of miscalculations and inadvertent escalation. This could lead to a lower nuclear threshold**.** Hypersonic weapons risk exacerbating the security dilemma. The action-reaction cycle between major powers could lead to a perpetual state of tension and distrust.

India's pursuit of hypersonic missiles threatens to disturb the precarious strategic balance in South Asia. India's BMD capability, coupled with hypersonic missiles, could erode Pakistan's deterrent capability. This asymmetric advantage might tempt India towards a preemptive strike strategy. This scenario significantly increases the chances of a devastating conflict, transforming South Asia into a volatile nuclear tinderbox. It deepens Pakistan's security dilemma. To maintain a credible deterrent, Pakistan may be forced to invest in counter-hypersonic technologies, develop its own hypersonic missiles, and reassess its nuclear posture. Ultimately, the introduction of hypersonic weapons in South Asia risks triggering a destabilizing arms race.

Hypersonic weapons' potential to cause instability in South Asia emphasizes how urgently international arms control measures are needed. Without laws to control the creation and spread of these weapons, the area would be caught up in a risky arms race with possibly disastrous

outcomes. However, achieving such agreements amidst existing political tensions and a lack of trust seems like a distant prospect. The international community must find innovative ways to foster dialogue and cooperation among major powers and between India and Pakistan to prevent a hypersonic arms race from taking root in South Asia. This could involve confidence-building measures such as hypersonic missile notifications, joint technical verification measures, regional risk reduction initiatives, and the pursuit of multilateral arms control treaties specifically focused on hypersonic technologies.

INDIAN NAVAL MODERNIZATION:

FROM BUYERS TO BUILDERS NAVY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIAN OCEAN REGION SECURITY

Abdul Moiz Khan and Usman Haider

Indian Naval Modernization: From Buyers to Builders Navy and Implications for Indian Ocean Region Security

Abdul Moiz Khan and Usman Haider*

Abstract

The successive Indian governments since 1947 have continually worked to indigenize the weapons manufacturing, particularly indigenous warship construction, given the country's extensive coastline along the Arabian Sea and the Andaman Sea. Over time, the aspiration to establish a blue-water navy intensified, leading to the deployment of an increasing number of warships and submarines. India consistently emphasized indigenization, recognizing that building such a navy requires more than merely importing ships and platforms. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's push for self-reliance, the domestic defence industry has apparently achieved a significant milestone by manufacturing all major naval platforms within Indian shipyards. To project influence across the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), India has aimed to develop a robust maritime force with both defensive and offensive capabilities. This effort reflects a broader ambition to emerge as a dominant maritime power in the region. The main question addressed in this paper is: How has India's effort to indigenize its warship-building industry and what implications does this development have for security dynamics in the IOR, especially for Pakistan? To explain this, the paper applies neorealism conceptual framework. This study finds that India, under Narendra Modi, has emerged as the only state in the IOR that has achieved the capability to build all types of warships domestically. This development is likely to create a security dilemma for IOR littoral states and may also threaten strategic stability between Islamabad and New Delhi. The paper concludes that India's ambitious naval modernization plans are more likely to accelerate maritime competition.

Keywords: Indian Ocean Region, Indian Navy, Modernization, Indigenization, South Asia, Buyers to Builders, Shipyards.

* Abdul Moiz Khan is a Research Officer at the Center for International Strategic Studies, Islamabad. He can be reached at kmoiz768@gmail.com.
Usman Haider is an Independent Researcher and holds an MPhil in Strategic Studies from National Defence University, Islamabad. He can be reached at usman.ssg@gmail.com.

Introduction

India's contemporary pursuit in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) appears to be based on its first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's belief that "history has shown that whatever power controls the IOR has, in the first instance, India's seaborne trade at her mercy and in the second India's very independence itself".[1] After independence, India's outlook on security was continental rather than maritime, as evident in the financial allocations, procurement of technology and capabilities, and the Indian Navy's lack of operational readiness.[2] For instance, the navy's share of the Indian defence budget was only 4% in 1950-51.[3]

The Indian naval budget increased in the post-Cold War era.[4] From that time onwards, the Indian Navy's importance in the grand Indian strategy has been growing steadily, especially under the reign of Narendra Modi. Under his tenure, the Indian Navy received additional funding. In addition, he took an interest in enhancing India's naval capabilities, which can be depicted from his statement, "in the past, security concerns in the Asia-Pacific region and the Indian Ocean have long been ignored. But today, this area is a major defence priority for the country. That is why we are working in every direction, from increasing the budget for the navy to increasing its capability".[5]

To accomplish this, he emphasized self-reliance because a country depending on other states for its armaments cannot rise to the stature of a major global power. This was New Delhi's dilemma as it wanted great power status but depended on other states for its military needs. To overcome this dilemma, India is moving from a buyer's navy to a builder's navy to achieve its goals. This transition is well underway, with the Indian shipbuilding industry now delivering one ship every 40 days.[6]

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[1] Donald L. Berlin, "India in the Indian Ocean," *Naval War College Review* 59, no. 4 (2006): 58–59.
[2] K. M. Panikkar, *India and the Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History* (New Delhi: Creative Media Partners, 2021).
[3] Gulab Mohanlal Hiranandani, *Transition to Triumph: History of the Indian Navy, 1965–1975* (New Delhi: Lancer Publishers, 2000).
[4] Rahul Roy-Chaudhury, "Indian Naval Expenditure in the 1990s," *Strategic Analysis* 22, no. 5 (1998): 675–90.
[5] Tayfun Ozberk, "Indian Navy Commissions Indigenous Aircraft Carrier 'INS Vikrant,'" *Naval News*, September 2, 2022, https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2022/09/indian-navy-commissions-ins-vikrant/
[6] Vikram Mittal, "The Indian Navy Is Building And Fielding A New Ship Every 40 Days," *Forbes*, November 11, 2025, https://www.forbes.com/sites/vikrammittal/2025/11/11/the-indian-navy-is-building-and-fielding-a-new-ship-every-40-days/.

Indian Naval Modernization: From Buyers to Builders Navy and Implications for Indian Ocean Region Security

India's contemporary naval modernization is driven by a convergence of strategic, doctrinal, and technological imperatives aimed at enhancing its influence across the IOR. Central to this transformation is India's pursuit of nuclear-powered submarines equipped with both short- and long-range submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). This modernization is closely tied to India's transition from a predominantly buyer's navy to an increasingly indigenous builder's navy, enabled through domestic shipbuilding programs, defense industrial partnerships, and incremental doctrinal adaptation. Indigenization is not merely an economic or technological choice but a strategic one.

Scholars such as Hiranandani emphasize institutional learning, leadership, and the Indian Navy's role in shaping indigenous shipbuilding.[7] Holmes, Yoshihara, and Winner analyze Indian naval strategy, sea power thinking, and maritime competition in the Indian Ocean.[8] In addition, works of Frank O'Donnell and others focus on India's pursuit of nuclear-powered submarines and their impact on deterrence and regional stability in the IOR.[9]

However, there exists less scholarly work on how the Indian Navy has ended its reliance on ships and submarines procured from foreign countries. Furthermore, the geopolitical implications for the IOR remain under-examined as India reduces its reliance on foreign suppliers and accelerates its domestic naval induction.

This research aims to cover this gap. It identifies that the Indian Navy has transitioned from being a buyer to being a builder. The study explains that India has achieved the goal of having all ships and submarines designed and built domestically. This happened because the Indian government has upgraded its shipyards to the point that they are now capable of constructing not only large, bulky aircraft carriers but also complex machines such as nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs). Moreover, it will serve as a foundational stone for future studies

[7] Priyanka Patel, Sameer Patil, and Arun Vishwanathan, "India's Quest for Defence Indigenisation: A Case Study of the Indian Navy," *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 10, no. 3 (December 2023): 364–94, https://doi.org/10.1177/23477970231207255.
[8] James R. Holmes, Andrew C. Winner, and Toshi Yoshihara, *Indian Naval Strategy in the Twenty-First Century*, Cass Series—Naval Policy and History 44 (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).
[9] Frank O'Donnell and Yogesh Joshi, "Lost at Sea: The Arihant in India's Quest for a Grand Strategy," *Comparative Strategy* 33, no. 5 (October 2014): 466–81, https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2014.962970.

because it illustrates that the rationale for becoming a builder navy is to accomplish the broader goal of becoming and maintaining a blue water navy.

The primary question addressed in this paper is: How has India's effort to indigenize its warship-building industry, particularly under the Modi government, shaped this process, and what implications does this development have for security dynamics in the IOR especially for Pakistan?

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, drawing upon both primary and secondary sources to examine India's naval modernization and its strategic implications. Primary sources include official policy documents, doctrinal statements, government reports, and speeches by senior civilian and military officials, while secondary sources consist of academic literature, think-tank analyses, and reputable media reports. This approach facilitates an in-depth interpretation of how India's maritime capabilities are conceptualized, justified, and operationalized, while also enabling assessment of their broader implications for regional security and strategic stability in South Asia and other regions of the IOR.

After this section, paper discusses, theoretical framework of Neorealism. Next, the article discusses Indian naval maritime strategies by illustrating how much they emphasize building surface and submerged platforms domestically. Following this, the article illuminates the organizational structure responsible for overseeing and making decisions about naval vessel construction. Moving into the middle section, which forms the core of the study, the article explains how and when the foundational stones were laid for building naval platforms and how the process was accelerated under Modi's government. Moreover, this section further explains the measures taken by Modi's government to upgrade the capabilities of shipyards to enhance their operational efficiency and capacity.

The latter half of the article identifies the future platforms that will be constructed in India over the next fifteen years. In the last section, the article explains that the ongoing modernization of the Indian Navy in the form of uplifting the shipbuilding industry can increase India's power projection in the IOR in an unprecedented manner, fuelling strategic imbalance and instability. Therefore, the primary focus of this research paper is to analyze the indigenization of the Indian naval fleet, how India has transitioned from being a buyer to a builder's navy, and to explore India's ambitions in the IOR, as well as how these ambitions threaten the IOR's stability

Theoretical Framework

According to Kenneth Waltz, who laid the foundation of the Neo-Realist school of thought, there is anarchy at the international structure level, lacking any central authority. He argues that states are like units in their functions, and each state is there for itself only, i.e., focused on self-help.[10] In this kind of structure, if a state increases its power, it forces other states to find means to counter its influence. In the context of IOR, this international anarchy explains the implications of Indian naval modernization and indigenization for other regional states. This gave rise to the security dilemma, which, according to John Herz, who first coined the term, defines it as the never-ending cycle in which an actor in an effort to secure itself from rival groups or individuals, tries to acquire more and more power, which in turn renders the others more insecure and compels them to take their own initiatives to secure themselves and as a result the vicious cycle never stops.[11]

The theoretical lens of Neorealism can aptly explain the causal effect of a buyer-dependent force on an indigenous builder navy in the IOR. In an anarchic structure, the top most priority of all states is survival and securing self-interest. The resulting security dilemma of other states can push a region to pursue a path of military build-up, eventually affecting regional stability.[12] As India has ended its reliance on foreign actors and indigenized shipbuilding, it can project its naval power in the IOR.

India and Pakistan have been in a strategic rivalry since their independence. If India increases its influence in IOR, Pakistan will have no option other than to weigh its preferences to balance the regional order through internal or external balancing. Moreover, Indian hegemonic aims threaten other regional actors. The regions in the IOR, especially South Asia and Southeast Asia, will be affected by Indian power projection, while New Delhi keeps increasing its influence for its benefit.

[10] Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 25.
[11] Shiping Tang, "The Security Dilemma: A Conceptual Analysis," *Security Studies* 18, no. 3 (2009): 590.
[12] John H. Herz, "Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 2, no. 2 (1950): 158.

Maritime Strategies and Emphasis on Indigenization

A strategy is formulated to achieve the desired political objectives using available resources. The Indian political objective of having a blue-water naval force in the IOR could only be achieved through indigenization. Keeping this in view, the Navy has also overtly stressed the need to attain self-sufficiency in building warships and submarines. Following the 2007 publication of 'Freedom to Use the Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy', the Navy's strategic documents have increasingly focused on the process of indigenization. This maritime document's basic premise was to underscore the significance of the Indian Navy in enabling New Delhi to use the Indian Ocean waterways for its national interests.[13] However, at the same time, the doctrine unambiguously stated that it is a strategic necessity for any state to design and construct naval warships.[14] To uphold this maxim, the Indian Navy will adopt specific processes that shorten design and construction times and reduce costs to support the Navy's indigenous capability enhancement. Moreover, the doctrine underscored the significance of a robust public-private partnership, which will be essential for India to maintain a strong defence industrial base and guide the country on the path toward self-reliance.[15]

The doctrine, "Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy," was introduced in 2015.[16] It shifted policy from freedom of seas to actively ensuring the security of seas, expanding the role of the Indian Navy. The 2015 strategy outlined India's maritime security objectives, which include strengthening net security within India's area of interest, protecting coastal and offshore assets from sea-based threats, and developing a force capable of fulfilling India's maritime security needs. In short, the maritime doctrine reflects the evolving outlook and priorities of the Indian Navy. The Navy affirmed in its 2015 strategy document that it would continue on the path of self-reliance.[17] The Navy underscored its success in its achievement of transformation from "a buyer's navy to a 'builder's navy".[18] It revealed that the service will take measures to increase self-reliance

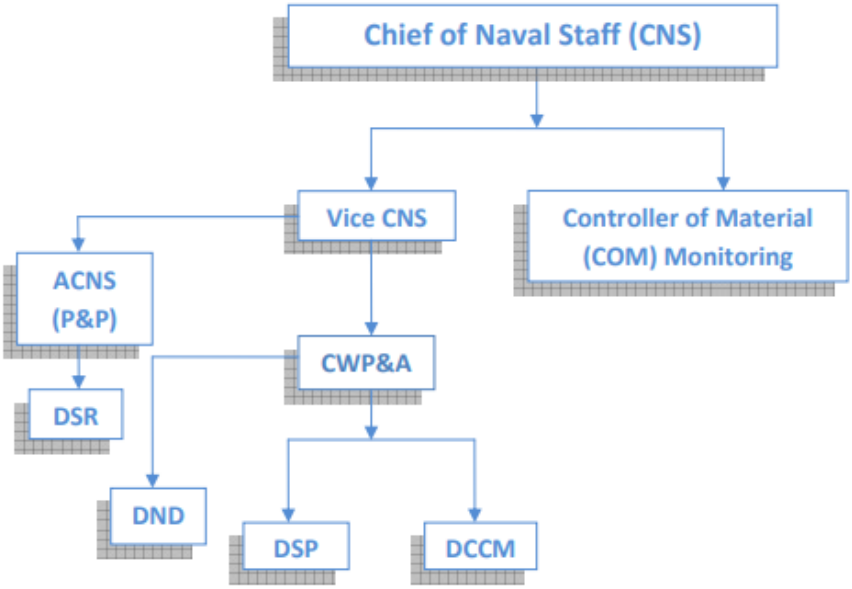
[13] Allah Nawaz, "India's Evolving Maritime Strategy," *South Asian Voices*, March 31, 2023, https://southasianvoices.org/indias-evolving-maritime-strategy/.
[14] Directorate of Strategy, Concepts and Transformation, *Freedom to Use the Seas: India's Maritime Military Strategy* (New Delhi: Integrated Headquarters Ministry of Defence [Navy], 2007), 121.
[15] Concepts and Transformation, *Freedom to Use the Seas*, 124.
[16] Directorate of Strategy, Concepts and Transformation, *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy* (New Delhi: Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence [Navy], 2015), accessed August 15, 2025.
[17] Concepts and Transformation, *Ensuring Secure Seas*, 131.
[18] Ibid.

in warship construction and focus more on domestic production of modern naval arms and ammunition. The Navy will focus on designing and producing advanced platforms, equipment, and systems to meet its operational needs within competitive timeframes and budgets. This may involve Indian companies forming consortia, joint ventures, and public-private partnerships with foreign partners, including technology transfer (ToT), in line with government policies.[19] All these efforts will contribute to attaining the grand strategy goal of having strategic autonomy vis-à-vis naval vessel construction.

