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Regulatory Independence and Nuclear Safety Governance in South Asia: A Comparative Analysis of Pakistan and India in Light of IAEA Standards

Sidra Shaukat*

Abstract

For civilian nuclear safety governance, independent nuclear regulators are imperative to eliminate conflicts of interest and to prioritize safety over political and economic pressures. It is important that national practices of nuclear regulatory authorities align with the best international practices. To understand the nuclear safety governance of South Asia, this study undertakes a comparative analysis of the nuclear regulatory frameworks of Pakistan and India by examining the Atomic Energy Regulatory Board (AERB) and the Pakistan Nuclear Regulatory Authority (PNRA) against the safety standards and guidelines of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The main argument of this research is that regulatory independence is essential for sustainable nuclear safety governance, and the absence of regulatory autonomy creates structural vulnerabilities that can affect long-term safety outcomes. In the context of Pakistan and India, it is significant because both states operate a civilian nuclear program in a shared geopolitical environment where regulatory failures carry transboundary consequences. The comparative analysis has been conducted across different dimensions such as regulatory independence, decision making and enforcement effectiveness, Integrated Regulatory Review Service (IRRS) implementation in both jurisdictions, and preparedness for emerging technological risks. For research methodology, the research adopts a qualitative approach to examine nuclear regulatory frameworks in Pakistan and India. The findings indicate that, as per IAEA safety standards, PNRA possesses a formally robust and independent institutional structure along with mature international engagement compared to AERB, which operates under a subordinated institutional architecture.

Keywords: IAEA, PNRA, AERB, Regulatory Independence, Safety Standards, Nuclear Governance, South Asia

Introduction

Nuclear energy has become one of the important elements in the global energy mix due to its application in multiple sectors, which has led the international community to place significant emphasis on the safety of nuclear governance as an important domain of public administration.

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Any failure and negligence in nuclear governance and regulation can produce repercussions that can cross national boundaries and engulf entire regions with an unlimited timeline.¹ Chernobyl² and Fukushima³ are demonstration of this catastrophic failure. For safe nuclear regulation, regulatory independence⁴ carries much of the weight as it allows the central authority to take sound decisions regarding the safety of the facilities and installation without any pressure from promotional entities that are responsible for expansion of nuclear energy. At the global level, the IAEA has presented itself as cooperative platform, aiming at establishing a global regulatory architecture and facilitating safe nuclear governance through its Safety Standards Series comprised of binding Safety Requirements and recommended Safety Guides⁵. These international safety standards emphasize harmonization between national and international institutions and the incorporation of legal independence, financial autonomy, transparency obligations, and peer review mechanisms into states' regulatory frameworks.⁶

Pakistan and India have extensive civilian nuclear programs where both states are operating thirty functioning nuclear power reactors⁷ with ambitious growth trajectories. Additionally, both states are operating radiation facilities with Pakistan's 6,732 medical radiation facilities⁸ and India operating comparably extensive radiological infrastructure.⁹ Nuclear regulators of both states (PNRA and AERB) are in place to ensure the safety standards of nuclear technology as per IAEA standards.

There is ample literature on IAEA safety standards, as well as nuclear regulatory authorities of both Pakistan and India. Some scholars have discussed the importance of coordination between international policy and national regulatory framework for the safety of

¹ Joy Rempe and Laurence Williams, "Overview of Nuclear Regulation and Regulatory Framework," in *Nuclear Engineering Handbook*, ed. Kenneth D. Kok (Oxford: Academic Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-409548-9.12156-6>.

² U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, "Backgrounder on Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant Accident," fact sheet, accessed February 24, 2026, <https://www.nrc.gov/reading-rm/doc-collections/fact-sheets/chernobyl-bg.html>.

³ World Nuclear Association, "Fukushima Daiichi Accident," *World Nuclear Association Information Library*, updated February 23, 2026, <https://world-nuclear.org/information-library/safety-and-security/safety-of-plants/fukushima-daiichi-accident>.

⁴ International Atomic Energy Agency, "Independence in Regulatory Decision Making," IAEA Publication No. 1172, (Vienna: IAEA, 2003), accessed February 24, 2026, https://www-pub.iaea.org/MTCD/Publications/PDF/Pub1172_web.pdf.

⁵ International Atomic Energy Agency, "Safety Standards," IAEA, accessed February 24, 2026, <https://www.iaea.org/resources/safety-standards>.

⁶ Stephen G. Burns, "Milestones in Nuclear Law: A Journey in Nuclear Regulation," in *Nuclear Law: The Global Debate* (The Hague: T.M.C. Asser Press, 2022), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6265-495-2_4.

⁷ Atomic Energy Regulatory Board (AERB), *Design of Fuel Handling and Storage Systems for Nuclear Power Plants*, Document No. AERB/NPP/SG/D-24 (Rev. 1) (Mumbai: AERB, 2025), accessed February 25, 2026, <https://www.aerb.gov.in/images/PDF/CodesGuides/NuclearFacility/NuclearPowerPlant/Design/24.pdf>.

⁸ Pakistan Nuclear Regulatory Authority, *Annual Report 2024* (Islamabad: PNRA, 2024), accessed February 24, 2026, <https://www.pnra.org/upload/pnrrpt/Annual%20Report%202024.pdf>.

⁹ Baljinder Singh *et al.*, "India's Growing Nuclear Medicine Infrastructure and Emergence of Radiotheranostics in Cancer Care: Associated Challenges and the Opportunities to Collaborate," *Indian Journal of Nuclear Medicine*, 38, no. 3 (2023): 201–207, accessed February 24, 2026, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10693374/>.

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commercial nuclear facilities¹⁰ while others have shed light on the significance of regulatory independence to ensure safety decisions without subjugation of external interference.¹¹ The scholarly literature on PNRA explains its evolutionary journey, alignment with IAEA safeguards, and its independent regulatory structure¹², whereas, assessment of AERB demonstrates an institutional structure that does not comply with the IAEA requirement of regulatory independence.¹³ The literature review provides important insights into institutional design, and the regulatory efficacy of PNRA and AERB. However, the comparative analysis of nuclear regulatory frameworks of both states against regulatory independence and its impact receives a disproportionate amount of scholarly attention. Furthermore, the literature offers very little analysis for cyber threats, small modular reactors (SMRs) accommodation, and climate scenarios incorporation into regular safety reviews of both regulators.

The study has employed IAEA safety standards as theoretical framework to analyze the regulatory independence of PNRA and AERB. IAEA's INSAG-17 report titled Independence in Regulatory Decision Making indicate that autonomy in legal, financial, and procedural decision making is essential for regulatory independence that impacts overall performance of the regulator.¹⁴ The objective of this research is to critically analyze the regulatory independence of PNRA and AERB against the IAEA benchmark along with regulators' responsiveness to IRRS recommendations, enforcement capacity and their preparedness for emerging technological challenges. These objectives lead to a central question: To what extent does regulatory independence determine the effectiveness of nuclear governance in Pakistan and India across different dimensions of regulatory framework, IRRS implementation, enforcement capability, and preparedness for emerging challenges?