Warship Building Organizational Hierarchy

The Indian Navy tightly controls the warship and submarine building, from formulating procedures and protocols to be followed while building these platforms. The Naval chief remains the principal authority, but he does not oversee the routine operational work, which falls under the office of the Vice Chief of Naval Staff (VCNS), which deals with sanctioning the building of surface and submerged vessels.[20] Under the command of VCNS lie various departments, such as the Assistant Chief of Naval Staff (Policy and Plan), who reports to the VCNS and oversees all perspectives, force level, financial, and infrastructure plans and programmes of the Navy. The Directorate of Naval Design (DND) comprises engineers who design various ships. The Directorate of Ship Production (DSP) is each ship class's project manager. Both DND and DSP operate under the Controller of Warship Production and Acquisition (CWP&A). The Directorate of Cost and Contract Management (DCCM), also under CWP&A, manages budget control and coordinates ship construction contracts. Together, these directorates are responsible for designing, producing, procuring equipment and materials, and managing finances related to the ships under construction. In addition to controlling the product's quality, the responsibility lies with the Controller of Material Monitoring (COM) office, the operational unit in charge of monitoring all the activities related to the construction of naval vessels. The organizational hierarchy is mentioned in the organogram below;

[19] Ibid., 132.
[20] Controller, Auditor General of India, *Chapter 1: Warship Building – An Overview*, report (New Delhi: Controller, Auditor General of India, 2011), accessed August 20, 2025, https://cag.gov.in/uploads/download_audit_report/2011/Union_Performance_Defence_Indigenous_Construction_Naval_Warships_32_2010_chapter_1.pdf.



Source: Controller, Auditor General of India.[21]

Indian Navy's Indigenous Capability Development: From Buyer's to Builders Navy

The Indian government's acquisition of Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Limited (MDSL) in 1960 proved the first practical step towards the indigenous production of warships.[22] It was envisioned that the Navy could build frigates domestically. For this purpose, the technical teams were sent to the Netherlands and Sweden; however, they recommended directly buying Leander-class frigates from the United Kingdom (UK) for techno-economic reasons.[23] However, twenty-one years after independence, after the upgradation of MDSL, the government decided to build them in India. As a result, the first frigate, INS Nilgiri, was launched in 1968 based on the design of the UK's Leander-class frigates.[24] This was a significant milestone for India. Following this, India achieved another accomplishment when, in 1983, INS Godavari, the first warship designed and built

[21] Auditor General of India, "Chapter 1: Warship Building -An overview."
[22] Hiranandani, *Transition to Triumph*, 08.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid, 68.

indigenously, was commissioned into service.[25] Unlike the Leander-class ships, Project 16 warships were designed on an entirely new platform; consequently, the Naval Design Directorate took over the project from the Leander Project Directorate.[26] Since the success of these two aforementioned projects, the Navy has been able to produce various ships domestically. However, regardless of their success, the navy still relies on foreign-built platforms, especially Russian-origin warships, to fulfil its needs. This is evident from the occasional procurement of frontline vessels such as INS Viraat and INS Vikramditya carriers, Rajput-class destroyers, Talwar-class frigates, and other platforms. However, when Modi became Prime Minister, the policy was adopted to completely indigenize the warship building.

Likewise, the journey to build an indigenous submarine was not easy for the Indian Navy. It took the Indian domestic industry decades after partition to begin designing, building, and launching submarines from its naval dockyards. India's first locally built diesel-electric submarine (SSK) was the INS Shalki, a license-produced copy of the German Type 209.[27] Work began on the hull in 1984 at MDSL, and the submerged platform was launched in 1989.[28] Finally, in 1992, the maiden indigenously built submarine was commissioned into India's silent force.[29] After successfully building the Type 209 submarines domestically, India signed a new agreement with France in 2005 to build six Kalvari-class submarines indigenously.[30] On the other hand, the plan to construct an SSBN program, the Advanced Technological Vehicle (ATV), secretly began with Soviet technical support in 1984.[31] The INS Arihant-class submarines are being built by the Shipbuilding Centre (SBC) at Naval Dockyards in Vishakhapatnam, a facility designed to

[25] V. Narayan, "INS Godavari Sets Sail into the Sunset after 3 Decades," *Times of India*, December 21, 2015, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/INS-Godavari-sets-sail-into-the-sunset-after-3-decades/articleshow/50259958.cms.
[26] Gulab Mohanlal Hiranandani, *Transition to Eminence: The Indian Navy 1976–1990* (New Delhi: Lancer Publishers, 2005), 64.
[27] "The Indian SSN Project: An Open Literature Analysis," Federation of American Scientists, accessed September 2, 2025, https://nuke.fas.org/guide/india/sub/ssn/part01.htm.
[28] Ibid.
[29] K. G. Ramkumar and Prakash Panneerselvam, "Indian Navy's Submarine Development Programme: A Critical Assessment," *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 10, no. 3 (2023): 402, https://doi.org/10.1177/23477970231207258.
[30] Captain M. Doraibabu and Commander Amrut Dilip Godbole, *A Decade of Transformation: The Indian Navy 2011–2021* (New Delhi: HarperCollins Publishers, 2023), 98.
[31] K. G. Ramkumar and Prakash Panneerselvam, "Indian Navy's Submarine Development Programme: A Critical Assessment," *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 10, no. 3 (2023): 399, https://doi.org/10.1177/23477970231207258.

manufacture SSBNs.[32] However, India took around two and a half decades to launch its first domestically produced SSBN in 2009. Finally, it was commissioned into service in 2016 and carried out its first deterrent patrol two years later.[33]

Table: 1

Submarine Name	Type	Commissioned Year	Builder
INS Shalki	SSK	1992	MDSL
INS Shankul	SSK	1994	MDSL
INS Arihant	SSBN	2009	SBC
INS Kalvari	SSK	2017	MDSL
INS Khanderi	SSK	2019	MDSL
INS Karanj	SSK	2021	MDSL
INS Vela	SSK	2021	MDSL
INS Vagir	SSK	2023	MDSL
INS Arighat	SSBN	2024	SBC
INS Vagsheer	SSK	2025	MDSL

Source: Author's own Compilation using different sources.

Indigenization in the Modi Era

The idea of transforming from a buyer's navy to a builder's navy is part of Modi's ambitious plan to indigenize naval power. Since becoming Prime Minister in 2014, Modi has emphasized reducing reliance on foreign countries. In line with his policy, the Indian Navy put forward a guideline document, the Indian Naval Indigenization Plan (INIP) 2015-2030, to achieve its objective of indigenization.[34] This was per the Modi policy of Make in India, which includes building ships and submarines, weapon systems, and spare parts domestically.[35] The INIP was introduced to completely transform the Navy from buyer to builder, which was echoed by the Indian naval chief

[32] "The Secret Undersea Weapon," *India Today*, January 30, 2008, https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/defence/story/20080128-the-secret-undersea-weapon-735178-2008-01-17.
[33] Doraibabu and Godbole, *A decade of transformation*, 101.
[34] Dost Barrech, Mukesh Kumar Khatwani, and Ayesha Alam, "Indian Naval Transformation under Modi Regime: Implications for Pakistan," *Pakistan Vision* 25, no. 1 (June 2024): 89.
[35] Dinaker Peri, "Navy Aligns Indigenisation Plan with 'Make in India'," *The Hindu*, July 21, 2025, https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/navy-aligns-indigenisation-plan-with-make-in-india/article7444736.ece.

Robin K Dhowan's statement in 2015, when he stated that "the blueprint for the future Indian navy remains firmly anchored on self-reliance and indigenization".[36] Under Modi's government in the last decade, the Navy has commissioned 33 surface platforms and seven submarines, totalling 40.[37] However, 39 naval platforms out of 40 were built indigenously.[38]

The INIP plan is progressing. Indigenous warship production saw steep growth; almost all warships have been built in domestic shipyards. Shipyards' upgradation process facilitated the building of frontline ships and submarines for the Indian Navy, including INS Vikrant, Kalvari, and Arihant class submarines, Visakhapatnam and Kolkata class destroyers, Nilgiri Frigates, Shivalik class frigates, and Kamrota class corvettes. Apart from vessel construction, small materials like spares and electrical equipment are indigenously built simultaneously. The navy has indigenized around 3,400 items under INIP, including over 2,000 machinery and electrical spares, over 1000 aviation spares, and over 250 weapon spares.[39] According to INIP, 90% of indigenization has been achieved in the float category, 60% in the move category, and 50% in the fight category.[40] The float part comprises the hull along with its fittings and components. The Move section encompasses the engine and all elements that facilitate movement. Complete propulsion systems include associated machinery and auxiliaries. Fight covers sensors and weapons. The Indian Navy is focusing its indigenisation efforts on propulsion, power generation, weapons, and sensors.[41]

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[36] Rajit Pandit, "Govt Moves to Turn Buyer's Navy into a Builder's Navy," *Times of India*, July 17, 2015, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/govt-moves-to-turn-buyers-navy-into-a-builders-navy/articleshow/48106944.cms.

[37] Ministry of Defence, "Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi Dedicates to the Nation Frontline Naval Combatants – INS Surat, INS Nilgiri & INS Vaghsheer – in Mumbai," press release, January 15, 2025, https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2093018.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Dinaker Peri, "Navy Accelerates Indigenisation Efforts, Focus on Weapons and Aviation Items," *The Hindu*, April 16, 2022, https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/navy-accelerates-indigenisation-efforts-focus-on-weapons-and-aviation-items/article65324255.ece.

[40] Mayank Singh, "Indian Navy's 262 Indigenous Projects under Advance Stage," *The Indian Express*, October 27, 2024, https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2024/Oct/27/indian-navys-262-indigenous-projects-under-advance-stage.

[41] Ibid.

Upgradation of Shipyards

There are 53 shipyards, which form the backbone of the Indian shipbuilding industry.[42] These shipyards can integrate all equipment required for warship/submarine building: floating hull, power engine, and armaments. The equipment associated with hull structures and fittings comes under the float category. Propulsion systems, power generation engines, alternators, associated control and auxiliary mechanical systems, fire-fighting systems, and general electrical equipment come under the move category. All ship-borne weapons and sensor systems that improve the ship's combat capability are associated with the fight category. The key shipyards involved in building warships and submarines are mentioned in Table 2.

Table 2

Key Shipyard Names	**Ownership**	**Operational Control**
Ship Building Centre (SBC)	Public	Defence Ministry
Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Limited (MDSL)	Public	Defence Ministry
Garden Reach Shipbuilders and Engineers (GRSE)	Public	Defence Ministry
Goa Shipyard Limited (GSL)	Public	Defence Ministry
Hindustan Shipyard Limited (HSL)	Public	Defence Ministry
Cochin Shipyard Limited CSL)	Public	Shipping Ministry
Hooghly Dock and Port Engineers Limited (HDPEL)	Public	Shipping Ministry

Source: Compiled by author from the Ministry of Defence website.

In addition, the Indian government has taken various initiatives in the last two decades to increase the shipbuilding capacity of its existing public sector shipyards. The rationale is to end complete reliance on foreign shipbuilders in order to accomplish the status of blue-water navy and maintain it, one needs to have the capacity and resources to build their warships and submarines indigenously, like China and the US. It is evident from the fact that the INS Tamal, a Talwar-class

[42] Ministry of Ports, Shipping, and Waterways, *Annual Report 2024–25*, report (New Delhi: Ministry of Ports, Shipping, and Waterways, 2025), 50, accessed September 1, 2025, https://shipmin.gov.in/sites/default/files/Annual%20Report%202024-25%20-%20English.pdf.

frigate, is the last ship constructed outside India.[43] As per the Indian government's announcement, all surface and submerged platforms will be built domestically from now on. At present, the current shipyards, including both private and public sector shipyards, have the capacity to fulfil this ambitious task.

MDSL remains the principal shipyard for building strategic naval vessels. So far, it has built 30 warships and eight conventional submarines for the Indian Navy.[44] It is capable of constructing both surface warships and submarines. It remains the primary facility for constructing all SSKs built in India. Its shipbuilding capacity has increased as it can build five naval warships compared to three in the past, and its submarine construction capacity has increased from three to six.[45] In addition to the MDSL, SBC remains another facility capable of building submarines, especially the SSBNs.

CSL is the only public-sector shipyard in India that can build a warship of 1,10,000 Deadweight Tons (DWT), which will be increased to around 3,00,000 DWT, enabling India to produce large aircraft carriers.[46] Like MDSL, it also has three dry docks for ship construction and four repair units, which can work simultaneously.[47] The third dry dock, which is 1017.06 ft in length, 246 ft in width, and 43 ft in depth, became operational in 2024.[48] It also has a newly installed crane with a capacity to lift a load of about 600 tons, making it the largest facility in India.[49]

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[43] Javaria Rana, "All about INS Tamal, the Last Overseas-Built Frigate Set to Guard India's Western Waters," *The Print*, June 30, 2025, https://theprint.in/defence/all-about-ins-tamal-the-last-overseas-built-frigate-set-to-guard-indias-western-waters/2674704/.

[44] Mazagaon Dock Shipbuilding Limited, *Annual Report 2024–25*, report (Mumbai: Mazagaon Dock Shipbuilding Limited, 2025), 12, accessed August 20, 2025, https://mazagondock.in/images/pdf/Annual%20Report%20FY%202024-25.pdf.

[45] Ministry of Defence, "Ship Building Capacity of Indian Navy," press release, March 8, 2016, https://www.pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=137430.

[46] Ministry of Ports, Shipping, and Waterways, *Annual Report 2024–25*, report (New Delhi: Ministry of Ports, Shipping, and Waterways, 2024), 59, accessed August 20, 2025, https://shipmin.gov.in/sites/default/files/Annual%20Report%202023-24_English.pdf.

[47] "Location," *Cochin Shipyard Limited*, accessed 20 August 2025, https://cochinshipyard.in/location.

[48] "Cochin Shipyard Set to Take a Giant Leap on Global Stage with New Dry Dock and Repair Facility," *Indian Shipping News*, January 16, 2024, https://indiashippingnews.com/cochin-shipyard-set-to-take-a-giant-leap-on-global-stage-with-new-dry-dock-and-repair-facility/.

[49] Ibid.

HSL, which is located in Visakhapatnam, is also renowned for building large warships. However, it has the additional capability of repairing and overhauling submarines.[50] It is the second largest facility after CSL, with a capacity of 80,000 DWT for ship building and 70,000 DWT for ship repairs.[51] GRSE, on the other hand, is on the path of modernization and increasing its shipbuilding capacity. Its previous capacity was to build 20 naval vessels of different types annually; however, in 2024, it constructed 24 of them.[52] Moreover, by the end of 2025, the capacity is expected to increase to 28.[53] Table 3 lists the specifications of key shipyards that built the Indian Navy's surface and submerged fleet.

Table 3

Shipyards	**Present Ship-building DWT Capacity**	**Construction Ship Dry Dock**	**Submarine Construction Dry Dock**	**Large Wet Basins**	**Large &Slipways**	**Goliath Crane Capacity (Ton)**
MDSL	Approx. 40,000	03	01	03	09	300
GRSE	10,000	01	Nil	01	01	250
GSL	6,000	02	Nil	01	01	100
HSL	80,000	01	01	01	03	250
CSL	1,25,000	03	Nil	01	03	600, 300, & 150

Source: Author's Own Compilation from different sources.