For analyzing nuclear regulations with trans-boundary consequences, South Asia (Pakistan and India) presents a particularly compelling and under-examined case. The study adopts a qualitative research methodology that utilizes both primary and secondary resources. The study relies on research articles, book chapters, IAEA reports, policy documents and national legislative bills. Given the fact that both states are members of the IAEA, a comparative

¹⁰ Joy Rempe and Laurence Williams, "Overview of Nuclear Regulation and Regulatory Framework," in *Nuclear Engineering Handbook*, ed. Kenneth D. Kok (Oxford: Academic Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-409548-9.12156-6>.

¹¹ Anthony Wetherall, "Normative Rule Making at the IAEA: Codes of Conduct," *Nuclear Law Bulletin* 2005, no. 1 (July 25, 2005): 71–93, https://doi.org/10.1787/nuclear_law-2005-5k9d19g4m348.

¹² Muhammad Rizwan, "Genesis and Contours of Pakistan's Regulatory Regime for Safety of Nuclear Power Plants in Comparison with International Standards," *CISS Insight Journal* 8, no. 1 (July 15, 2020): 94–117, accessed February 26, 2026, <https://journal.ciss.org.pk/index.php/ciss-insight/article/view/138>.

¹³ Andrews-Speed, Philip, and Nur Azha Putra. "Breaking the iron triangle around nuclear safety regulation: The cases of France, Japan, and India." *Regulation & Governance* (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1111/rego.12577>.

S. S. Bajaj, "Regulatory practices for nuclear power plants in India," published in *Sādhanā*, Volume 38, Part 5, pages 1027–1050, October 2013. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12046-013-0174-9#citeas>.

¹⁴ International Nuclear Safety Advisory Group, *Independence in Regulatory Decision Making*, INSAG-17 (Vienna: International Atomic Energy Agency, 2003), https://www-pub.iaea.org/MTCD/Publications/PDF/Pub1172_web.pdf.

design will provide a meaningful understanding of both regulators with similar standards and conditions of IAEA safety standards, IRRS recommendations, and IAEA guidelines.

The next section of this paper provides a theoretical foundation for the analysis. The paper further compares the legal and functional independence of PNRA and AERB as per IAEA criteria, international engagement, and IRRS responsiveness. Finally, the paper evaluates how both regulators are getting ready for emerging challenges such as cybersecurity, SMR governance, adapting to climate change, and integrating Artificial intelligence (AI). The discussion is followed by a Conclusion.

Theoretical Framework

▪ *Regulatory Independence in Nuclear Regulation*

There are three important functions that every regulatory body is expected to perform. The first is to develop sound, comprehensive regulations; the second is to verify compliance with these regulations; and the third is to enforce corrective regulatory measures in cases of malpractice or wrongdoing by persons or organizations. To perform these functions, the regulatory authority must possess competence, authority, and regulatory independence. For successful nuclear regulatory governance, regulatory independence¹⁵ has been recognized as foundational bedrock that impacts the integrity of the institution by freeing it from external pressures and strengthening its legal, financial, operational, and procedural dimensions of regulation. For this research, the IAEA's frameworks, especially the INSAG-17 Report "Independence in Regulatory Decision Making", are utilized as the primary theoretical lens to systematically evaluate the institutional design and safety governance of both regulators. The IAEA framework defines regulatory independence as both structural autonomy, which is the formal separation of the regulatory body from entities that promote or operate nuclear facilities, and functional authority, which is the practical capacity to make and enforce safety decisions without subjection to external interference.¹⁶

Within this theoretical lens, four principal indicators can systematically assess regulatory independence across jurisdictions. The first principle is legal and decision-making autonomy that requires the regulatory body to possess unambiguous authority to adopt safety regulations, develop binding subordinate instruments, and impose sanctions, with explicit legal barriers protecting specific safety decisions from political or industry pressure.¹⁷ The second principle is appointment and removal safeguards that demand transparent, criteria-based processes. Financial

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Anthony Wetherall, "Normative Rule Making at the IAEA: Codes of Conduct," *Nuclear Law Bulletin* 2005, no. 1 (July 25, 2005): 71–93, https://doi.org/10.1787/nuclear_law-2005-5k9d19g4m348.

¹⁷ Nuclear Energy Agency, *Nuclear Regulatory Decision Making*, NEA No. 5356 (Paris: OECD/Nuclear Energy Agency, 2005), <https://www.oecd-nea.org/upload/docs/application/pdf/2019-12/nea5356-decision.pdf>.

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independence is the third principle that requires stable, adequate funding mechanisms separated from both promotional bodies and licensee influence. The fourth principle is transparency, which demands that decision-making processes be open and accessible to public scrutiny.¹⁸

The second aspect of this theoretical framework is the relationship between regulatory independence and safety outcome that establishes a central theoretical argument for this research. Autonomy in nuclear governance is essential for positive safety performance of the regulatory authority.¹⁹ Several mechanisms have been articulated by IAEA that shows how institutional independence translates into enhanced safety performance. The institutional autonomy and independence create legal barriers to all the essential technical safety decisions from commercial and developmental pressures. Furthermore, technical regulatory capacity is directly connected with financial independence, which prevents the regulatory administration from unnecessary delays. Availability of resources shapes the regulator's ability to employ, train, and retain staff capable of independent judgment, and to engage external scientific experts.²⁰ Regulatory independence is also essential for effective radioactive waste management. As reflected in IAEA safety frameworks such as Radioactive Waste Safety Standards (RADWASS)²¹, independent regulators are in a better position to implement international standards of safety without commercial and political pressure.

The IAEA's formal articulation of regulatory independence, against which the PNRA and AERB are assessed, has evolved substantially through its Safety Fundamentals and General Safety Requirements (specifically GSR Part 1 and Part 3). Together these documents constitute the authoritative international reference for the design of national regulatory framework. GSR Part 1 (requirement 4) positions regulatory independence as foundational to the entire nuclear safety regime. It establishes that independence must be clearly reflected in the national legal framework and grounded in instruments enacted at the highest political level. The framework openly demands that there should be operational separation of the regulator from the entities promoting or operating nuclear facilities.²² The Convention on Nuclear Safety²³, Joint

¹⁸ INSAG, *Independence in Regulatory Decision Making*, INSAG-17 (Vienna: International Atomic Energy Agency, 2003). https://www-pub.iaea.org/MTCD/Publications/PDF/Pub1172_web.pdf.

¹⁹ Alexander Anastassov, "Some Aspects of the Effectiveness of the International Regulatory Framework to Ensure Nuclear Safety," in *Nuclear Non-Proliferation in International Law – Volume III*, ed. Jonathan Black-Branch and Dieter Fleck (The Hague: T.M.C. Asser Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6265-138-8>.
INSAG, *Independence in Regulatory Decision Making*, INSAG-17 (Vienna: International Atomic Energy Agency, 2003). https://www-pub.iaea.org/MTCD/Publications/PDF/Pub1172_web.pdf.

²¹ International Atomic Energy Agency, *Classification of Radioactive Waste: A Safety Guide*, IAEA Safety Series No. 111-G-1.1, STI/PUB/950 (Vienna: IAEA, 1994), accessed February 25, 2026, https://gnssn.iaea.org/Superseded%20Safety%20Standards/Safety_Series_111-G-1.1_1994_Pub950e_web.pdf.

²² International Atomic Energy Agency, *Governmental, Legal and Regulatory Framework for Safety (GSR Part 1, Rev. 1)* (Vienna: IAEA, 2016), viewed February 25, 2026, NSS-OUI, https://nucleus-apps.iaea.org/nss-oui/Content/Index?CollectionId=m_8fd5e365-0c72-4e28-9ec7-3a2452df2b43&type=PublishedCollection.

²³ International Atomic Energy Agency, *Convention on Nuclear Safety*, IAEA Information Circular No. INFCIRC/449 (Vienna: IAEA, 5 July 1994), accessed February 25, 2026, <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/infirc449.pdf>.

Convention frameworks²⁴, and the IAEA Safety Standards²⁵ reinforces these requirements for national regulators.

The theoretical framework further incorporates the significance and limitations of the IRRS²⁶ that acts as the IAEA's primary instrument for translating abstract standards into practical regulatory improvement through systematic, country-specific peer review. IRRS missions provide host regulators with objective evaluation against IAEA safety standards, recommendations for improvement, and structured opportunities for knowledge exchange with international regulatory peers possessing direct applicable experience. However, there are fundamental structural limitations in the international nuclear safety governance architecture. This standard binding force is applicable only to the IAEA's own operations and IAEA-assisted operations, leaving the vast majority of global nuclear activity subject exclusively to voluntary national application. The absence of enforcement mechanisms beyond IAEA-assisted operations means that states can adopt the appearance of compliance while maintaining promotional-regulatory integration that is fundamentally incompatible with genuine independence, and face no binding consequences for doing so.²⁷

Comparative Analysis

Statutory Independence of AERB and PNRA

▪ ***Legal Independence***

PNRA is Pakistan's national nuclear regulator and it is committed to ensure and integrate international safety protocols into the national regulatory framework. Throughout its journey of regulatory independence, Pakistan has completed multiple milestones, including the establishment of the Pakistan Nuclear Safety and Radiation Protection Ordinance in 1984, the Directorate of Nuclear Safety and Radiation Protection in 1985, and finally, the Pakistan Nuclear

²⁴ International Atomic Energy Agency, *Joint Convention on the Safety of Spent Fuel Management and on the Safety of Radioactive Waste Management*, IAEA INFCIRC 546 (Vienna: IAEA, adopted 5 September 1997; entered into force 18 June 2001), accessed February 25, 2026, https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/23/09/23-03660e_web.pdf.

²⁵ International Atomic Energy Agency, *IAEA Nuclear Safety and Security Glossary*, (Vienna: IAEA, 2022 (Interim Edition)), accessed February 25, 2026, <https://www-pub.iaea.org/MTCD/Publications/PDF/IAEA-NSS-GLOweb.pdf>.

²⁶ International Atomic Energy Agency, *Integrated Regulatory Review Service (IRRS): Technical Brochure*, (Vienna: IAEA, November 2024), accessed February 25, 2026, https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/24/11/22-00616e_ns_tech_bro_irrs_final.pdf.

²⁷ Angel Anastassov, Some Aspects of the Effectiveness of the International Regulatory Framework to Ensure Nuclear Safety, in *Nuclear Non-Proliferation in International Law – Volume III: Legal Aspects of the Use of Nuclear Energy for Peaceful Purposes*, ed. Jonathan L. Black-Branch and Dieter Fleck (The Hague: T.M.C. Asser Press, 2016), 215–46, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-94-6265-138-8_7.

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Regulatory Authority in 2001.²⁸ The establishment of PNRA was a deliberate attempt to meet international expectations for a genuinely independent oversight authority.²⁹ AERB, on the other hand, was constituted on November 15, 1983, under Sections 16, 17, and 23 of the Atomic Energy Act of 1962, legislation whose primary legislative purpose was advancing nuclear energy development rather than independently governing it.³⁰

With respect to statutory independence, the regulatory authorities of both states — AERB and PNRA — have adopted different approaches. PNRA is a fully autonomous regulatory organization responsible for nuclear safety regulation and radiation protection. The Ordinance No. III of 2001 provided explicit legislative authority to PNRA, where the Chairman reports directly to the Prime Minister, the highest political authority of Pakistan. Furthermore, the ordinance also created a formal separation of PNRA from the promotional body of the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission (PAEC).³¹ AERB, on the other hand, operates under the administrative control of the Atomic Energy Commission.³² The very entity responsible for exploiting or promoting nuclear technologies. This creates an irreconcilable conflict of interest, as the regulatory authority is held accountable to the very body whose activities it is mandated to scrutinize, and it compromises the independent relationship that effective nuclear governance requires. The structural subordination of AERB to Atomic Energy Commission contradicts the IAEA's explicit requirement³³ that regulatory budgets and authority should not be decided by or be subject to the approval of those parts of the government which are responsible for exploiting or promoting nuclear technologies.

▪ *Operational Independence*

The structure of PNRA has been established in accordance with IAEA regulatory standards and separates operational regulatory authority from institutional support. For that there are two primary wings within PNRA. The Executive Wing is for central regulatory functions, and the Corporate Wing functions as a Technical Support Organization. Furthermore, there are specialized directorates for nuclear safety, radiation safety, transport, and waste safety. The

²⁸ Naeem Ahmad Salik, *Learning to Live with the Bomb: Pakistan, 1998–2016* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2017), chap. 7, “Pakistan’s Nuclear Regulatory Regime,” 257–291.

²⁹ Muhammad Rizwan, “Genesis and Contours of Pakistan’s Regulatory Regime for Safety of Nuclear Power Plants in Comparison with International Standards,” *CISS Insight Journal* 8, no. 1 (July 15, 2020): 94–117, accessed February 26, 2026, <https://journal.ciss.org.pk/index.php/ciss-insight/article/view/138>.

³⁰ Atomic Energy Regulatory Board (AERB), Government of India, *Acts — Acts & Regulations*, accessed February 26, 2026, <https://www.aerb.gov.in/english/acts-regulations/acts>.