Indian Navy's shipbuilding capability has increased substantially in the last two and a half decades. It achieved mastery in building warships, a highly intricate and multifaceted task encompassing a range of processes such as feasibility studies, design considerations, system integration, construction, testing, and sea trials. It is now building complex systems independently, from aircraft carriers to nuclear-powered submarines. Besides, the construction time has decreased, as

[50] "Ship Repairs Division," Hindustan Shipyard Limited, accessed August 20, 2025, https://web.archive.org/web/20111008112209/http://www.hsl.nic.in/sr.html.
[51] Ibid.
[52] "GRSE Boosts Shipbuilding Capacity to 28 Vessels by End of 2025, Eyes Green Field Expansion," *Indian Defence Research Wing*, May 24, 2025, https://idrw.org/grse-boosts-shipbuilding-capacity-to-28-vessels-by-end-of-2025-eyes-greenfield-expansion/.
[53] Ibid.

exemplified by the Nilgiri class frigates. Initially, it was estimated that the ships would be built in a time frame of approximately seven years. However, due to the constant upgrades of shipyards and efficiency in supply chains, the time has been reduced to four years.[54]

Future of Indian Naval Indigenization

In addition to the Arihant project, India plans to construct four additional S-5 class SSBNs with a displacement of about 12,000-13,500 tons.[55] Construction is likely to begin in 2027. The S-5s will likely have 12-16 missile tubes, more than the earlier Arihant class.[56] The SSBNS will be capable of carrying new and advanced K-6 SLBMs with a range of 8,000 kilometers.[57] Besides K-6, India is also developing K-5 with a 5,000-kilometer targeting range.[58] The missiles are currently in the development phase, and once operational, they can provide India with an assured second-strike capability. Moreover, the Indian Navy has amended its 30-year submarine building plan to include the program of indigenously building six SSNs.[59] The SSNs will have a 6,000-ton displacement with almost 95 percent indigenous content and will be built at the SBC in Visakhapatnam.[60] These SSNs will provide round-the-clock security to India's SSBNs and increase the strike options for the Indian Navy's conventional submerged operations. India's operationalization of its expanded SSN and SSBN fleet would increase India's power projection in the region, incentivizing it to flex its muscles.

On the conventional side, the Indian Navy approved the building of six new conventional submarines in the coming years, equipped with cutting-edge Air Independent Propulsion (AIP) technology and modern missiles, under the aegis of a Project named P-75I, worth over 40000 CR

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[54] Ajay Banerjee, "New Tech Speeds up Warship Making," *Tribune India*, August 27, 2023, https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/features/new-tech-speeds-up-warship-making-538620.
[55] "India Gears Up for Commencement of S5-Class SSBN Manufacturing," *Indian Defence Research Wing*, August 21, 2025, https://idrw.org/india-gears-up-for-commencement-of-s5-class-ssbn-manufacturing/.
[56] Usman Haider, "S5-Class Submarines: Assessing Capabilities and Potential Risks to Region," *Strategic Forecast*, September 26, 2025, https://strategicforecast.cissajk.org.pk/?p=22713.
[57] "Indian Navy to Test K-6 Hypersonic Ballistic Missile for Future Underwater Nuclear Strike Force," *Army Recognition*, July 5, 2025, https://armyrecognition.com/news/navy-news/2025/indian-navy-to-test-k-6-hypersonic-ballistic-missile-for-future-underwater-nuclear-strike-force.
[58] Dr Zahir Kazmi, "The K-5 Conundrum: India's Rising Missile Reach and the Global Blind Spot," *Strategic Forecast*, April 16, 2025, https://strategicforecast.cissajk.org.pk/?p=20927.
[59] Rahuil Bedi, "India to Approve Plans for Six-Boat Nuclear Submarine Fleet," *JANES*, https://www.janes.com/osint-insights/defence-news/industry/india-to-approve-plans-for-six-boat-nuclear-submarine-fleet.
[60] Ibid.

Indian rupees.[61] The submarines under P-75I will replace the older Shishumar class submarines. At the moment, there are three contenders for the P-75-I project: one is the French Barracuda type, the Second is the South Korean DSME-3000, and the third and final is the Spanish S-80 Plus.[62] These companies fulfil the two prerequisites set by the Indian Navy: the boats should be able to carry AIP systems and be armed with land attack and anti-ship cruise missiles.

Likewise, plans exist to construct further indigenous surface vessels. The leading among them is the Project-18 class destroyers, which will potentially carry 144 VLS-launched missiles, including India's premier system, BrahMos.[63] The ships will carry an additional payload compared to the existing Vishakhapatnam-class, which only has 48-cell VLS capability.[64] This indicates the arsenal that new Project-18 warships will possess, but simultaneously demonstrates the domestic shipping industry's ability to build such a sophisticated platform. The Navy is expected to commission six to ten vessels; however, given their capability, more can also be inducted.[65] In addition, the Indian Navy signed an agreement with CSL and GRSE to build eight Anti-Submarine Warfare Shallow Water Craft (ASW-SWC) anti-submarine corvettes.[66] Some are launched, delivered, and inducted, while three remain under construction. Moreover, in the unmanned platforms domain, Krishna Defence and Allied Industries Ltd (KDAIL) has been selected to build unmanned Underwater Vehicles (UUVs), for which the first platform's steel-cutting ceremony took place in June 2025.[67] Table 4 shows the principal vessels that will be built by the Indian shipyards in the next fifteen years.

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[61] Ministry of Defence, "MoD Issues RFP for Construction of Six P-75(I) Submarines for Indian Navy," press release, July 20, 2021, https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1737191.

[62] H. I. Sutton, "Incident: Indian Navy Submarine Reported in International Waters off Pakistan," *Naval News*, https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2021/10/incident-indian-navy-submarine-reported-in-international-waters-off-pakistan/.

[63] "Project 18: India Developing Next-Gen Destroyer That Can Carry 144 Missiles, Including BrahMos, and Track Enemies 500 km Away," *The Economic Times*, July 31, 2025, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/new-updates/project-18-india-developing-next-gen-destroyer-that-can-carry-144-missiles-including-brahmos-and-track-enemies-500-km-away/articleshow/123013487.cms?from=mdr.

[64] Ibid.

[65] "Project 18 (P-18) Next-Generation Destroyer: India's Path to a Standardized, Cost-Effective Naval Powerhouse," *Indian Defence Research Wing*, August 4, 2025, https://idrw.org/project-18-p-18-next-generation-destroyer-indias-path-to-a-standardized-cost-effective-naval-powerhouse/.

[66] Usman Haider and Ali Panjhuta, "India's New Shallow Water Anti-Submarine Corvettes: Options for Pakistan," Islamabad Policy Institute, December 2, 2025, https://ipi.org.pk/indias-new-shallow-water-anti-submarine-corvettes-options-for-pakistan/.

[67] "Construction of India's Largest Unmanned Submarine 'Jalkapi' Begins in Halol, Gujarat," *Desh Gujarat*, June 11, 2025, https://deshgujarat.com/2025/06/11/construction-of-indias-largest-unmanned-submarine-jalkapi-begins-in-halol-gujarat/.

Table: 4

Platform	Type	Builder	Quantity
INS Vishaal	Air Craft Carrier	CSL	01
S5 class	SSBN	SBC	04
Project 77	SSN	SBC	06
Kalvari Class	SSK	MDSL	03
Project-75	SSK	MDSL	06
Swimmer Delivery Vehicle	Midget Submarine	N/A	02
UUV	UUV	KDAIL	12
Project 18 class	Destroyer	MDSL	06-10
Project 17B-class	Frigate	MDSL/GRSE	8-10
Next Generation Corvettes	Corvette	CSL	08
ASW-SWC Class	Corvette	4 each by CSL and GRSE	03
NGMVs Class	Corvette	CSL	06
NGC Class	Corvette	5 by GRSE and 3 by CSL	08
MCMV	Minesweeper	N/A	12
Samarthak-class	MPV	L&T	02
NG-MPV	MPV	Likely to be L&T	02
NG-OPV	OPV	GSL and GRSE	08-11
HSL class	FRO	HSL and L&T	04-05

Source: Author's own compilation by using different sources.

Moreover, the Indian shipping industry will also build other platforms, as shown in Table 4. However, if India maintains its maritime practices in the long run, it might become an exporter of military equipment instead of the world's largest importer. Considering its ambitious and status-driven pursuits to join the great power grouping, its naval buildup will only increase the arms race in the region and the security dilemma of other states. The following section covers this subject.

Indian Naval Designs and Regional Stability of the IOR

Indian hegemonic aspirations in its self-proclaimed backyard can negatively impact not only South Asian security but also the broader IOR. The region extends from the Strait of Malacca and the western coast of Australia in the East to the Mozambique Channel in the west. In the north is the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea, while in the south is the southern Indian Ocean. The critical subregions are South Asia, the Middle East, the eastern coast of Africa, and different islands dotting the ocean. Further, the SLOCs also increase the geopolitical and strategic importance of IOR. Three critical chokepoints in the IOR: the Straits of Malacca, Hormuz, and Bab-el-Mandeb can disrupt oil transportation, trade, and maritime activities.[68] A regional power can influence all entry and exit points and strengthen its anti-submarine warfare and surveillance missions, as it is easier to detect submarines near chokepoints than in the broader sea, expanding maritime dominance.[69]

- ***Arabian Sea Region***

India's primary focus in the IOR is the South Asian region, which includes the Bay of Bengal, the Arabian Sea, and the waters surrounding South Asian Island states. The region is home to two nuclear powers, Pakistan and India, which have a long history of enmity. Indian naval modernization and its goal of emerging as the dominant regional power and a net security provider are perceived by Pakistan as a threat to its national security. India's ambitions would only exacerbate tensions between the two, thus threatening regional stability. Moreover, India has already nuclearized the IOR by developing and deploying nuclear submarines. It also diversifies its launch options by developing new cruise and ballistic missiles for its naval platforms. These include the development of K5 and K6 SLBMs and deploying the 3,500 km range K-4 SLBM on INS Arighat. In response, Pakistan must develop its sea-based deterrent to maintain strategic stability, as well as second-strike capability.

So far, Pakistan has SSKs, and its response to Indian naval provocations has been restrained. Pakistan is the only state in the region that has the capability and operational will to challenge Indian hegemony, particularly in the wake of constant Indian stubbornness and

[68] Abdul Moiz Khan and Amna Saqib, "In Going Global, India Risks Being Undermined in Its Own Backyard," *South China Morning Post*, September 3, 2022, https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3191080/seeking-be-major-global-power-india-risks-being-undermined-its-own.
[69] Darshana M. Baruah, "What Is Happening in the Indian Ocean," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 3, 2021, https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2021/03/what-is-happening-in-the-indian-ocean?lang=en.

aggression against Pakistan. However, India's increasing power projection and move towards a builder's navy will exacerbate Pakistan's security dilemma. Every state must rely on self-help to survive in an anarchical world. Thus, in the absence of any Pakistan-India arms control agreements, the increasing Indian naval strength can only lead to an arms race in the IOR.

- ***Andaman Sea: A Gateway to the Strait of Malacca***

Another vital subregion of the Indian Ocean is Southeast Asia. This region is home to the Malacca Strait, one of the most important waterways for regional states. China is a major regional stakeholder and heavily depends on this channel for energy and trade needs. Further, other regional stakeholders rely on the Malacca Strait, accounting for around 40% of the world's trade.[70] The Indian Navy is flexing its muscles in the eastern Indian Ocean theatre to expand its influence and power projection. In 2018, after an agreement with Singapore, India gained access to the Changi naval base near the Malacca Strait and the South China Sea.[71] The access can provide logistical help to Indian vessels deployed in the region. Moreover, India has developed five offshore military bases in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. These bases are INS Kohassa, INS Jarawa, Car Nicobar Air Force Base, INS Kardip, and INS Baaz.[72] These bases are close to the Malacca Strait, and India continuously upgrades these facilities.

India's proximity to the Malacca Strait allows it to disrupt this critical waterway for its strategic goals. India can exercise sea denial and sea control options at the Malacca Strait. Indian operational capability to exercise power at the Malacca Strait can impact the stability of the eastern IOR because there are no other naval forces in the region to keep India in check. Further, India's problems with China could spill into this region if New Delhi operationalizes its strength in IOR to limit Beijing's trade in the wake of another border conflict. Thus, the Indian pursuit of controlling the IOR can negatively impact all the regional states dependent on these waterways for their trade and energy needs.

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[70] "Factbox – Malacca Strait Is a Strategic 'Chokepoint,'" *Reuters*, March 4, 2010, https://www.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-46652220100304.

[71] Shaurya Karanbir Gurung, "Navy Gets Access to Singapore's Changi Naval Base," *The Economic Times*, July 12, 2018, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/navy-gets-access-to-singapores-changi-naval-base/articleshow/61855776.cms?from=mdr.

[72] "Delhi Continues Strategic Investment in the Indian Ocean," *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, May 9, 2022, https://amti.csis.org/delhi-continues-strategic-investment-in-the-indian-ocean/.

- ***From Euro-Atlantic to Asia-Pacific Theatre***

For centuries, the IOR has not been a major ground for great power rivalry. Europe was the main theatre of war during the previous wars. In this new era of great power competition, the dynamics of world politics are changing. The evolving US-China rivalry might shift the theatre of competition from the Euro-Atlantic to the Asia-Pacific.[73] Due to evolving geopolitical dynamics, the significance of the IOR has grown substantially. Moreover, India is strengthening security alliances with the US and other nations to achieve its goal of regional dominance. China, which relies heavily on the IOR for much of its trade and energy supplies, would need to confront India, potentially prompting the US to boost its naval presence in the region at India's request to counter China. The area is critically important to China because about 80% of its imported oil passes through the IOR and the Malacca Strait.

The evolving Indian maritime strategy, its growing alliances and partnerships, especially with the US, and possible implications for IOR trade routes have worried other states. For instance, China is said to be building naval facilities to secure vital trade routes and counter any future aggression in the wake of the increasing Indian naval prowess in the region. Moreover, the military and technological advancements India has secured through its strategic partnership with the US are likely to prompt other regional actors to seek a strategic balance. A prominent example of this dynamic is the strengthening China-Pakistan strategic partnership. Another notable example is the deepening cooperation between China and the Gulf states, which may eventually culminate in a formal naval strategic partnership.

In sum, the evolving Indian naval strategy can increase strategic instability in the sub-regions of IOR. Once the Indian Navy works in unison with that of the Quad and AUKUS, it has a distant possibility to form an Asian NATO. India's ambition and grand designs for regional hegemony will only spark stronger competition in the region, making IOR the centre of great power competition. The US and other like-minded Western states must realize the perils of propping up India as the net security provider.

[73] Summar Iqbal Babar and Abdul Moiz Khan, "Chinese Military Modernization under Xi: Harbinger of a New Great Powers Rivalry," *Asia-Pacific: Annual Research Journal of Far East & South East Asia* 40, no. 1 (2022): 46, https://doi.org/10.47781/asia-pacific.vol40.Iss0.5863.