³¹ Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission, “PAEC Contact Us,” *PAEC*, accessed February 24, 2026, <https://paec.gov.pk/contact/index.aspx>.

³² Atomic Energy Regulatory Board (AERB), Government of India, “*Annual Reports*,” accessed February 26, 2026, <https://www.aerb.gov.in/english/publications/annual-report>.

³³ International Atomic Energy Agency, “*IAEA Safety Standards*, IAEA Safety Standards Series,” (Vienna: IAEA, 2023), section on financial aspects of regulatory independence, accessed February 26, 2026, https://www-pub.iaea.org/MTCD/Publications/PDF/P1801_web.pdf.

Center for Nuclear Safety, School of Nuclear and Radiation Safety, and National Radiation Emergency Coordination Center collectively demonstrate genuine regulatory ambitions, align with international safety standards.³⁴ The regulatory activities of PNRA also reflect institutional independence and confidence, aligning closely with IAEA frameworks across multiple, independently verifiable dimensions. The regulatory structure of PNRA (Ordinance at top, Regulations at second tier, Regulatory Guides at third tier) reflects IAEA's hierarchical standards architecture.³⁵ PNRA has a history of cooperating with the nuclear regulators of other countries, especially China, where bilateral relations are quite strong in terms of nuclear safety, and it has been involved in bilateral arrangements with multiple Chinese organizations,³⁶ such as National Nuclear Safety Administration (NNSA), China Nuclear Power Operations Technology Corporation (CNPO), and Nuclear and Radiation Safety Center (NSC).³⁷ The enforcement and operational autonomy has helped PNRA in achieving high level of safety standards.

The structural subordination of AERB can be seen by its deep operational embeddedness within the broader Department of Atomic Energy (DAE)³⁸ ecosystem. The first problem is that the experts in multi-tiered safety review committees are predominantly from organizations within DAE, and these committees are responsible for AERB's technical decision making. The Nuclear Power Corporation of India Limited³⁹ and Bharatiya Nabhikiya Vidyut Nigam⁴⁰ are two regulated entities which themselves are DAE subsidiaries. Bharat Atomic Research Centre⁴¹ and Indira Gandhi Centre for Atomic Research⁴² are promotional research organizations upon whom AERB relies for primary technical support. The Safety Research Institute at Kalpakkam also conducts technical research, however, it is very limited with respect to the total dimensions of

³⁴ Tariq Majeed, "Assessment of Nuclear Safety and Security Regime of Pakistan," *CISS Insight Journal* 13, no. 1 (June 30, 2025), accessed February 26, 2026, <https://journal.ciss.org.pk/index.php/ciss-insight/article/view/413>.

³⁵ Pakistan Nuclear Regulatory Authority (PNRA), "Establishment of Regulatory Framework," accessed February 26, 2026, <https://pnra.org/estab-rf-work.html>.

³⁶ Dr. Allauddin Kakar, Azeem Khalid, and Malik Muhammad Ali, "Pakistan-China Nuclear Energy Cooperation: Emerging Trends to Achieve Sustainable Development Goals," *Pakistan Journal of International Affairs* 4, no. 1 (January 2021), accessed February 26, 2026, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/350496752_Pakistan-China_Nuclear_Energy_Cooperation_Emerging_Trends_to_Achieve_Sustainable_Development_Goals.

³⁷ Pakistan Nuclear Regulatory Authority (PNRA), "International Cooperation," accessed February 26, 2026, <https://www.pnra.org/int-cooperation.html>.

³⁸ Department of Atomic Energy (DAE), "Government of India," *Homepage*, accessed February 25, 2026, <https://dae.gov.in/>.

³⁹ International Atomic Energy Agency, "Nuclear Power Corporation of India Limited," (IAEA Publication P1574 Addendum, Section 075) (Vienna: IAEA, n.d.), accessed February 25, 2026, <https://www-pub.iaea.org/MTCD/publications/PDF/IAEA-NSS-GLOWeb.pdf>.

⁴⁰ Government of India, Ministry of Finance, "Statement of Budget Estimates 2011-2012," (Demand No. 5: Department of Atomic Energy, Expenditure Budget Volume II) (New Delhi: Government of India, 2011), accessed February 25, 2026, <https://www.indiabudget.gov.in/budget2011-2012/ub2011-12/eb/sbe5.pdf>.

⁴¹ R. D. Kale, "India's Fast Reactor Programme — A Review and Critical Assessment," *Progress in Nuclear Energy* (2020), accessed February 26, 2026, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0149197020300251>.

⁴² Indira Gandhi Centre for Atomic Research, "IGCAR Annual Report 2025" (Kalpakkam: Department of Atomic Energy, Government of India, 2025), accessed February 26, 2026, https://www.igcar.gov.in/publications/igc_annual_report_2025.pdf.

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regulatory research needed.⁴³ The training of AERB recruits at nuclear training schools under Homi Bhabha National Institute, which is a DAE institution⁴⁴, can potentially inculcate promotional values during professional development. These operational and technical dependencies have potential to create conflict of interest and external pressure on AERB.

▪ *Financial Independence*

PNRA's budget is also independent and separate from promotional and regulated entities. It is generated through federal grants, license fees, and Public Sector Development Program, making PNRA free from financial approval from other entities.⁴⁵ Whereas, AERB's budget needs DAE approval, which is the body that AERB regulates.⁴⁶ This goes against IAEA rules that say regulatory budgets should not be tied to organizations that promote nuclear technologies. This financial subordination structurally undermines the independence asserted by AERB. If funding is flowing through promotional entity than regulatory authority can face pressure to align with promotional agendas of licensing, or incorporation of new technologies. Similarly, without an independent budget, regulators cannot freely provide funds for research and inspections, etc. The 2025 SHANTI Bill⁴⁷ seeks to provide statutory power and some independence in financial matters but the bill has gaps and risks that need to be addressed. This bill was aimed at resolving the autonomous issue that caused the prolonged scholarly criticism of AERB. However, it has also been observed that there are certain gaps that may cause difficulty in the implementation of the SHANTI Bill. These gaps include supplier liability, the failure to establish independent regulatory funds, ambiguous liability caps across different reactor categories, lack of clarity about the regulation of SMRs, and the absence of explicit public participation mechanisms.⁴⁸

⁴³ S. S. Bajaj, "Regulatory practices for nuclear power plants in India," published in *Sādhanā*, Volume 38, Part 5, pages 1027–1050, October 2013. <https://www.ias.ac.in/article/fulltext/sadh/038/05/1027-1050>.

⁴⁴ Government of India, "*National Report of India for the Sixth Review Meeting of the Contracting Parties to the Convention on Nuclear Safety*," (New Delhi: Government of India, 2014), accessed February 26, 2026, <https://aerb.gov.in/images/cns2014.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Pakistan Nuclear Regulatory Authority, "*History of PNRA*," accessed February 26, 2026, <https://www.pnra.org/history.html>.