Conclusion

India under Narendra Modi has emerged as the only state in the IOR that has achieved the capability to build all types of warships domestically. This goal is in line with India's ambitious objective to have a blue water capability to project its maritime power in the IOR and beyond. In addition, it is also augmenting its shipyards capability to build more ships in less time. All this effort is to have a fleet of 200-plus warships and submarines by 2035, which India deems necessary to project its power projection in the region. This is creating a dilemma for the littoral states in the region because the ability to have a large fleet of naval vessels, and that too in quick succession, has increased New Delhi's maritime domain awareness, particularly its ability to affect the maritime traffic at the region's key chokepoints. Simultaneously, this expanding naval capacity contributes to a growing maritime security dilemma, especially for smaller littoral states and regional competitors such as Pakistan, which perceive India's builder-navy ambitions as a threat to national security, given India's past actions. This also poses new challenges, especially in the Arabian Sea region because the Indian decision to commissioning INS Arihant in 2016 is yet another signal that it wants to maintain hegemony in the region. This effort is backed up by building and deploying advanced conventional surface and sub-surface vessels with cutting-edge anti-surface and anti-submarine capabilities, boosting its maritime force posture in the Arabian Sea region. This is increasing asymmetry between Pakistan and India in maritime affairs, causing a concern in Islamabad that New Delhi somehow aims to affect Pakistan's sea lines of communication. The rhetoric emerging from Indian officials in the aftermath of the May 2025 crisis reflects a strategic mindset indicative of aggressive intent. This mindset, combined with the growing naval capabilities reinforced by the ability to indigenize warships and submarines domestically, suggests a potential temptation for the Indian leadership to pursue a path of aggression in the future as well. This will threaten the strategic stability between Islamabad and New Delhi, which is already fragile because of the latter's decision not to initiate negotiations with the former. Lastly, the ambitious plan of India will result in accelerating maritime competition in the region rather than fostering cooperative security.

INDIA–US DEFENSE RELATIONS:

CONVERGENCES AND DIVERGENCES

Ahyousha Khan

India-US Defense Relations: Convergences and Divergences

Ahyousha Khan*

Abstract

The United States has long described its partnership with India as a "defining partnership for the twenty-first century," investing since 2005 in India's defense capabilities, technology base, and military interoperability. This relationship reached a formal milestone with India's designation as a "Major Defense Partner" in 2016. At the end of October 2025, both countries signed the next defense framework despite current turmoil in relations. This paper assesses why both countries were able to sign the agreement by theoretically highlighting the convergences and divergences in their relationship. It examines whether Washington and New Delhi possess the political will, mutual trust, common values, and institutional capacity to conclude and implement a new defense framework. Using a qualitative methodology and a neoclassical realist approach, the paper combines analysis of official policy documents, joint statements, speeches, and defense agreements with secondary sources such as think-tank reports and defense trade data. The findings suggest that while shared interests in balancing China sustain strategic convergence, persistent gaps in interoperability, India's self-serving strategic autonomy doctrine, mistrust, and a lack of common values complicate Washington's vision of India as a credible defense partner.

Key Words: India-US, Defense Relations, Framework, Strategic Autonomy, Interoperability, Defense Partnership

* Ahyousha Khan is an Associate Director at the Strategic Vision Institute, Islamabad. She can be reached at ahyoushakhan@gmail.com.

Introduction

The US-India relationship was described as "defining partnership for the twenty first century".[1] US perceived India as a "natural ally" with "shared values". The US took great efforts beginning in 2005 to "help India to become a major regional power.[2] For this purpose, the US worked to improve India's arms capabilities, technology base and enable interoperability for military operations. India was also designated as a "Major Defense Partner" in 2016.[3]

In July 2025, high-level diplomatic engagement between the US and India occurred; these interactions focused on finalizing the "10-Year US-India Defense Framework"[4] for deepening the major defense partnership. However, this momentum was soon overshadowed by tariff related tensions, when President Trump imposed 25% tariffs on Indian exports and hinted at "unspecified penalties" over India's continued purchases of Russian oil.[5] The underlying economic imbalance remains a sticking point because the US is India's largest export market, receiving goods worth $87 billion in 2024, while India imported only $41 billion from the US, resulting in approximate $46 billion trade deficit.[6]

Trump's announcement of even higher tariffs would damage India's export revenue further. In July 2025, the EU also imposed sanctions on Nayara, one of India's two largest private oil refiners, which is majority-owned by Russian interests.[7] As a result, the Modi government issued statement calling the targeting of India "unjustified and unreasonable" and vowed to take all

[1] "Statements by President Obama and Prime Minister Modi of the Republic of India," *The White House: Office of the Press Secretary*, January 25, 2015, archived, accessed August 13, 2025, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/25/statements-president-obama-and-prime-minister-modi-republic-india.
[2] US Department of State, "Background Briefing by Administration Officials on U.S.–South Asia Relations," press briefing, March 25, 2005, accessed August 13, 2025, https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2005/43853.htm.
[3] US Department of State, "U.S. Security Cooperation with India," Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, January 20, 2025, accessed August 13, 2025, https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-india.
[4] US Department of Defense, *Fact Sheet: Framework for the U.S.-India Major Defense Partnership (2025–2035)*, October 31, 2025, https://media.defense.gov/2025/Nov/13/2003820236/-1/-1/1/FACT-SHEET-FRAMEWORK-FOR-THE-US-INDIA-MAJOR-DEFENSE-PARTNERSHIP.PDF
[5] Megha Bahree, "US–India Relations at Their 'Worst' as Trump Slaps 50 Percent Tariff," *Al Jazeera*, August 7, 2025, accessed August 13, 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/7/us-india-relations-at-their-worst-as-trump-slaps-50-percent-tariff.
[6] David Lawder and Manoj Kumar, "Trump's Doubling of Tariffs Hits India, Damaging Ties," *Reuters*, August 27, 2025, accessed August 13, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/india/trumps-doubling-tariffs-hits-india-damaging-ties-2025-08-27/.
[7] Yashraj Sharma and Charu Sudan Kasturi, "India Accuses US, EU of Russia Trade Double Standards: Who Is Right?," *Al Jazeera*, August 5, 2025, accessed August 13, 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/5/india-accuses-us-eu-of-russia-trade-double-standards-who-is-right.

necessary measures to safeguard its national interests and economic security. [8] These actions cast a shadow over the strategic dialogue. However, at the end of October 2025, both countries signed the next defense agreement, which reflects that despite some apparent differences, the existence of systemic procedures is enabling defense cooperation. However, this calls for a pragmatic assessment of relations between both countries under Trump 2.0, especially as Washington's tariff regime is indiscriminate, working even against allies. Beyond tariffs, deeper challenges persist in the US-India relationship which include diverging values, persistent interoperability gaps, and India's rigid insistence on self-serving strategic autonomy. All of these issues undermine Washington's vision of India as a "net security provider" in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and India as a balancer against China.[9]

There is a wide academic literature that exists on the subject of India-US defence and strategic relations. Some scholars have written on convergences and divergences of defense relations of both countries.[10] Others have analyzed the subject critically that how both countries have divergent interests, goals and values.[11] Key areas of friction between the two nations include a significant trust deficit, diverging expectations regarding India's role in containing China, and conflicting perspectives on the emerging multipolar order.[12]

The relationship is explored through the lens of theory of Neoclassical Realism. While hedging is frequently employed to explain the US-India defense and strategic partnership,[13]

[8] "'Extremely Unfortunate': India Reacts Strongly to Donald Trump's 25% Additional Tariff for Buying Russian Oil; 'Will Take All Actions Necessary…'," *The Times of India*, August 6, 2025, accessed August 13, 2025, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/india-business/extremely-unfortunate-india-reacts-strongly-to-donald-trumps-25-additional-tariff-for-russia-oil-buys-will-take-all-actions-necessary/articleshow/123145429.cms.

[9] "'Extremely Unfortunate': India Reacts Strongly to Donald Trump's 25% Additional Tariff for Buying Russian Oil; 'Will Take All Actions Necessary…'," *The Times of India*, August 6, 2025, accessed August 13, 2025, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/india-business/extremely-unfortunate-india-reacts-strongly-to-donald-trumps-25-additional-tariff-for-russia-oil-buys-will-take-all-actions-necessary/articleshow/123145429.cms.

[10] Sameer Lalwani, "US-India Divergence and Convergence on Defense Operationalization Concepts," *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 5, 2025, https://www.cfr.org/article/us-india-divergence-and-convergence-defense-operationalization-concepts.

[11] Kamran Bokhari and Daniel Markey, "Re-envisioning U.S.-India Relations," *New Lines Institute*, September 7, 2023, accessed August 13, 2025, https://newlinesinstitute.org/strategic-competition/india/re-envisioning-u-s-india-relations/.

[12] Ashley J. Tellis, "India's Great-Power Delusions: How New Delhi's Grand Strategy Thwarts Its Grand Ambitions," *Foreign Affairs* 104, no. 3 (May/June 2025), accessed August 13, 2025, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/india/indias-great-power-delusions.

[13] Muhammad Adnan Khan, "Strategic Hedging or Strategic Confusion? India's Rise as a Global Player," *The GSI Insight*, accessed August 15, 2025, https://thegsinsight.com/strategic-hedging-or-strategic-confusion-indias-rise-as-a-global-player/; Txell Reguant, "Can India's Strategic Autonomy Be Considered Hedging?," *Global Affairs and Strategic Studies*, Universidad de Navarra, February 21, 2025, accessed August 15, 2025,

however, its core assumption is that political entities unable to effectively ensure their security vis-à-vis major powers will choose to rely on patronage from great powers,[14] does not have validity in case of India. In this logic, hedging acts as an insurance policy against strategic uncertainty, allowing states to balance relations among competing powers to mitigate vulnerabilities. However, India's nuclear capabilities, conventional power, and independent strategic culture enable it to provide for its own security in a manner not typical of hedging states. New Delhi's engagement with Washington is not driven by existential dependence but by the desire to extract strategic, economic, and technological benefits, as well as to influence the regional balance, without diluting its strategic autonomy.

Contrastingly, Alliance Security Dilemma Theory by Glenn H Snyder[15] is also insufficient in capturing this dynamic because both states are not allies yet as India has consistently rejected treaty-based defense commitments, as Jaishankar categorically denied being part of any military commitment because it is not suitable for India.[16] To further substantiate the argument one also has to consider that both countries have 'Non-Aligned Movement' (NAM)[17] because India has always considered itself to be part of the NAM now known as 'strategic autonomy". The US also recognized India as a 'defense partner' not an ally. Thus, Neoclassical Realism offers a more nuanced and accurate explanation of India's strategic cooperation with the US by integrating the interplay between systemic pressures and domestic decision-making variables.

The Neoclassical Realist framework provides a more comprehensive lens for studying India's partnership with the US. It enables an exploration of systemic opportunities arising from

https://www.unav.edu/web/global-affairs/can-india-s-strategic-autonomy-be-considered-hedging-; M. Kara, "India's Hedging Strategy in Great Power Competition," *Politics & Foresight* (2025), accessed August 15, 2025, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/pafo.12271; Mark Leonard, James Crabtree, and Suhasini Haidar, "Hedging Diplomacy: New Delhi's Foreign Policy in Trump's World," European Council on Foreign Relations (podcast, September 26, 2025), accessed August 15, 2025, https://ecfr.eu/podcasts/episode/hedging-diplomacy-new-delhis-foreign-policy-in-trumps-world/.

[14] F. Figiaconi, "Choosing Not to Choose: Hedging as a Category of Neutrality," *European Journal of International Security*, published online 2025, 1–20, https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10009.

[15] Glenn H. Snyder, *The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics*, World Politics 36, no. 4 (July 1984): 461–495.

[16] Ulupi Borah, "India's Strategic Considerations on NATO's Deepening Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific," *Centre for Joint Warfare Studies (CENJOWS)*, September 10, 2024, accessed August 15, 2025, https://cenjows.in/indias-strategic-considerations-on-natos-deepening-cooperation-in-the-indo-pacific/.

[17] Shashi Tharoor, "The US and India's Non-Aligned Alliance," *Project Syndicate*, July 5, 2023, accessed August 15, 2025, https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/us-india-relations-remarkable-transformation-by-shashi-tharoor-2023-07/.

the US-China rivalry, as filtered through domestic perceptions, leadership priorities, and institutional capacities.

The objective of this research is a critical analysis of India-US defense relations systematically, especially in the light of the recent Next 10 Years Defense Framework both countries have signed while going through a tense political and economic rift. This paradoxical rift leads to the research question, which is 'How the US and India were able to sign and sustain defense agreements despite the evident political strain in their bilateral relationship? This paper finds out that both countries have been able to sustain the relationship because in relationship, there are certain divergences at systematic and bureaucratic levels but there also exist certain commonalities.

This study adopts a qualitative research approach and secondary data gathering approaches. It relies on official policy documents, joint statements, speeches, and defense agreements to examine evolving strategic dynamics, along with already published research.

Following this, the paper presents the theoretical framework, highlights current challenges in the relationship, and then examines areas of convergence and divergence. Finally, it provides the conclusion.

Theoretical Framework: Neoclassical Realism

To analyze US-India defense and strategic relations, the study applies Neoclassical Realism which argues that the internal political structures, elite perceptions, and strategic cultures shape the relationship, while states interact within the international system shifting from unipolarity to multipolarity. Neoclassical Realism is employed in International Relations (IR) not merely for its ability to explain diverse phenomena, but for its strength in integrating multiple levels of analysis and avoiding the reductionist dogmatism that constrains other realist theories.[18] However, Neoclassical Realism works by analyzing foreign policy through integrating both the structure of international system and domestic factors and their complex interactions with each other.[19]

[18] Jalal Dehghani Firoozabadi and Mojtaba Zare Ashkezari, *"Neo-classical Realism in International Relations"* (Asian Social Science 12, no. 6 [2016], accessed August 13, 2025), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/303412155_Neoclassical_Realism_in_International_Relations.
[19] Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Security Seeking under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited*, *International Security* 25, no. 3 (2001): 128–161, https://doi.org/10.1162/016228800560543.

Neoclassical Realism is an approach to foreign policy analysis that seeks to understand international politics by taking into account the nature of the international system, which includes the political environment within which states interact. Furthermore, Neoclassical Realists argue that states respond in large part to the constraints and opportunities of the international system when they conduct their foreign and security policies, but their responses are shaped by unit-level factors such as state-society relations, the nature of their domestic political regimes, strategic culture, and leader perceptions.[20]

Convergences and Divergences in US-India Defense Relations according to implementation of Neoclassical Realism in tabular form.

Drivers	Convergence	Divergence
Systemic / International	• *Shared concerns over China's rise*. • *Defense industrial* interests in advanced tech (AI, space, cyber, maritime domain awareness). • *Desire to shape global norms* for critical technologies and supply chains.	• *Different threat geographies.* US is Western-Pacific focused, India prioritizes continental borders with China/Pakistan and IOR • *Multipolar worldview:* India embraces multi-alignment and BRICS/SCO, while the US prefers compliance. • *Trade and sanctions friction:* US tariffs, CAATSA sanctions risk over Russian arms deals. • *Alliance expectations:* US seeks NATO-like interoperability; India resists formal alliances.

[20] Norrin M. Ripsman, "Neoclassical Realism," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*, December 22, 2017, accessed August 19, 2025, https://oxfordre.com/internationalstudies/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-36.

Internal / Bureaucratic & Domestic	• *Defense market incentives:* India needs high-end tech; US firms seek access to India's $70B defense market. • *Political signaling:* Modi and successive US administrations use defense cooperation to showcase global leadership and domestic strength. • *Regular 2+2 Dialogue* and defense agreements (COMCASA, BECA, SOSA) institutionalize interaction.	• *Strategic Autonomy doctrine:* deeply rooted in India's foreign-policy culture. • *Procurement philosophy mismatch:* India's lowest-cost bids vs. US cost-plus and ITAR restrictions. • *Russian legacy systems:* complicate interoperability and trigger US sanctions concerns. • *Bureaucratic inertia:* Slow Indian defense acquisition, delays in offsets, and US export-control hurdles.

Current Negotiations and Emerging Tensions

In July 2025, high-level diplomatic engagement between the US and India took place; focusing on finalizing the upcoming "10-Year US-India Framework" for deepening the major defense partnership. However, this momentum was soon overshadowed by tariff-related tensions, when President Trump imposed tariffs on Indian exports.[21]

In February 2025, Prime Minister Narendra Modi met President Donald Trump, who framed defense cooperation with India in commercial terms, proposed major arms sales, including F-35 fighter jets, and pushed for increased US oil and gas exports to reduce the bilateral trade deficit. Both sides agreed to negotiate New Defense Framework, with military ties positioned less as strategic alignment and more as mutually beneficial economic and industrial partnerships.