⁴⁶ Comptroller and Auditor General of India, "*Report No. 9 of 2012-13 — Performance Audit on Activities of the Atomic Energy Regulatory Board*," Union Government, Atomic Energy Department: Chapter 2 — Regulatory Framework for Nuclear and Radiation Facilities (New Delhi: CAG, 2012), accessed February 26, 2026, https://cag.gov.in/uploads/download_audit_report/2012/Union_Performance_Atomic_Energy_Regulatory_Board_Union_Government_Atomic_Energy_Department_9_2012_Chapter_2.pdf.

⁴⁷ Press Information Bureau, Government of India, "*The Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India (SHANTI) Bill, 2025*," (New Delhi: Government of India, 19 December 2025), accessed February 26, 2026, <https://static.pib.gov.in/WriteReadData/specificdocs/documents/2025/dec/doc20251222741701.pdf>.

⁴⁸ JMMF Institute, *The Gaps and the Risks of the Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India (SHANTI) Act, 2025* (New Delhi: JMMF Institute, 2025), <https://www.informaticsjournals.co.in/index.php/jmmf/article/view/54225/36096>.

■ *Procedural Transparency*

As far as transparency is concerned, it also impacts legitimacy and autonomy. The transparency mechanisms of PNRA are also proactive and aligned with international safety standards. Section 52 of the 2001 Ordinance declares the chairman and members of PNRA as public servants, whereas sections 55 and 56 grant PNRA the power to make rules and regulations.⁴⁹ PNRA translates these rules and regulations into Urdu, conducts stakeholder consultations prior to official gazette notification, and submits annual reports to both the government and the public. These actions align with the procedural transparency standards of the IAEA. AERB's public engagement appears reactive where Press releases are used to keep the public informed and responses to Parliamentary queries, rather than proactive transparency mechanisms.⁵⁰ When the regulator is independent and autonomous, it reflects in effective decision-making and operational enforcement. The overall evaluation of both regulators against the key indicators of regulatory independence shows PNRA as the overall superior regulatory infrastructure.

IAEA IRRS Implementation in Pakistan and India

IRRS acts as the IAEA's primary instrument for translating abstract standards into practical regulatory improvement through systematic, country-specific peer review. PNRA documents explicitly show active participation in the IRRS mission to Vietnam as an IAEA expert. PNRA has participated in multiple projects and workshops to improve IRRS implementation and improve self-assessment capabilities. PAK/9/028 and PAK/9/034 were IAEA Technical Cooperation Projects that were focused on the self-assessment of PNRA using self-assessment tools.⁵¹ Developments were also made at the national level by establishing the Directorate of Regulatory Affairs (RAD) for self-assessment of regulatory effectiveness and development of performance indicators to provide quantifiable benchmarks for measuring regulatory maturity. For that, PNRA documented 12 strategic performance indicators.⁵² These developments and institutional improvement mechanisms show strong alignment with IRRS methodologies.⁵³

AERB, on the other hand, has also been engaged with the IAEA's peer-reviewed system and IRRS missions in 2015 and 2022. According to IRRS Mission 2015, the government of India should formally embed regulatory independence of AERB into law and separate it from

⁴⁹ Pakistan, "Pakistan Nuclear Regulatory Authority Ordinance, 2001," (Ordinance No. III of 2001), available at: [https://www.pnra.org/upload/legal_basis/Ordinance%202001\(Amennded\).pdf](https://www.pnra.org/upload/legal_basis/Ordinance%202001(Amennded).pdf).

⁵⁰ CAG, *Report No. 9 of 2012-13*.

⁵¹ Pakistan Nuclear Regulatory Authority, "Fifth National Report of Pakistan Under the Joint Convention on the Safety of Spent Fuel Management and on the Safety of Radioactive Waste Management," (Islamabad: PNRA, 2020), accessed February 26, 2026, <https://pnra.org/upload/reports/Pakistan-5NR.pdf>.

⁵² PNRA, "Fifth National Report of Pakistan," <https://pnra.org/upload/reports/Pakistan-5NR.pdf>.

⁵³ Pakistan Nuclear Regulatory Authority, *Fifth National Report of Pakistan under the Joint Convention on the Safety of Spent Fuel Management and on the Safety of Radioactive Waste Management*, (Islamabad: PNRA, 2020), accessed February 26, 2026, <https://pnra.org/upload/reports/Pakistan-5NR.pdf>.

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promotional entities, independence in internal functioning of AERB, formulation of a national safety strategy for waste management, and further suggestions about power plant inspection and emergency preparedness.⁵⁴ The second mission in 2022 also identified the same gaps regarding the regulator's legal independence, safety assessment of nuclear plants, consistency in regulations related to IAEA safety standards, and a clear national policy regarding radioactive waste management that has been lost.⁵⁵ The analysis also shows that Pakistan demonstrates superior documentation and discipline with respect to IRRS implementation and engagement.

Emerging Technological Challenges: Comparative Regulatory Adaptation in PNRA and AERB

As per the IAEA mandate, it is essential for nuclear regulators to address emerging technological challenges to ensure safety standards across all dimensions. For that, regulatory independence plays a pivotal role because a regulator that is under the subordination of a promotional entity is unable to independently assess the impact of emerging challenges and, therefore, incapable of fulfilling its central safety governance tasks. Regulatory independence in cyber-security, SMR application, climate change, and AI not only requires policy understanding but also a dedicated institutional infrastructure that can work freely from external influence. The following analysis provide details of regulatory adaptation in PNRA and AERB.

▪ Cyber-Security

Cybersecurity of the nuclear facilities has become imperative to prevent major accidents, sabotage, and system failure. It has become an essential element of safety and security of nuclear facilities. At the national level, Pakistan has established a dedicated National Center for Cyber Security (NCCS)⁵⁶ in 2018, a tangible institutional investment providing training for cybercrime investigation and malware analysis. The research and development labs of NCCS operate around 11 different universities to provide cybersecurity solutions. However, this facility is not associated with PNRA, and Pakistan has not publicly issued any cybersecurity strategy for its nuclear facilities.⁵⁷ Despite the absence of cyber-security strategy, PNRA has been conducting training courses and exercises on Digital safety and Cyber Security to strengthen its safety

⁵⁴ Press Information Bureau, Government of India, "IAEA Reviews the Nuclear Regulatory Infrastructure of India," Press Release, March 27, 2015, accessed February 26, 2026, <https://www.pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=117817®=3&lang=2>.

⁵⁵ International Atomic Energy Agency, "Integrated Regulatory Review Service (IRRS) Follow-Up Mission to India: Final Report (Vienna: IAEA, 2022)," accessed February 26, 2026, https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/documents/review-missions/final_irrs_follow-up_report_india.pdf.