[21] Megha Bahree, "US–India Relations at Their 'Worst' as Trump Slaps 50 Percent Tariff," *Al Jazeera*, August 7, 2025, accessed August 19, 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/7/us-india-relations-at-their-worst-as-trump-slaps-50-percent-tariff.

As a result, engagements at the ministerial level on the issue of New Defense Framework took place in July.[22] According to a communiqué issued by US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth following his meeting with Indian officials, the US expressed satisfaction with the successful integration of US defense systems into India's military inventory. These developments reflect a two-pronged US strategy; enhancing interoperability and positioning India as a key defense market.[23]

Point of Convergence in Relations

A. Convergences at the Systemic Level

The strongest incentives for India-US defense cooperation arise from shared systemic pressures in the changing international order.

- ***Rise of China and Situation in Asia-Pacific***

Both Washington and New Delhi view China's growing military and economic power as the central structural challenge in Asia.[24] The US "Indo-Pacific strategy," launched under the previous two administrations, is explicitly designed to counter rising Chinese influence through partnerships with like-minded states.[25] The term "*Indo-Pacific*", a relatively recent addition to strategic discourse, illustrates how Washington perceives the region: it draws an artificial boundary from the US West Coast to India's western shores, reflecting an American threat perception.[26] This shift from *Asia-Pacific* to *Indo-Pacific* underscores US-China competition and Washington's determination to reinforce its position by engaging India as a key partner.

Over the past decade, Beijing's naval presence in the South China Sea, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), including the Maritime Silk Road, have significantly increased China's

[22] US Department of War, "Readout of Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth's Call with India's Minister of Defense Rajnath Singh," *War.gov*, July 2, 2025, accessed August 19, 2025, https://www.war.gov/News/Tag/45781/india/.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Khadija Younus, "Strategic Convergence and Competition in the Indo-Pacific Region: Policy Options for Pakistan," *Margalla Papers* 24, no. 1 (2020): 81–96, https://doi.org/10.54690/margallapapers.24.1.39.
[25] Khadija Younus, "Strategic Convergence and Competition in the Indo-Pacific Region: Policy Options for Pakistan," *Margalla Papers* 24, no. 1 (2020): 81–96, https://doi.org/10.54690/margallapapers.24.1.39.
[26] Farhan Hanif Siddiqi, "US Indo-Pacific Strategy and Pakistan's Foreign Policy: The Hedging Option," *Strategic Studies* 42, no. 1 (2022): 1–16, https://doi.org/10.53532/ss.042.01.00153.

presence in the Indo-Pacific region,[27] which the US perceives as a threat to the regional balance of power. To maintain its traditional influence, Washington and its allies have pursued a range of countermeasures, including the *Indo-Pacific* strategy (though many Indian and Pacific Ocean littoral states reject this term), the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), and the trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (AUKUS). Given that China's regional influence is primarily economic, the United States has also advanced the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) as a counterbalance to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Beyond hard-core realist calculations, the contest also carries a normative dimension. The US and its allies frame their economic and strategic initiatives as rooted in democratic values, claiming superiority over China's governance model. India's status as the "world's largest democracy" was meant to provide credibility to this narrative and provides legitimacy for its participation in US-led initiatives. However, the Modi government's record on civil liberties complicates this claim. Democratic administrations in the US often highlighted the partnership as one between "the oldest democracy and the largest democracy," but New Delhi's hardline actions toward political opponents, religious minorities, social activists, Western media outlets such as the BBC, and even alleged overseas assassination plots have raised concerns.[28]

During Prime Minister Modi's June 2023 visit, more than seventy US members of Congress wrote to President Biden urging him to press Modi on protecting human rights and democratic values.[29] Thus, democracy has functioned more as a rhetorical selling point than the true driver of bilateral ties; the relationship rests on apparent shared strategic interests rather than shared political or moral ideals. China's growing stakes in the IOR have caused deep concern in India, leading many to believe that Chinese presence in the IOR has shrunk New Delhi's traditional

[27] Khalid Manzoor Butt and Sadaf Jan Siddiqui, "Pakistan's Strategic Calculus: Nexus Between Security and Development," Issue Brief no. 2–2021, *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad*, August 2021, accessed August 19, 2025, https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/5_SS_Khalid_Manzoor_Butt_and_Sadaf_Jan_Siddiqui_No-2_2021.pdf.

[28] K. Alan Kronstadt, *India: Religious Freedom Issues*, Congressional Research Service Report R45303, updated November 13, 2024, accessed August 19, 2025, https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R45303.

[29] Office of Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal, "Jayapal, Van Hollen Lead Bicameral Letter with Over 70 Members Urging President Biden to Discuss Upholding Human Rights and Democratic Values During Upcoming Meeting with Indian PM Modi," press release, June 20, 2023, accessed August 19, 2025, https://jayapal.house.gov/2023/06/20/jayapal-van-hollen-lead-bicameral-letter-with-over-70-members-urging-president-biden-to-discuss-upholding-human-rights-and-democratic-values-during-upcoming-meeting-with-indian-pm-modi/.

sphere of influence and necessitating a counter-China strategy.[30] This common concern underpins cooperation on maritime domain awareness, joint naval exercises such as Malabar, and the US support for India's blue-water capabilities.[31]

- ***US need for capable Regional Partners***

From Washington's perspective, the transition from unipolarity to a more contested global order demands greater burden-sharing. Due to its size, strategic location, and expanding economy, India is viewed as a pivotal regional actor capable of helping balance against China.[32] This calculation has driven US efforts to deepen defense cooperation and accelerate India's military modernization through transfers of emerging technologies.[33] Foundational defense agreements, such as COMCASA and BECA, are central to this strategy, as they enable secure information-sharing and enhance interoperability. Since the early 2000s, the partnership has broadened beyond arms sales to encompass intelligence sharing, joint exercises, and the New Framework for the US-India Defense Relationship.[34] Washington hoped that Beijing's growing presence along the Himalayan border or across the wider Indo-Pacific, would draw India firmly into the US strategic orbit. Yet New Delhi's behavior has been more cautious. Despite periodic clashes with China, India avoids overt alignment and has resisted participation in US-led coalition operations such as Prosperity Guardian in the Red Sea.[35] Even the 2020 border crisis and ongoing naval build-up have not altered India's long-standing commitment to "strategic autonomy," underscoring the limits of US expectations".[36]

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[30] Abhijit Singh, "Sino-Indian Dynamics in Littoral Asia – The View from New Delhi," *Strategic Analysis* 43, no. 3 (2019): 199–213, https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2019.1598083.
[31] Aman Thakker, "U.S.-India Maritime Security Cooperation," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, October 8, 2019, https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-india-maritime-security-cooperation.
[32] S. Kumar, S. S. Verma, and S. H. Shah, "Indo-US Convergence of Agenda in the New Indo-Pacific Regional Security Architecture," *South Asia Research* 40, no. 2 (2020): 215–30, https://doi.org/10.1177/0262728020915564.
[33] Zafar Khan, "The Effects of US–China Competing Strategies in Asia-Pacific on India and Pakistan Rivalry in the South Asian Region," *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 7, no. 4 (2021): 888–906, https://doi.org/10.1177/20578911211021155.
[34] U.S. Department of Defense, *Fact Sheet: Framework for the U.S.-India Major Defense Partnership*, October 31, 2025, accessed August 19, 2025, https://media.defense.gov/2025/Nov/13/2003820236/-1/-1/1/FACT-SHEET-FRAMEWORK-FOR-THE-US-INDIA-MAJOR-DEFENSE-PARTNERSHIP.PDF.
[35] "India Not Joining Operation Prosperity Guardian in Red Sea as of Now," *The Week (India)*, December 26, 2023, accessed August 19, 2025, https://www.theweek.in/news/india/2023/12/26/india-not-joining-operation-prosperity-guardian-in-red-sea-as-of-now.htm.
[36] Rushali Saha, "Making Sense of India's Muted Response to the Red Sea Crisis," *South Asian Voices*, January 29, 2024, accessed August 19, 2025, https://southasianvoices.org/geo-f-in-r-indias-response-red-sea-crisis-01-29-2024/.

To improve regional cooperation and influence, the US and India are also investing in mini-lateral groupings. The QUAD is one such example that provided a platform for coordinating security, technology, and infrastructure initiatives without binding alliance commitments. The QUAD (the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia) has become a primary vehicle for coordinating strategic approaches and security perspectives in direct response to Chinese assertiveness.[37] Since 2017, the Quad has expanded into a leader-level summit. Its diverse focus on areas like cyber security, infrastructure, and climate change positions the group as a cornerstone of the Indo-Pacific regional architecture.[38]

Although India has always rejected being part of any military alliance, to avail the benefits of US security threats vis-à-vis China, it has been involved in activities like "Malabar Exercises", which is conducted by QUAD members to contain China in Asia-Pacific.[39] While the US anchors its Pacific strategy in formal alliances with Japan and South Korea, its approach in the IOR reflects a partnership centered on India to counter China's growing maritime footprint. India's perception of China as a strategic challenger, coupled with its self-ascribed role as the primary security provider in the IOR, has made it an attractive—yet inherently limited—partner for US regional objectives.

- ***India's Aspiration for Great-Power Status***

India seeks to position itself as an equal player between China and the United States, a goal that transcends the Modi government and reflects a long-standing national ambition.[40] This aspiration to become a global power is grounded in India's consistent advocacy of a "multipolar world," a vision sharply different from Washington's preference for preserving US primacy.[41] Whereas US

[37] Frederick Kliem, "Why Quasi-Alliances Will Persist in the Indo-Pacific? The Fall and Rise of the Quad," *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 7, no. 3 (2020): 271–304, https://doi.org/10.1177/2347797020962620.
[38] Garima Mohan and Kristi Govella, *The Future of the Quad and the Emerging Architecture in the Indo-Pacific* (Washington, DC: The German Marshall Fund of the United States, June 21, 2022), https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4311301.
[39] Dost Muhammad, "Growing Indian Interest in Malabar Naval Exercise," *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad*, December 18, 2020, accessed August 19, 2025, https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/IB_Dost_Muhammad_Dec_18_2020.pdf.
[40] Kamran Bokhari and Daniel Markey, "Re-envisioning U.S.-India Relations," *New Lines Institute*, September 7, 2023, accessed August 20, 2025, https://newlinesinstitute.org/strategic-competition/india/re-envisioning-u-s-india-relations/.
[41] Ashley J. Tellis, "India's Great-Power Delusions: How New Delhi's Grand Strategy Thwarts Its Grand Ambitions," *Foreign Affairs* 104, no. 3 (May/June 2025), accessed August 19, 2025, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/india/indias-great-power-delusions.

strategists often view multipolarity as a challenge to unipolar stability and a driver of great-power competition, New Delhi sees it as essential to preventing any single state from imposing its will on the international system. For New Delhi, closer defense ties with the United States reinforce its claim to major-power status. India perceives itself as a burgeoning great power, backed by significant economic and military capabilities. Its involvement in high-level strategic dialogues and its designation as a 'Major Defense Partner' further demonstrate that its influence now extends well beyond the region.

However, while India anticipates becoming a great power in terms of relative Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by midcentury, it does not expect to be a superpower.[42] New Delhi aims to restrain not only China but also any other country that might aspire to become a global power, including the United States, thereby safeguarding its strategic autonomy and avoiding formal alliances. This approach is based on India's belief that a rising power should guard its freedom of action and avoid compromises that could lead to subordination within coalitions. However, this pursuit of multipolarity and strategic autonomy, coupled with its economic growth predominantly tied to domestic market expansion rather than international integration, may lead to less global influence than desired, even as it becomes a great power.[43]

Ultimately, India's pursuit of great-power status is both ambitious and cautious; it seeks recognition and influence without the encumbrances of alliance politics. This dual posture, leveraging US partnership while resisting dependence, highlights the central tension in India's rise. Whether New Delhi can translate its economic and demographic strengths into sustained global clout will depend not only on continued growth and institutional reform at home, but also on its ability to navigate a competitive, multipolar order without sacrificing the strategic autonomy it prizes.

Together, these factors create a structural environment where strategic convergence is not optional but mutually advantageous, even though both sides guard their autonomy.

[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.

B. Convergences at the Bureaucratic / Domestic Level

Beyond the international system, internal political and bureaucratic incentives sustain India-US defense cooperation.

- ***Defense-market Incentives***

India is the world's largest arms importer and seeks high-end technologies to modernize its forces. India has undertaken a series of reforms and initiatives to promote defense production, exports, and collaboration with US companies. The Defense Production and Export Promotion Policy (DPEPP) 2020 sets a target of roughly USD 5 billion in annual defense exports by 2025 and encourages joint ventures with foreign firms, including US majors such as Boeing and Lockheed Martin.[44] Under the Under the Strategic Partnership (SP) Model, selected Indian private companies collaborate with foreign Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs) to produce multiple military platforms, serving as key partners in national defense. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) liberalization in 2020 raised the automatic route cap for FDI in defense from 49% to 74%, allowing deeper US participation in co-production and export projects.[45] Initiatives like Make in India and Atmanirbhar Bharat[46] promote indigenous manufacturing and joint production, supporting projects such as the co-production of GE F414 jet engines and the assembly of MH-60R helicopters for export.[47] Additionally, export approvals and fast-track procedures, including the creation of a Defence Export Promotion Cell, have streamlined licensing and clearances for jointly developed systems involving US technology transfers.[48] These measures demonstrate how India is simultaneously courting US technology and investment while positioning itself as a defense exporter. This transformation has enabled India to carve out a niche in the international arms

[44]Asia Pacific Security Magazine, "MOD Releases Draft Defence Production and Export Promotion Policy 2020," *Asia Pacific Security Magazine*, accessed August 20, 2025, https://www.asiapacificsecuritymagazine.com/mod-releases-draft-defence-production-and-export-promotion-policy-2020.

[45] Ministry of Defence, "FDI in Defence Sector," *Press Information Bureau*, February 9, 2024, https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=2004475.

[46] Abhay Yadav, "India's Defence Industry: The Rise and the Transformation," March 24, 2024, https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4771042.

[47] YP Rajesh, "Why GE Plan to Make Fighter Jet Engines in India Is a Big Deal," *Reuters*, June 23, 2023, accessed December 25, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/why-ge-plan-make-fighter-jet-engines-india-is-big-deal-2023-06-22/.

[48] Press Information Bureau, Government of India, "Marketing of Indigenously Developed Defence Equipment," press release, December 16, 2022, accessed August 19, 2025, https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1884096&reg=3&lang=2.

market, with bilateral trade with the US growing significantly over the past two decades. Co-production projects like the GE F414 jet-engine agreement exemplify how commercial incentives on both sides reinforce the broader strategic partnership, aligning with India's goal of achieving substantial defense exports by 2025. Moreover, India has also recently eased its nuclear liability laws to cap accident-related penalties on equipment suppliers, three government sources said, in a move mainly to attract US firms that have been holding back due to the risk of unlimited exposure.[49]

- ***Political Signaling and Institutionalized Dialogue Mechanisms***

For successive US administrations, deepening ties with India demonstrates a commitment to the Indo-Pacific. For Prime Minister Modi, visible US engagement supports his domestic narrative of India as a rising global power. The strengthened Indo-US proximity has become a notable factor in the regional security architectures, highlighting a growing multidimensional convergence of interests. The US-India bilateral relationship has notably strengthened in areas of defense, counter-terrorism, cyber, and homeland security, especially after 2016. Regular forums such as the 2+2 Dialogue, the DTTI, and the Security of Supply Agreement provide predictable channels for policy coordination.[50] The US-India strategic partnership has seen dramatic development through strategic dialogues and reciprocal visits, reflecting deepening ties in both security and economic fields.[51] These mechanisms reduce bureaucratic friction, enable long-term planning, and normalize cooperation across multiple agencies and services.