⁵⁶ National Centre for Cyber Security (NCCS), "About NCCS," accessed February 26, 2026, <https://nccs.pk/#:~:text=The%20Government%20of%20Pakistan%20established%20the%20National,make%20Pakistan%20a%20leader%20in%20cyber%20security>.

⁵⁷ Haleema Saadia, "Cybersecurity Framework for Pakistan's Nuclear Facilities," *South Asian Voices*, May 10, 2023, accessed February 26, 2026, <https://southasianvoices.org/cybersecurity-framework-for-pakistans-nuclear-facilities/>.

protocols. Apart from in-house training, Pakistan National Institute of Safety and Security (NISAS) has also been collaborating with IAEA for nuclear security education, training, and technical support. The cybersecurity frameworks of AERB put lots of emphasis on securing digital control and instrumentation systems.⁵⁸ Despite principal alignment with IAEA's guidelines, the AERB cybersecurity framework still lacks specific regulatory guidelines with specific procedures, and there is no public record of a structured cyber incident response framework. These gaps exist not solely due to a resource deficit but also due to the structural consequences of institutional dependence.

▪ **Small Modular Reactors (SMR)**

Small Modular Reactors have emerged as a transforming technology, and they are also mandated by the IAEA to be incorporated in the regulatory framework. This adaptation requires institutional autonomy for licensing and engaging with international partners or vendors. PNRA's SMR regulatory preparation demonstrates forward planning for integrating SMRs into energy infrastructure. For example, in 2013, Directorate of SMRs⁵⁹ was established to enhance SMR design, engineering capabilities and to identify challenges in development and deployment of SMR technology. PNRA has also established research group to conduct studies and provide solutions to regulatory challenges in licensing of SMRs and provide assistance in national regulation consistent with IAEA standards.⁶⁰ PNRA is also interacting with IAEA through hosting meeting with experts and coordinates research initiatives. However, PNRA, despite having an independent regulatory body, has not yet developed a legal framework pertaining to SMRs, which reveals a gap between strategic necessity and regulatory infrastructure. AERB, on the other hand, claims that existing Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) regulations are largely applicable to SMRs with specific reviews for unique features, an adaptation approach that prioritizes institutional continuity over SMR-specific innovation.⁶¹ This position indicates that indigenous designs (BSMR-200⁶², SMR-55⁶³) will be reviewed within established frameworks.

⁵⁸ Neeraj B. R., "Cybersecurity in Indian Nuclear Facilities," *Electronic Journal of Social and Strategic Studies* 4, no. 3 (December 2023–January 2024): 314–338, accessed February 26, 2026, https://www.ejsss.net.in/uploads/172/15025_pdf.

⁵⁹ Syed Mobashir Banoori, "Technical Requirements of Pakistan for Small Modular Reactor Design & Technology for Near Term Deployment," IAEA Technical Working Group on Small and Medium-Sized or Modular Reactors (TWG-SMR), July 2019, https://nucleus.iaea.org/sites/htgr-kb/twg-smr/Documents/TWG-2_2019/B06_Syed_Pakistan_TWG_2019.pdf.

⁶⁰ Rahman Khalil ur, Younus Irfan, Muhammad Nouman Mayo, Muhammad Zahid Hussain, S. A. N. Bhatti, Faiza Batool, and Mudassir Shah, "Small Modular Reactors: A Regulatory Perspective," paper presented at an International Atomic Energy Agency conference, <https://conferences.iaea.org/event/374/papers/31383/files/12715-Paper%20Small%20Modular%20Reactors%20-%20A%20Regulatory%20Perspective-modified.pdf>.

⁶¹ *Press Information Bureau — Government of India reply on AERB and SMRs (Feb 4 2026)*: <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetailm.aspx?PRID=2223305>.

⁶² *World Nuclear News*, August 14, 2025, <https://www.world-nuclear-news.org/articles/eil-to-assist-in-development-of-indian-smr-design>.

⁶³ *World Nuclear News*, December 10, 2025, <https://www.world-nuclear-news.org/articles/maharashtra-and-andhra-pradesh-proposed-for-first-indian-smrs>.

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Additionally, the SHANTI Bill 2025 promised some regulatory independence that will somehow create space for private sector participation for independent SMR oversight. However, the persistent gap and ambiguities in SHANTI Bill tell another story. AERB frameworks were designed for large-scale state-run plants and require a 10-15-year permitting cycle, which is not suitable for private sector business models for SMRs.⁶⁴ The Civil Liability for Nuclear Damages Act (CLNDA) 2010⁶⁵ has further complicated SMR deployment frameworks because it creates obstacles for foreign and domestic participation, particularly for technology transfer arrangements⁶⁶.

■ *Climate-induced Hazards*

IAEA⁶⁷ has identified changing seawater levels and severe weather conditions as climate-induced hazards and new regulatory challenges. It is imperative for regulatory bodies to act proactively and introduce measures and programs that can tackle climate-induced threats. Regulators must be institutionally autonomous to assess risks to existing facilities without being constrained by the interests of other entities. PNRA has climate engagement centers which are focused on facilitating Pakistan's target of 8,800 MWe nuclear capacity by 2030.⁶⁸ This approach shows that Pakistan is framing nuclear energy as a climate challenge solution. However, due to Pakistan's documented vulnerability to rising inflation and natural disasters, there is a possibility of climate-driven infrastructure risks, and it needs systematic climate scenario integration into facility licensing requirements. Nevertheless, Pakistan is working towards this goal and held NREE-2024 emergency preparedness exercise⁶⁹ to addresses response capabilities. AERB, after Fukushima, demonstrated reactive capacity by establishing AERBSC-EE committee to assess the safety of all the NPPs against Tsunamis, earthquakes, cyclones and power shortage along with mandatory plant-wide safety reassessment, and tiered corrective actions.⁷⁰ However, multiple climate-driven challenges related to infrastructure, coastal

⁶⁴ JMMF Institute, *The Gaps and the Risks of the Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India (SHANTI) Act, 2025* (New Delhi: JMMF Institute, 2025), <https://informaticsjournals.co.in/index.php/jmmf/article/view/54225/36096>.

⁶⁵ *The Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act, 2010*, No. 38 of 2010, Government of India, accessed March 4, 2026, <https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/2084/5/A2010-38.pdf>.

⁶⁶ JMMF Institute, *The Gaps and the Risks of the Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India (SHANTI) Act, 2025* (New Delhi: JMMF Institute, 2025), <https://informaticsjournals.co.in/index.php/jmmf/article/view/54225/36096>.