[49] Sarita Chaganti Singh, "India Plans to Ease Nuclear Liability Laws to Attract Foreign Firms, Sources Say," *Reuters*, April 18, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/india/india-plans-ease-nuclear-liability-laws-attract-foreign-firms-sources-say-2025-04-18/.
[50] Government of India, "Joint Statement on the Second India-U.S. 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue," *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*, accessed August 20, 2025, https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/32227/Joint+Statement+on+the+Second+IndiaUS+2432+Ministerial+Dialogue.
[51] Dinshaw Mistry, *Aligning Unevenly: India and the United States*, Policy Studies No. 74 (Honolulu: East-West Center, 2016), accessed August 20, 2025, https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/321f9572-1a40-4a92-bec6-6316eaeb56c1/content.

Point of Divergence in Relations

- ***Systemic Pressures: Divergent Strategic Priorities and Enduring Trust Deficit***

US and India remain divided in their geographical priorities and strategic outlooks. India's focus remains largely on its immediate subcontinental borders and the Western IOR, while the US strategic posture focuses broader Eurasian landmass and Asia-Pacific. These divergent threat perceptions have fueled mutual skepticism in both partners, Washington often perceives New Delhi's persistent strategic autonomy and selective cooperation as non-committal,[52] whereas India views persistent US pressure as a form of strategic entrapment.[53] Tensions became evident in May 2023 when the US House Select Committee on Strategic Competition with China proposed including India in a NATO Plus arrangement to bolster Taiwan's deterrence.[54] Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar publicly dismissed the idea, stating that a military alliance is "not possible for India." [55]

Adding to the complexity, Jaishankar's recent visit to China, first in five years, underscored India's intention to maintain stable bilateral ties with Beijing.[56] This approach directly contrasts with US expectations for India to play a more assertive role against China. The Biden administration, in particular, has questioned the political will of its partner to deter Chinese assertiveness in the Western Pacific.[57] While Washington looks to New Delhi as a key player in its "Indo-Pacific strategy", India remains hesitant to escalate tensions with China. These strategic

[52] Daniel S. Markey, "India as It Is: Washington and New Delhi Share Interests, Not Values," *Foreign Affairs* 102, no. 3 (May/June 2023), accessed August 25, 2025, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/india/markey-modi-biden-united-states.
[53] Sameer Lalwani, "U.S.-India Divergence and Convergence on Defense Operationalization Concepts," *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 5, 2025, https://www.cfr.org/article/us-india-divergence-and-convergence-defense-operationalization-concepts.
[54] "US Congressional Committee Recommends Strengthening NATO-Plus with India to Counter Chinese Communist Party's Strategic Competition," *Hindustan Times*, May 28, 2023, accessed August 25, 2025, https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/us-congressional-committee-recommends-strengthening-nato-plus-with-india-to-counter-chinese-communist-party-s-strategic-competition-101685210608532.html.
[55] Fareha Naaz, "'India Capable of Countering Chinese Aggression', Refuses to Join NATO, Says S. Jaishankar," *LiveMint*, June 9, 2023, accessed August 25, 2025, https://www.livemint.com/news/india-capable-of-countering-chinese-aggression-refuses-to-join-nato-says-s-jaishankar-11686288765836.html.
[56] Anadolu Agency, "Indian Foreign Minister Makes First Trip to China in 5 Years," *AA.com.tr*, July 14, 2025, accessed August 25, 2025, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/indian-foreign-minister-makes-1st-trip-to-china-in-5-years/3630380.
[57] Araudra Singh, "Hurdles and Opportunities for the India-U.S. Defense Partnership," *Stimson Center*, February 22, 2024, accessed August 25, 2025, https://www.stimson.org/2024/hurdles-and-opportunities-for-the-india-u-s-defense-partnership/.

misalignments and unresolved trust issues could hinder the trajectory of US-India defense cooperation.

- ***Ties with Russia, China and Multipolar Worldview***

Despite its involvement in the Quad, India's commitment to a multipolar world is occasionally viewed with skepticism in the West. By actively participating in groups like BRICS and the SCO, New Delhi continues to engage with platforms explicitly designed to challenge Western hegemony. India is a strong supporter of multipolarity and sees it as a framework for opportunities and growth where not one state has ultimate power, this basic notion is against the US dominance and challenges unipolarity.

Moreover, whenever, it comes to Russia, India has not fulfilled the desires of US, such as when Russia invaded Ukraine, Washington hoped that India would distance itself from the Kremlin, and condemn Russian aggression.[58] But, India continued to maintain its strategic partnership with Russia, a geostrategic adversary of the US. On the economic side, India has benefited from Russian oil sales, which helped India meet its fast-growing energy needs. Since Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, New Delhi has increasingly purchased discounted Russian oil in contravention of US-led sanctions; it is now Russia's number one export destination.[59] For such friendship Russian President Vladimir Putin has thanked India by calling India a "true friend."[60]

Furthermore, India has also purchased Russian arms for decades, meaning that the majority of India's military hardware is of Soviet or Russian build.[61] Thus far, Washington has looked the other way on enforcing the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), which penalizes countries that purchase weapons from sanctioned Russian defense suppliers, with respect to New Delhi's purchase of Moscow's S-400 surface-to-air missile

[58] Krishna N. Das, "U.S. Hopes India Will Distance Itself from Russia After Ukraine Invasion," *Reuters*, March 3, 2022, accessed August 25, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/us-hopes-india-will-distance-itself-russia-after-ukraine-invasion-2022-03-03/.
[59] Clyde Russell, "Asia Crude Imports Surge as China, India Snap up Russian Oil," *Reuters*, March 28, 2024, accessed August 25, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/asia-crude-imports-surge-china-india-snap-up-russian-oil-russell-2024-03-28/.
[60] Mausam Jha, "'PM Modi Willing to Do His Utmost to Resolve Russia-Ukraine Issue by Peaceful Means,' Says Putin," *LiveMint*, December 28, 2023, accessed August 25, 2025, https://www.livemint.com/news/world/eam-s-jaishankar-meeting-russian-president-vladimir-putin-pm-modi-ukraine-bilateral-india-russia-world-sergey-lavrov-11703726317637.html.
[61] Sushant Singh, "86 Per Cent of Indian Military Equipment of Russian Origin: Stimson Center Paper," *Indian Express*, July 22, 2020, accessed August 25, 2025, https://indianexpress.com/article/india/86-per-cent-of-indian-military-equipment-of-russian-origin-stimson-center-paper-6517136/.

system.[62] Heightening these issues are India's continued purchases of Russian-origin equipment, especially the S-400 air defense system.[63] But the issue is that not only are such platforms incompatible with US systems, but they also raise security concerns, particularly regarding potential data leaks that could compromise advanced US technologies. While there has been steady progress in training and command-level integration, India's equipment base remains largely Russian, where India has currently purchased 60 billion of Russian arms, which is 65 % of its total arms import.[64] President Trump hinted at a potential sale of the F-35 to India; however, the proposal failed to gain traction due to complex regulatory hurdles and strategic misalignments.

As highlighted by recent operational shortcomings during the India-Pakistan air battle, India's own systems lack cohesion, raising serious doubts about joint operational readiness in real-time crises.[65] The absence of a shared purpose or agreed-upon mission for interoperability further undermines its development. India's reluctance to participate in coalition operations such as the US-led Prosperity Guardian in the Red Sea, reveals the enduring constraints to be engulfed in "US-Led Security Ecosystem" away from its position of autonomy.[66]

- ***Domestic Drivers: Divergent Bharat First, Hindu Nationalism, and Strategic Autonomy***

Under the Modi regime, India's foreign policy has evolved according to global power shifts, US-China rivalry, and the rise of nationalism, by retorting to Hindu nationalism and the "Bharat First" doctrine increasingly shaping its foreign and domestic policies. While India maintains its

[62] Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty, "S-400 CAATSA Sanctions Ball in US Court," *Observer Research Foundation*, November 18, 2021, accessed August 25, 2025, https://www.orfonline.org/research/s-400-caatsa-sanctions-ball-in-us-court/.
[63] Erin Mello, "The Enduring Russian Impediment to U.S.-Indian Relations," *War on the Rocks*, February 13, 2023, https://warontherocks.com/2023/02/the-enduring-russian-impediment-to-u-s-indian-relations/.
[64] Daniel S. Markey and David Brostoff, "Friends with Limits: The Future of Russo-Indian Defense Ties," *War on the Rocks*, April 25, 2025, accessed August 25, 2025, https://warontherocks.com/2025/04/friends-with-limits-the-future-of-russo-indian-defense-ties/.
[65] John A. Tirpak, "The Biggest News from India-Pakistan Air Battle: the Kill Chain," *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, May 19, 2025, https://www.airandspaceforces.com/india-pakistan-air-battle-kill-chain/.
[66] Rushali Saha, "Making Sense of India's Muted Response to the Red Sea Crisis," *South Asian Voices*, January 29, 2024, https://southasianvoices.org/geo-f-in-r-indias-response-red-sea-crisis-01-29-2024.

longstanding principle of strategic autonomy, it now follows a more pragmatic model of "issue-based engagement" and is prioritizing national interest over ideological alignment.[67]

Since its independence in 1947, India has maintained a policy of nonalignment, eschewing formal alliances and resisting the pull of competing blocs. This posture of strategic autonomy fundamentally defined its diplomacy throughout the Cold War. Now, its foreign policy community stresses a commitment to multi-alignment, which consists of the diversification of partnerships, the refusal to join military alliances, the promotion of a multipolar world order in which no single superpower or pair of great powers is predominant, and a willingness to engage in issue-based cooperation with a wide variety of actors across geopolitical fault lines.[68]

Despite being a major arms importer, India promotes defense indigenization, though progress is hampered by limited research and development, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and slow technological adaptation.[69] Its openness to foreign defense collaboration, particularly with the US, are based on techno-nationalistic sentiments and aimed at strengthening domestic capabilities rather than forging deep security partnerships. India's techno-nationalistic policy on utilizing foreign tech to boost its own technical base has many downsides, such as, the public sector dominance has slowed down India's technological progress and weakened its ability to benefit from foreign partnerships. Since the early 2010s, Western expectations of India as a liberal democratic and economic counterweight to China have largely gone unfulfilled, hampered by inconsistent economic progress, perceived democratic backsliding, and a persistent reluctance toward formal alliances.[70]

In the past, even minor moves toward the US were seen in India as threats to sovereignty, while defense deals with countries like Russia or France were not questioned.[71] After the Cold War, strategic autonomy expanded from a nuclear-focused idea to a broader foreign policy principle.

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[67] Mehtap Kara, "India's Hedging Strategy in Great Power Competition," *Political Science Quarterly* 140, no. 1 (2025): 1–25, https://doi.org/10.1111/pafo.12271.
[68] Happymon Jacob, "The Shocking Rift Between India and the United States," *Foreign Affairs*, August 14, 2025, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/india/shocking-rift-between-india-and-united-states.
[69] Mukesh Kumar, "India's Defense Indigenization: An Emerging Arms Exporter?," *Stimson Center*, June 26, 2023, accessed August 25, 2025, https://www.stimson.org/2023/indias-defense-indigenization-an-emerging-arms-exporter/.
[70] Ashley J. Tellis, "India's Great-Power Delusions: How New Delhi's Grand Strategy Thwarts Its Grand Ambitions," *Foreign Affairs* 104, no. 3 (May/June 2025), accessed August 25, 2025, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/india/indias-great-power-delusions.
[71] Jeff M. Smith, "Strategic Autonomy and U.S.-Indian Relations," *War on the Rocks*, November 6, 2020, https://warontherocks.com/2020/11/strategic-autonomy-and-u-s-indian-relations/.

First emphasized by leaders like President K.R. Narayanan and PM Manmohan Singh, it became practical way to keep India's global options open.[72] Former NSA M.K. Narayanan even said the US was "exploiting" the special relationship to pull India into its anti-China strategy.[73] This skepticism has made many in the West label India as a "swing state,"[74] one that will not fully commit to any one camp, hence, its nickname as "the weakest link in the QUAD"[75].

Thus, this blend of Hindu nationalism, techno-nationalism, and strategic autonomy by Modi regime is likely - allow India to leverage great power competition without giving-up freedom of action, but it limits trust and depth in its partnerships. India will continue to play the role of a calculated "swing state" rather than the dependable strategic partner US wants it to be, thus, no matter how many defense partnerships both sides sign.

- ***Technical and Structural Barriers at Domestic Levels in both countries***

The two countries operate under vastly different procurement philosophies: India prioritizes the 'lowest-cost, technically acceptable' (L1) approach, whereas the U.S. utilizes a 'best-value' model that justifies higher costs for superior performance and capability. India's lowest-cost and technically responsive bids are motivated by financial limitations, a high acquisition volume, and a wish to evade the political attention that comes with costly contracts.

According to this approach, pricing becomes the deciding factor once a system satisfies the technical requirements, frequently favoring platforms with adequate rather than excellent performance. For instance, even though these systems lagged behind Western alternatives in avionics, survivability, or network-centric capabilities, India's long-term reliance on Russian-origin platforms such as the MiG-21, MiG-29, and T-72 tanks were shaped by both strategic alignment and their relatively lower acquisition and lifecycle costs.[76]

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[72] Ibid.

[73] "22 Is Less Than the Sum of Its Parts," *The Hindu*, accessed August 25, 2025, https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/22-is-less-than-the-sum-of-its-parts/article24970664.ece.

[74] Shayerah I. Akhtar, *India-U.S. Relations: Issues for Congress*, CRS Report R47597 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, June 16, 2023), https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R47597.

[75] Dhruva Jaishankar, interview by Hwang Jae-ho, *The Korea Herald*, August 1, 2022, published by ORF America, https://orfamerica.org/media/koreaheraldjaishankarinterview.

[76] Ashley J. Tellis, *Troubles, They Come in Battalions: The Manifold Travails of the Indian Defense Establishment* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016), 38–45, accessed August 25, 2025, https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/03/14/troubles-they-come-in-battalions-pub-63001.

This divergence leads to procedural misalignment and miscommunication, especially in arms trade negotiations. Despite high expectations, initiatives like the iCET and the DTTI have yet to bring transformative results. Moreover, due to strict regulatory frameworks like the Arms Export Control Act (AECA) and International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR), critical technologies required for advanced platforms such as nuclear-powered submarines is restricted for India, which is sore a point for India.[77] On India's side, regulatory and structural inefficiencies persist despite revisions to the Defence Acquisition Procedure; US firms have also raised concerns over India's delays in granting offset credits, which expose them to penalties.[78]

Conclusion

The persistence of US-Indian defense cooperation is neither coincidental nor solely leader-driven, especially in the face of obvious political, economic, and normative conflicts. Instead, a Neoclassical Realist perspective best explains it as the result of a relationship that is both domestically mediated and structurally conditioned. Because deep-seated systemic incentives and institutionalized mechanisms continue to outweigh episodic tensions, both states reached a new ten-year defense framework, despite tariff disputes under Trump 2.0, sanction pressures regarding Russia, and ongoing disagreements over strategic alignment. The growing rivalry between the US and China creates a strong structural drive for cooperation at the systemic level. India's worries about China's expanding maritime and continental influence and Washington's desire for competent regional allies create a convergence that is difficult for either side to ignore. This convergence is selective and constrained, though. India does not share Washington's inclination for alliance-based balancing, nor does it view China in a strictly zero-sum manner. Rather than seeing the growing multipolar system as a challenge needing strong alignment, India sees it as a chance to improve its own status and autonomy. This difference explains why India maintains interaction with China and upholds its long-standing friendship with Russia while simultaneously strengthening defense ties with the US. At the domestic and bureaucratic level, institutionalization has insulated the defense relationship from political shocks. Mechanisms such as the 2+2 Dialogue, foundational agreements (COMCASA, BECA, SOSA), defense-industrial cooperation, and

[77] Araudra Singh, "Hurdles and Opportunities for the India-U.S. Defense Partnership," *Stimson Center*, February 22, 2024, accessed August 25, 2025, https://www.stimson.org/2024/hurdles-and-opportunities-for-the-india-u-s-defense-partnership.
[78] Ibid.

expanding military exercises have shifted the partnership away from ad hoc, leader-centric engagement toward routinized interaction.

The prevailing theoretical frameworks such as hedging or alliance security dilemma theory are insufficient. Neoclassical Realism better captures this dynamic by explaining how systemic pressures are filtered through domestic ideas—strategic autonomy, techno-nationalism, procurement preferences, and nationalist politics—to produce a calibrated, non-committal partnership. The US-India defense partnership is durable but inherently constrained. While structural interests and institutionalized cooperation offer resilience against shocks, India's pursuit of strategic autonomy and multipolarity prevents the relationship from evolving into a formal alliance. The paradox of deepening defense ties alongside persistent strategic divergence is a defining feature, not a temporary glitch. Looking ahead, India will likely continue to leverage technological benefits from the US while avoiding the role of a 'decisive balancer' against China to preserve its independence.

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INDIAN ILLEGALLY OCCUPIED JAMMU AND KASHMIR AND PALESTINE:

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF IDENTITY CRISIS, AND NARRATIVES OF RESISTANCE AND OCCUPATION

Syeda Saba Israr

Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir and Palestine: A Comparative Study of Identity Crisis, and Narratives of Resistance and Occupation

Syeda Saba Israr*

Abstract

This paper examines the parallels between the conflicts in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK) and Palestine through the lenses of occupation, resistance, and unresolved self-determination. Rooted in post-colonial divisions, both disputes have been characterized by decades of military control, demographic engineering, and recurring youth-led uprisings against occupying forces. These conflicts have been marked by severe human rights violations, targeted assassinations, and large-scale civilian casualties, with profound implications for the identity and collective consciousness of Muslim communities at both local and transnational levels. Drawing on comparative case studies and constructivist theory, the paper analyzes how state repression, legal exceptionalism, and narrative control have contributed to enduring identity crises and grassroots solidarity while international law continues to reproduce political stalemates rather than resolution. The paper analyzes how long-term occupation in IIOJK and Palestine socially constructs identities and common narratives of resistance, and how new technologies like information control, digital governance, and surveillance systems reinforce these dynamics. The study argues that despite geographical and geopolitical differences, IIOJK and Palestine represent interconnected struggles for liberation shaped by collective trauma, ideological occupation, generational resistance, and technologically mediated forms of control and resistance.

Key words: Conflict, Resistance, Liberation, Resolution, Occupation, Demographic Engineering, Human Rights.

* Syeda Saba Israr is a PhD Scholar at the Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad. She can be reached at syedasabaisrar@hotmail.com.

Introduction

The Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK) in South Asia and Palestine in the Middle East represent two of the world's oldest, most complex, and multifaceted conflicts; they also remain among the long-standing issues on the United Nations agenda.[1] These two protracted and intricate conflicts involving IIOJK and Palestine are concentrating on an ideological, identity and a geographical core. Muslims in both states have been severely deprived of their basic right of self-determination, and human rights, as a result of Indian and Israel's subjugation and colonization. India and Israel's cruel, aggressive, and immoral actions and policies have affected Muslims in both states.[2] Both the conflicts originated under the British empire through seemingly straightforward partition plan proposed by British. This decision precipitated enduring conflicts that evolved into complex and multifaceted disputes. It has not only hindered the region's economic development, peace, and security, but also impeded Muslims' freedom, their identity and right to self-determination in both states.[3]

This study situates the conflicts in IIOJK and Palestine within a shared framework of occupation, resistance, and the unresolved right to self-determination, while recognizing technology as a significant—though not exclusive—dimension of these struggles in 2025. Rooted in post-colonial partitions, both IIOJK and Palestine have endured prolonged military control, demographic engineering, and repeated cycles of youth-led uprisings against occupying authorities. These periods of unrest have been accompanied by severe human rights violations, targeted assassinations, and large-scale civilian casualties, all of which have profoundly shaped Muslim identity at both the local and transnational levels.[4]

Drawing on constructivist theory and comparative case analysis, the paper highlights how state repression now increasingly combines conventional coercion with advanced surveillance technologies such as biometric databases, AI-enabled monitoring, internet restrictions, and digital profiling, which deepen the sense of constant control and intensify identity crises among occupied

[1] Goldie Osuri and Ather Zia, "Kashmir and Palestine: Archives of Coloniality and Solidarity," *Identities* 27, no. 3 (May 2020): 249–66, https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2020.1750200.
[2] Ibid.,2.
[3] Ather Zia, "'Their Wounds Are Our Wounds': A Case for Affective Solidarity between Palestine and Kashmir," *Identities* 27, no. 3 (May 2020): 357–75, https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2020.1750199.
[4] Ibid.

populations.[5] At the same time, grassroot resistance has adapted by using digital platforms to sustain narratives of resistance, collective memory, and solidarity, even as international law and global governance mechanisms continue to produce political stalemates rather than resolution. Taken together, the cases of IIOJK and Palestine reveal interconnected struggles for liberation. In these contexts, collective trauma, ideological occupation, generational resistance, and emerging technologies converge to reshape identity and power dynamics under conditions of prolonged occupation.[6]

Scholarly research has previously been done on this subject. An overview of the historical context and the current state of affairs in the area is given by Salma Malik and Nasreen Akhtar's discussion of "Jammu and Kashmir Conflict under Indian Illegal Occupation: Past and Present." Both have explicitly bifurcated the situation and explained the circumstances which compelled people to rush to Kashmir soon after the independence.[7] Nawazish Ali in "Kashmir and Palestine: A tale of two subjugations" tactfully articulated the notion of replication of the Israeli tactics by India. In a compelling analysis "Kashmir and Palestine: Ignored Occupations," Survaj Kumar examines the parallel trajectories of these two regions. He argues that both Kashmir and Palestine have been defined by a sustained struggle for national independence and the re-establishment of sovereignty over their respective territories.

Hafsa Ammar in "Parallels between Palestine and Kashmir" focused on the several parallels between these two conflicts: a Muslim-majority population, colonialism, regional enmity, geostrategic importance, among others. In their comparative analyses of 'South Asian Palestine' and 'Middle Eastern Kashmir': Parallel Case Studies of Occupation Forces and Crackdown on Youth, Lubna Abid Ali and Sana Imtiaz Kitchlew highlight the parallels and differences between

[5] Ruheela Hassan, "Digital Exclusion and Its Impact on Journalism in Kashmir," *E-Learning and Digital Media* 19, no. 5 (September 2022): 475–94, https://doi.org/10.1177/20427530221104880.
[6] "The Impact of Digital Repression on Human Rights Situation in IIOJK," KIIR, accessed August 12, 2025, https://kiir.org.pk//research-Paper/the-impact-of-digital-repression-on-human-rights-situation-in-iiojk-8694.
[7] Salma Malik and Nasreen Akhtar, "Jammu and Kashmir Conflict under Indian Illegal Occupation: Past and Present," *Margalla Papers* 25, no. 1 (2021): 23–35, https://doi.org/10.54690/margallapapers.25.1.48.

these two conflicts.[8] Tariq Ali and Arundhati Roy's book Kashmir: The Case for Freedom examines the grave human rights abuses committed by Indian military stationed in IIJOK.[9]

While a substantial body of literature has comparatively examined IIOJK and Palestine through historical, legal, and geopolitical lenses, existing scholarship largely treats technology as peripheral rather than constitutive of contemporary occupation and resistance. Most studies focus on military repression, demographic engineering, diplomacy, or international law, but do not systematically analyze how digital surveillance, biometric governance, AI-enabled monitoring, internet shutdowns, and information control have become central instruments through which occupation is exercised and identities are reshaped in the post-2015 and especially post-2019 and post-2023 periods. Moreover, the role of technology in deepening identity crises is significant. At the same time, it enables new forms of resistance, narrative construction, and transnational solidarity – yet this dual role remains under-theorized within constructivist frameworks.

The research answers how prolonged occupation, state repression, and unresolved self-determination in IIOJK and Palestine collectively produce identity crises and shared narratives of resistance, and in what ways does the increasing use of surveillance and digital technologies reinforce or transform these dynamics rather than fundamentally redefining them?

The paper argues that in IIOJK and Palestine, technology has become an integral layer of occupation that operates alongside military force, legal control, and demographic engineering, intensifying identity crises while reshaping resistance narratives. Advanced surveillance systems, digital restrictions, and information control do not merely suppress dissent; they actively reconstruct how occupied populations perceive themselves, their oppressors, and their collective struggle. At the same time, these technological constraints generate adaptive forms of resistance through digital storytelling, online solidarity, and transnational advocacy, reinforcing shared narratives of liberation.

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine IIOJK and Palestine conflicts through comparative case analysis. Data are drawn from secondary sources, including peer-

[8] Lubna Abid Ali and Sana Imtiaz Kitchlew, "'South Asian Palestine' and 'Middle Eastern Kashmir': Parallel Case Studies of Occupation Forces and Crackdown on Youth," *IPRI Journal* 19, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 120–48, https://doi.org/10.31945/iprij.190205.
[9] Arundhati Roy, Pankaj Mishra, Hilal Bhatt, Angana P. Chatterji, and Tariq Ali, *Kashmir: The Case for Freedom* (London: Verso Books, 2011).

reviewed research journals, academic books, policy reports, and publications by reputed think tanks.

Theoretical Framework

Constructivism facilitates comparative analysis by focusing on how identities, narratives of resistance, and perceptions of legitimacy are socially constructed across different conflict settings. Applied to IIOJK and Palestine, it enables comparison of shared mechanisms such as occupation, repression, and surveillance that shape similar identity crises despite distinct geopolitical contexts.[10] This approach allows the study to move beyond regional specificity and identify convergent patterns of resistance and domination across both cases.[11]

From the constructivists point of view, IIOJK and Palestine conflict is not just a matter of territory or resources but are firmly anchored in the created identities and narratives of states.[12] Conflicts can be escalated or transformed by communication of parties about themselves and their enemies. These identities are created and constantly modified by historical, social, and political contexts.[13]

Many realist analyses, however tend to interpret South Asian security dynamics through a Hobbesian lens in international affairs. The challenges of security, nuclear stability or instability, arms race, military influence, and ongoing wars restrict foreign policy options and collaboration in resolving the conflict. The South Asian analysts attempt to understand the links between the two nations by embracing the classical and structural theoretical framework. But the post-positivists who have been ruling the discipline, challenged the move.

The significance of ideas, identity, cultural history, constitutive laws and norms, and how they impact state relations are all emphasized by constructivist theory. These ideational factors are central to understanding how occupation in IIOJK, similar to Palestine, has generated enduring identity insecurity and resistance narratives rooted in history, religion, and collective memory.

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[10] Antje Wiener, "Constructivist Approaches in International Relations Theory: Puzzles and Promises," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, ahead of print, January 5, 2007, https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1939758.
[11] Arndt Michael, "Realist-Constructivism and the India-Pakistan Conflict: A New Theoretical Approach for an Old Rivalry," *Asian Politics & Policy* 10 (January 2018): 100–14, https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12365.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.

Initially, the two identities were essential to the British Raj's division, which resulted in the establishment of India and Pakistan in 1947.[14]

While India was a socialist republic, on paper, with a Hindu-majority population, Pakistan was established as a Muslim state. Under the leadership of Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the movement for Pakistan was built on the conviction that the fundamental rights of Muslims could not be adequately secured within a centralized, Hindu-majority state. This foundational logic continues to shape the geopolitical narrative of the region today. In IIOJK, this struggle persists as a direct challenge to external control. The Kashmiri people have consistently asserted their right to autonomy, a demand rooted in a history and culture that remains distinct from the broader Indian polity.[15]

According to T.V. Paul,[16] "the two nations' relationship is more akin to an ongoing rivalry than a typical conflict, meaning that it is "a strategic competition between the same pair of states over an extended period of time." A tiny proportion of interstate confrontations last a long time and "lock" the opposing states into a strong conflictual connection. These "repeated militarized conflict," "outstanding set of unresolved issues," and "psychological manifestations of enmity" are what characterize these "enduring" or "intractable" conflicts." These characteristics clearly define the India-Pakistan relationship, which has seen four wars, ongoing hostilities and crises, and even instances where conflict could escalate into higher rung escalation ladder.[17] It is important to note that long-lasting rivalries are extremely difficult to explain using realist and rational-choice methods.

This conflict characterized by a "dysfunctional [intergroup] collective identity," which is maintained through a constant process of zero-sum social comparisons, deep ontological uncertainty, and threat to identities from both "domestic" and "systemic" turbulence. Conflict serves as a means of achieving ontological security and preserving collective self-esteem.[18] In both

[14] Victoria Schofield, "Kashmir in Conflict: India, Pakistan and the Unfinished War," *New Statesman* 129 (July 17, 2000): 53–54.
[15] Atif Shafique, "The Case for Constructivism in Analyzing the India-Pakistan Conflict," *E-International Relations*, July 2011, 1–38.
[16] T.V. Paul, "Casues of the India-Pakistan Enduring Rivalry," (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 3-26.
[17] Subrata Mitra, "War and Peace in South Asia: A Revisionist View of India-Pakistan Relations," *Contemporary South Asia* 10, no. 3 (2001): 361–79.
[18] Erik Ringmar, "On the Ontological Status of the State," *European Journal of International Relations* 2, no. 4 (June 1996): 439–66.

Kashmir and Palestine, resistance thus becomes a socially constructed response to occupation, sustaining group identity in the face of prolonged marginalization and coercive control.

Constructivism finds a middle ground in the Israel-Palestine conflict because it aims to explain how human agents socially build these structures in the first place, as opposed to concentrating only on how structures define individuals' identities and interests. It further aims to comprehend the interplay between the materials, subjective, and inter subject worlds in the social production of reality. Constructivism provides a thorough framework for understanding the difficulties that emerge and how the dispute may be resolved with collaboration.

This framework also clarifies why Palestinian and struggle of Kashmiri people in IIOJK, despite different geopolitical settings, exhibit similar identity crises and overlapping narratives of resistance against occupation. Constructivism also looks at the basic ways in which political people interpret and portray the social and material world. The identity determines the different treatments. For example, some benefits may not be suitable or beneficial to a group that belongs to a different identity.

Due to this diversity, human actors, political organizations and leaders, for instance actively assess behaviors pertaining to languages, beliefs, and ethnicity and try to provide the social world's problems with due consideration.[19] The basis for the demands of Palestinian Arabs and Zionists to a state with a separate identity is the unease of being a minority population in their own territory and the connection between religion and land.[20] Unlike the theory of realism, constructivism takes into account the relationships between numerous actors and the institutions that exist in a given state. In fact, the Israel-Palestine conflict is mostly a cross-ethnic occurrence rooted in identity as the idea of boundaries and cross-border conflict, are of social constructions based on national and ethnic norms and identity.[21] An analysis of the distinctions across communities, cultures, and ethnic groups is required to fully comprehend the occurrence of conflict; otherwise, alternative approaches may prove ineffective.

[19] Nevenka Strazisar, "Rethinking the Concept of Peace-building: The Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina," paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, Minneapolis, MN, March 1998, 109.
[20] Deborah Dash Moore, *American Jewish Identity Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 97–110.
[21] David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, revised edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 320–65.