⁶⁷ "New CRP: Climate Change Challenges to the Safety of Nuclear Installations (J72007)," International Atomic Energy Agency, June 21, 2023, accessed March 4, 2026, <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/news/new-crp-climate-change-challenges-to-the-safety-of-nuclear-installations-j72007>.

⁶⁸ Pakistan Country Nuclear Power Profile 2020, International Atomic Energy Agency, updated 2020, accessed March 4, 2026, <https://www-pub.iaea.org/MTCD/Publications/PDF/cnpp2020/countryprofiles/Pakistan/Pakistan.html>.

⁶⁹ Pakistan Nuclear Regulatory Authority, *Emergency Exercise ConvEx-2C*, accessed March 4, 2026, <https://www.pnra.org/emergency-exercise-convex.html>.

⁷⁰ S. S. Bajaj, "Regulatory practices for nuclear power plants in India," published in *Sādhanā*, Volume 38, Part 5, pages 1027–1050, October 2013. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12046-013-0174-9#citeas>.

facilities, and long-term temperature rise remain undocumented. IAEA's demands enhanced efforts to monitor the external environment to prepare for future challenges, and this requires climate projection integration into safety reviews, a requirement that both regulators need to fulfill.

▪ *Artificial Intelligence (AI)*

IAEA identifies AI's positive and negative impact implications. This requires more collaboration, information exchange, and the capability to detect malicious software and protection against cyber-attacks.⁷¹ PNRA's AI engagement is spread over surveillance, emergency response, physical protection, and regulatory modernization.⁷² This shows that PNRA acknowledges AI as a multi-domain regulatory challenge rather than a simple security concern. However, documentation of AI regulations needs operationalization and specific regulatory guidance for AI-equipped facility systems. It is imperative for PNRA to demonstrate its institutional independence by operationalizing regulatory inspection protocols and investing in specialized human capital to facilitate credible AI governance. AERB's AI framework also needs responsible AI implementation based on accountability, safety, and resilience with human control, and a risk-based approach.⁷³ Furthermore, the establishment of an independent AI regulatory capacity is also difficult for AERB amid its structural reliance on DAE technical assistance.

Policy Recommendations

Based on above analysis, the following recommendations should be considered by Pakistan for better nuclear governance.

- PNRA should utilize its mature IRRS engagement to move further by strengthening its position as a peer reviewer and utilize different platforms for international collaboration for nuclear technology transfer.
- PNRA should also work on capacity building challenges that stem from the shortage of young engineers and nuclear scientists and the aging technical workforce.⁷⁴ To tackle this

⁷¹ *Considerations for Deploying Artificial Intelligence Applications in the Nuclear Power Industry*, IAEA Nuclear Energy Series (Vienna: International Atomic Energy Agency), accessed March 4, 2026, https://www-pub.iaea.org/MTCD/publications/PDF/p15866-PUB2119_web.pdf.

⁷² Pakistan Nuclear Regulatory Authority, *Annual Report 2024* (Islamabad: PNRA, 2024), accessed February 24, 2026, <https://www.pnra.org/upload/pnrrpt/Annual%20Report%202024.pdf>.

⁷³ D. K. Shukla, "Artificial Intelligence – Use, Challenges and Regulatory Perspectives" (speech presented at the 54th meeting of the International Nuclear Regulators' Association, September 16, 2024), Atomic Energy Regulatory Board, accessed March 4, 2026, <https://aerb.gov.in/images/PDF/AI-chairman.pdf>.

⁷⁴ International Atomic Energy Agency, *Pakistan: National Presentation—Workshop on National Strategies on Capacity Building for Nuclear Safety*, Vienna, September 9–13, 2024, presented by Muhammad Waqas Sherani (Director General, International Cooperation and Human Resources, Pakistan Nuclear Regulatory Authority), accessed February 26, 2026,

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challenge, PNRA should again leverage its IRRS engagement to collaborate with the IAEA for knowledge exchange and training programs.

- PNRA has a history of cooperating with the nuclear regulators of other countries, especially China, where bilateral relations are quite strong in terms of nuclear safety. PNRA has been involved in bilateral arrangements with multiple Chinese organizations.⁷⁵ This cooperation should be further utilized for SMR adaptation and governance. On the legislative side, PNRA should develop an SMR-specific regulatory framework to address the incorporation of SMR in large-scale facilities on a priority basis. The focus of the SMR-specific regulatory framework should be on the licensing process, capacity building training, cybersecurity requirements for SMRs, waste management requirements (SMRs produce more waste), and emergency preparedness and response for SMRs.
- For cyber-security, PNRA should invest in existing institutional infrastructure and develop independent inspection competencies for cyber-security governance across all facilities. For that, PNRA can collaborate with NCCS established by the government of Pakistan. NCCS's main goal is to protect critical infrastructure, and its labs can be utilized for specialized research related to digital nuclear safety and security.
- Inspection and regulatory review of nuclear installation is an essential function of the regulatory body, and it requires highly technical and competent personnel. It is difficult for any new regulatory body to perform these functions without external technical support. In case of PNRA, Pakistan relied on China for the review of safety analysis during the licensing of Chashma-1. Along with that Pakistan has also been developing the competence of its own manpower to perform all of its regulatory functions. Pakistan intends to further engage in bilateral collaboration with IAEA and its training centers to strengthen the capacity of technical manpower and expertise.⁷⁶ Pakistan should further engage in bilateral collaboration and IAEA training centers to build technical manpower and expertise.
- To improve the nuclear safety governance in South Asia, both states need to improve bilateral information-sharing mechanisms for safety. The transboundary radiological consequences of regulatory failure in this densely populated region demand more than national compliance narratives.

<https://gnssn.iaea.org/regnet/SC%20Documents/Steering%20Committee%20Meeting/Workshop%20National%20Strategies%20on%20Capacity%20Building/20%20National%20presentations/Pakistan.pdf>.

⁷⁵ Dr. Allauddin Kakar, Azeem Khalid, and Malik Muhammad Ali, "Pakistan-China Nuclear Energy Cooperation: Emerging Trends to Achieve Sustainable Development Goals," *Pakistan Journal of International Affairs* 4, no. 1 (January 2021), accessed February 26, 2026, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/350496752_Pakistan-China_Nuclear_Energy_Cooperation_Emerging_Trends_to_Achieve_Sustainable_Development_Goals.

⁷⁶ Naeem Ahmad Salik, ed., *Nuclear Regulatory Regime in Pakistan, 1956–2020: 64 Years of Regulating Nuclear Industry* (Islamabad: Pakistan Nuclear Regulatory Authority, 2026), 59–64.