The constructivist approach to conflict resolution advocates for mutual gathering of the opposing parties and mutual understanding of one other's objectives. This is essential for resolving the two conflicts.[22] Within a constructivist framework, technology functions not as a neutral tool but as a socially embedded instrument that shapes identities, perceptions, and power relations under occupation.

Surveillance technologies, digital governance, and information control practices contribute to the construction of "threatened" and "deviant" identities, while simultaneously redefining resistance through online mobilization and narrative production. In the cases of IIOJK and Palestine, technology reinforces existing structures of domination and resistance by mediating how actors interpret insecurity, legitimacy, and collective belonging. Ultimately, those in IIOJK and Palestine share a common destiny, despite belonging to distinct religious, ethnic, and cultural groups. In this sense, technology intensifies, rather than replaces, the structural and ideological dimensions of occupation that shape identity crises and resistance in both regions.

Parallels of the Conflicts

There are certain parallels that can be drawn between both the conflicts.[23] These parallels actually provide the discourse for the comparative study of both the conflicts. One can better understand the dynamics of the IIOJK and Palestine conflicts through systematic analysis, which further helps determine their nature and contours. Parallels can be studied on the basis of the timeline, geographical significance, actors, human rights violations, manipulation of the media, role of international community and algorithmic repression.[24] From a constructivist point of view, these similarities are not accidental but grow out of shared experiences of occupation, identity contestation, and narrative control. This approach makes it possible to compare IIOJK and Palestine by focusing on how ideas of threat, legitimacy, resistance, and belonging are shaped over time, including through media manipulation and the increasing use of digital and surveillance technologies.

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[22] Helen Yanacopulos and Joseph Hanlon, *Civil War, Civil Peace* (Oxford: James Currey Publishers, 2006), 25–26.
[23] Lubna Abid Ali and Sana Imtiaz Kitchlew, "'South Asian Palestine' and 'Middle Eastern Kashmir: Parallel Case Studies of Occupation Forces and Crackdown on Youth," *Islamabad Policy Research Institute* 19, no. 2 (2019): 120–48, https://www.prdb.pk/article/south-asian-palestine-and-middle-eastern-kashmir-p-3829.
[24] Nawazish Ali, "Kashmir and Palestine: A Tale of Two Subjugations," *Daily Times*, April 21, 2021, https://dailytimes.com.pk/747743/kashmir-and-palestine-a-tale-of-two-subjugations.

a. Timeline of both the Conflicts

The 1990s was a watershed decade, characterized by a fundamental shift in the resistance movements within both IIOJK and Palestine. While the core disputes date back to the 1947–1948 era, the mid-1990s represented a period of intense escalation and renewed international attention rather than the "emergence" of the disputes themselves. On 14 August 1947, India and Pakistan's geographical divide proved to be the last master stroke that brought an end to the British Raj. The separation was purportedly carried out following a thorough examination of the religious preferences of the vast majority.

Areas having a Muslim population tended to join Pakistan, whereas areas with a Hindu majority joined India. The majority of the population in IIOJK was Muslim and favored accession to Pakistan. The Instrument of Accession signed by Maharaja Hari Singh remains highly controversial, with researchers debating its authenticity and locals in IIOJK questioning its legitimacy.

In 1948, the declaration of the State of Israel triggered a full-scale regional war with its neighboring Arab states, prompting further intervention by the United Nations. Similar to the situation in IIOJK, the destabilization of Palestine intensified during this era, specifically following the 1947 UN Partition Plan. This pivotal moment precipitated the 1948 Nakba, setting both regions on parallel trajectories of prolonged conflict and territorial dispute.

Consequently, there was an intensification of hostility and bloodshed between Arabs and Jews. The Nakba, which means "catastrophe" in Arabic, had a devastating impact on the Palestinian people's way of life in May 1948.[25] The Zionists drove around 700,000–750,000 Palestinians from their lands. Such displacement is still frequent in recent decades. The Balfour Declaration, made by the British in 1917, provided escaping Jews asylum in Palestine without the knowledge or consent of the Palestinians, and this document has also been a source of turmoil for the Palestinians. From a constructivist perspective, these foundational events did not merely redraw borders but socially constructed competing identities, historical grievances, and narratives of legitimacy that continue to shape both conflicts. The contested memories of partition,

[25] Rashmi Sehgal, "Kashmir Conflict: Solutions and Demand for Self-Determination," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 1, no. 6 (June 2011): 192.

displacement, and broken promises became central to identity formation in IIOJK and Palestine, embedding occupation and resistance into collective consciousness across generations.

b. Actors in the Conflicts

The common overarching actor in both conflicts was the British Crown, which oversaw the tumultuous partitions of lands that were previously held under its colonial authority. The main players happen to be the aggressive nations i.e., Israel and India, both regional powers with sufficient economic ties and international support to justify their military and political repression of the hostility. The situation involves regionally powerful states acting as occupiers, specifically India and Israel. Both are backed by international alliances and strong economic ties. They are justifying their political and military engagements in both the regions.

Because of their identities and areas with a majority of Muslims, IIOJK and Palestine are both being targeted and coerced into abandoning their territorial rights. From a constructivist viewpoint, the role of the British crown and subsequent actions of India and Israel illustrate how colonial legacies and state identities have shaped enduring narratives of legitimacy and control. These narratives frame Muslim-majority territories such as IIOJK and Palestine as contested spaces, where occupation is normalized and resistance is delegitimized through historically constructed claims to sovereignty.

c. Geographical Significance

Both the regions have their substantial geographical significance which cannot be neglected. Kashmir is a nuclear flash point. It could be a potential connecting bridge within the whole of Kashmir, as well as a measure trade route. In case of Palestine, the region holds immense significance for three monotheistic religions: Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Furthermore, it serves as a vital crossroads connecting Asia and Africa.[26] From a constructivist perspective, the geographical significance of IIOJK and Palestine extends beyond material or strategic value and is deeply embedded in social meanings and collective memory.[27] Religious symbolism, historical narratives, and strategic imaginaries transform territory into a core element of identity and

[26] Hafsa Ammar, "Parallel between Palestine and Kashmir," *Paradigm Shift*, July 22, 2023, https://www.paradigmshift.com.pk/palestine-and-kashmir.

[27] Rashmi Singh, "The Discourse and Practice of 'Heroic Resistance' in the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict: The Case of Hamas," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 13 (December 2012): 529–45, https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2012.725660.

legitimacy for both occupiers and occupied populations. As a result, geography becomes a central driver of identity claims, the justification of occupation, and the persistence of shared narratives of resistance in IIOJK and Palestine.[28]

d. Human Rights Violation

In IIOJK**,** multiple credible sources report ongoing and systematic human rights abuses that form part of the everyday reality of occupation. UN experts have expressed "alarm" at human rights violations linked to counter-terrorism operations in 2025, noting that following a terrorist incident in April, authorities arrested and detained approximately 2,800 individuals**,** including journalists and human rights defenders, under broad security laws that allow prolonged detention without trial. Arbitrary detentions, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, torture, intimidation of lawyers and dissidents, and restrictions on media and civil liberties have been highlighted repeatedly by UN mandate-holders as violations of international human rights law. Reports also document routine siege and search operations, excessive use of force, and the pervasive impact of militarization on civilian life in the region.[29]

In Palestine, the human rights situation is marked by large-scale displacement, destruction of civilian infrastructure, and civilian deaths amid ongoing military operations. In early 2025, Human Rights Watch documented that at least 32,000 Palestinians were forcibly displaced from refugee camps in the West Bank in operations described as lacking legal justification and effecting extensive damage to more than 1,460 buildings. These actions have been condemned as violations of international humanitarian law and criticized as part of broader patterns of forced displacement and discrimination.[30]

Separately, Israeli human rights organizations have reported the deaths of at least 98 Palestinians in detention since the Gaza conflict escalated in 2023, with credible allegations of

[28] Ibid.
[29] "New Demolition Order for West Bank Camp Is 'More Devastating News' | UN News," *UN News*, December 16, 2025, https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/12/1166605.
[30] Ibid.

torture, abuse, and lack of independent investigation.[31] Across Gaza and the West Bank, attacks on essential infrastructure, including water and sanitation systems, have compounded the humanitarian crisis, affecting access to basic services and public health.

Through a constructivist lens, systematic human rights violations in both IIOJK and Palestine function as instruments of identity construction, where prolonged repression and legal exceptionalism shape collective memory, deepen identity crises, and sustain narratives of resistance under occupation.

e. Manipulation of Media

Media is maneuvering and manipulating the freedom movements and the notions of the conflict. It is formulating gray and white propaganda for tarnishing the freedom movement of Palestine. It is posing both the movements as terrorist and anti-state activities, as any statement that is against Zionism is considered as anti-Semitic.[32] In case of IIOJK, it is clearly being targeted through black propaganda and suppressing voices for their rights and freedom. Indians are blaming Pakistan for all the protest and movements as blatant lies and semi truth on social media. IIOJK is suffering not only from the highest concentration of military personnel but also from an "e-curfew." This e-curfew entails prolonged internet shutdowns, as well as the blocking of mobile data, news sites, and social media.

In this globalized and highly tech world, an internet blockade may be extremely detrimental to any country, especially one that is currently experiencing this kind of violence. Speaking out against this injustice, journalists in IIOJK reported that time gaps and inaccuracies made it impossible for them to report on situations as they occurred, which also led to a surge of misinformation.[33]

India is projecting the façade of normalcy in the occupied region; however, the reality suggests otherwise. From a constructivist lens, media manipulation and digital censorship function

[31] Emma Graham-Harrison and Yuval Abraham, "At Least 98 Palestinians Have Died in Custody since October 2023, Israeli Data Shows," *The Guardian*, November 17, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/nov/17/at-least-98-palestinians-have-died-in-custody-since-october-2023-israeli-data-shows.

[32] "Framing the Israel-Palestine Conflict in Media Headlines: A Comparative Analysis of Western and Eastern Perspectives Using Appraisal and Transitivity Frameworks," *ResearchGate*, ahead of print, October 29, 2025, https://doi.org/10.63878/jalt1194.

[33] "Article 370: Curfew in Kashmir as Protesters Plan 'Black Day,'" *BBC News*, August 4, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-53646322.

as tools of narrative control that shape perceptions of legitimacy, threat, and resistance. By framing freedom movements as terrorism and restricting information flows, occupying powers actively construct identities of deviance while obscuring structural violence and reinforcing dominant narratives of occupation.[34]

AI, Drones, and Data-Driven Surveillance in Kashmir and Palestine

In the current times, the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI), drones, and data-driven surveillance has further deepened the architecture of occupation in both IIOJK and Palestine, marking a shift from traditional militarization toward algorithmic control.[35] In IIOJK, the Indian state has increasingly integrated AI-enabled systems into its security framework, including facial recognition technologies, predictive policing tools, and large-scale data aggregation linked to biometric identity databases. Surveillance drones are routinely deployed for crowd monitoring, border patrol, and counterinsurgency operations, particularly during protests or political anniversaries.[36] These technologies allow authorities to anticipate dissent, map social networks, and pre-empt mobilization, thereby transforming IIOJK into one of the most heavily monitored regions in the world. For the local population, AI-driven surveillance reinforces a sense of collective suspicion, where identity itself becomes securitized and reduced to data points within an opaque algorithmic system.[37]

A comparable, though more technologically mature, model exists in Palestine, where Israel has long functioned as a testing ground for advanced surveillance and military technologies. Israeli authorities employ AI-assisted drones, automated targeting systems, and extensive data profiling to monitor Palestinian populations in Gaza and the West Bank.[38] Palestinians are subjected to racialized attachment analysis, biometric screening at checkpoints, and algorithmic risk scoring that determines freedom of movement, employment access, and even arrest likelihood. This form

[34] Ibid.
[35] "Drones, Data, and the Kashmir Divide," *Migration and Technology Monitor*, accessed August 25, 2025, https://www.migrationtechmonitor.com/blog/drones-data-and-the-kashmir-divide.
[36] Ibid.
[37] "Modi Regime Deploys Technology to Harshly Suppress Innocent Kashmiris," *National*, October 12, 2025, https://www.app.com.pk/national/modi-regime-deploys-technology-to-harshly-suppress-innocent-kashmiris/.
[38] Emelie Andersin, "The Use of the 'Lavender' in Gaza and the Law of Targeting: AI-Decision Support Systems and Facial Recognition Technology," *Journal of International Humanitarian Legal Studies* 16, no. 2 (May 2025): 336–70, https://doi.org/10.1163/18781527-bja10119.

of data-based racial profiling embeds occupation into everyday life, where decisions affecting livelihoods and survival are increasingly made by automated or semi-automated systems with minimal transparency or accountability. AI thus institutionalizes discrimination by translating political identity into technical risk categories.[39]

From a constructivist standpoint, these technologies do more than enhance efficiency; they actively construct and reinforce identities. AI systems and drones operationalize pre-existing political assumptions, encoding them into digital infrastructures that normalize permanent surveillance and exceptional control over Muslim populations.[40] At the same time, these practices generate new forms of resistance, as Kashmiris and Palestinians document drone presence, expose algorithmic bias, and mobilize international attention through digital platforms.[41] In both cases, AI and drone warfare do not replace occupation but refine it, making control more pervasive, less visible, and more difficult to contest, while simultaneously intensifying identity crises and reinforcing shared narratives of resistance under technologically mediated domination.

Conclusion

A comparative analysis of the protracted conflicts in Kashmir and Palestine reveals a complex interplay between constructed identity and structural violence that has sustained their intractability. Both regions are characterized by prolonged military occupation, systematic human rights abuses, and a severe crisis of self-determination that threatens the fundamental existence of the Kashmiri and Palestinian people. Beyond mere territorial disagreements, these conflicts are rooted in long-term processes of political and cultural marginalization carried out by the occupying powers. This shared narrative of resistance, born from such marginalization, is essential to comprehending the ongoing nature of these disputes.

From a constructivist perspective, the collective identities of Palestinians and Kashmiris are constantly being formed and reconstructed in response to experiences of erasure, oppression,

[39] Ibid.
[40] Nur Pamuji, "Ethical Governance of AI Drones in the Modern Warfare: A Socio-Technical Systems Analysis of Israel-Palestine Conflict," *Syntax Literate; Jurnal Ilmiah Indonesia* 10 (December 2025): 12307–21, https://doi.org/10.36418/syntax-literate.v10i12.62647.
[41] Ibid.

and displacement. Resistance is fueled by the practices of the occupying forces—often justified by domestic legal frameworks—which serve as tools of identity negation. Conversely, narratives of resistance, disseminated through political discourse, cultural output, and international advocacy, are crucial for maintaining group cohesion and rallying global solidarity. This lens emphasizes that ideational elements and socially constructed realities are as vital to the conflict's persistence as material or territorial factors.

Despite numerous interventions by the United Nations, regional organizations, and major powers, a sustainable solution remains elusive. The failure of the international governance architecture, particularly the UN Security Council, can be attributed to structural limitations such as the veto power and the tendency of major states to prioritize strategic interests over the consistent application of international humanitarian law. This has effectively paralysed multilateral action and granted occupying governments a sense of impunity.

The persistence of these conflicts is further exacerbated by the policies of the states involved. Severe violations of international law including demographic engineering, the imposition of draconian laws, and systematic violence against civilian populations—create a recurrent dynamic of repression and resistance. These actions not only deepen human suffering but continually rekindle the grievances that drive the conflicts.

Both the conflicts possess a destabilizing potential that extends far beyond their immediate borders, directly impacting regional and global security. A durable solution, therefore, requires moving beyond strictly territorial frameworks toward a fundamental recognition of the identity-based and historical dimensions at the heart of the struggles. The international community must transition from declaratory diplomacy to coordinated, principled pressure to uphold international law. It is vital that a comprehensive framework be developed—one that addresses both the underlying identity-based grievances and the symptomatic human rights violations—to create the conditions for a just and lasting peace.

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