Conclusion

The research analyzed the regulatory frameworks of Pakistan and India through the theoretical lens of regulatory independence highlighted in IAEA Safety Standards GSR 1 and INSAG-17. It reveals that regulatory independence in nuclear governance is not merely a normative, procedurally inspired ideal, but rather a structural necessity for maintaining sustainable nuclear safety standards. The regulatory independence of both regulators was measured across legal, financial, and procedural transparency aspects, along with IRRS implementation responsiveness, and emerging technological challenges. It is also revealed that the PNRA has an overall superior regulatory structure, independent from promotional entities and aligned with international safety standards, which can be seen in the overall operations of PNRA. The inspection and enforcement details and outcomes of PNRA also demonstrate institutional maturity and effectiveness. At the international level, PNRA shows effective engagement, and its documents show active participation in the IRRS mission to Vietnam as an IAEA expert. The operational record of India's AERB shows explicit vulnerabilities in its regulatory architecture.

The major vulnerability is that the institutional architecture of AERB does not meet the IAEA Safety requirement for regulatory independence, which means that a regulatory body should not be subordinated to the promotional entity whose facilities it oversees. Efforts have also been made to overcome this structural flaw through the Nuclear Safety Regulatory Authority Bill 2011 and SHANTI Bill 2025. However, despite this legislative effort, the structural flaw in AERB's institutional proximity to DAE remains unresolved. Moreover, in the domain of emerging technological and environmental challenges, both regulators face converging threats from cybersecurity, climate-induced hazards, and AI. These challenges carry significance beyond India and Pakistan, and only timely accommodation can prevent catastrophic incidents that have transboundary effects. To counter these threats, timely regulatory adaptations, grounded in international safety standards, are imperative. Finally, it is evident that those regulators that possess genuine regulatory independence, reflected in the institution's legal, financial, enforcement, and international engagement aspects are structurally equipped to fulfill the demands of nuclear safety governance, and they have more potential and will to resist the pressure of emerging challenges.

Assessing Pakistan's National Security Framework: A SWOT Analysis of NISP 2014, 2018, and NSP 2022

Minahil Khurshid and Rubina Waseem *

Abstract

This paper critically assesses the evolution of Pakistan's national and internal security policies through a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis of the National Internal Security Policy (NISP) 2014, NISP 2018, and NSP 2022. Using SWOT as a strategic evaluation tool, the study examines the strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities of these policies. The first comprehensive internal security framework, NISP 2014 focused on intelligence cooperation and counter-terrorism. However, its effectiveness was limited due to weak institutional implementation. NISP 2018 broadened the scope of de-radicalisation, socioeconomic reforms and civil society engagement but its success was undermined by a lack of federal-provincial coordination. The NSP 2022 marked a paradigm shift by incorporating both the human and economic security in addition to the traditional defence issues. Despite this broader approach limitation in resources and policy continuity hindered its effectiveness. The analysis shows that all of the policies were introduced with some good innovations, but the same weaknesses were prevalent in all, and they included bureaucratic inertia, the political polarization, and the financial constraints. There are opportunities, though, in advancing geo-economic integration, building cyber resilience and using civil society. The results show that the security architecture of Pakistan requires stronger implementation capacity, sustained inter-governmental cooperation, and a balanced approach between the traditional and human security issues.

Keywords: National Security Policy, Counter-terrorism, Pakistan, National Security Policy (NSP), National Internal Security Policy (NISP), Internal Security, SWOT, Geo economics, Civil Society.

Introduction

National security refers to the protection of a nation's sovereignty, territorial integrity and the ideals of a nation against external and internal threats. National security is a broad concept that deals not only with terrorism but also with financial instability, environmental hazards, war, and social unrest. Arnold Wolfers characterized national security not only as an absence of physical threats, but also as the assurance that such

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threats will not emerge. This perspective highlights the complex and multidimensional nature of national security, which includes both its objective and subjective nature. These debates are not abstract in Pakistan.

The security situation in the country has been greatly affected by terrorism, violent extremism, socioeconomic inequality and changing regional dynamics¹. The post-9/11 period and the emergence of violent extremism within Pakistan forced the state to reconsider its priorities to such an extent that it had to introduce formal national and internal security structures capable of addressing both the immediate terrorist threats and the long-term causes of instability.

In this context, there are three policy frameworks that Pakistan has implemented in the past decade, namely the NISP framework 2014, the NISP 2018, and the NSP 2022-2026. Each of them is a distinct step in changing security policy of the state. The NISP 2014, the first comprehensive internal security document in Pakistan, focused on counter-terrorism, madrassa control, and intelligence coordination and had difficulty with implementation. The NISP 2018 changed the emphasis to preventive policies like socio economic reforms, de-radicalisation, and greater involvement of civil society but was even undermined even by provincial opposition. Finally, the NSP 2022-2026 introduced a citizen-centric vision that places economic security at the core of overall national stability.

To evaluate these policies, this paper uses SWOT analysis as a strategic framework for analyzing these policies. The SWOT analysis that was traditionally applied to business and organisational studies is increasingly being applied within the social sciences to evaluate the processes and effectiveness of policy formulation. Based on this framework, the research addresses the following research questions: How effective have the internal and national security policies in Pakistan been in response to the changing security challenges in the country?

This analysis has shown that although all the policies introduced important initiatives, they shared common weaknesses that limited effective implementation, including bureaucratic inertia, lack of funding, and absence of policy continuity. At the same time, there are still prospects of upholding geoeconomics diplomacy, improving the involvement of civil society, and enhancing cyber resilience. This paper has

¹ Usama Farooq and Muhammad Khan, "Beyond Ideology: The Complex Determinants of Terrorism in Contemporary Pakistan," *Journal of Security & Development Studies* 4, no. 1 (2024): 52–54.

relevance both to academia and policy formulation because it will analyze the three policies within a logical analytical framework, thereby providing insights into the evolution of Pakistan's security doctrine while highlighting areas where reforms are required.

In recent years, the concept of national security has been evolved significantly. What was formerly the primary concern of national security as the need to protect the borders and the armed forces has now taken an additional dimension as the need to protect the identity, culture and borders of a nation.² This wider approach is an indication of an increasing acceptance of the significance of integrated approaches that assess not just the military challenges, but also the political, social, environmental and economic aspects that are critical for state stability.

In this regard, the NSP of Pakistan is also crucial, as it outlines the strategic actions and plans designed to guarantee internal stability and promote the welfare of its people. These policies aim to address important challenges like militancy, religious extremism and other internal challenges that weaken the effective functioning of the state. Assessing the effects of the NISP and NSP, this study aims to increase the understanding of the connections between the policies in the sphere of national security and the stability of states in a particular environment of a developing country with multifaceted security threats.

This study adopts a qualitative method to assess the effectiveness of Pakistan's national and internal security policies. SWOT analysis is used as a primary tool to examine strategic objectives, limitations in the implementation of the policies and their effectiveness. The research uses both primary and secondary data. The secondary data includes academic articles, journal papers, policy documents, and reports. In contrast, primary data was collected through interviews with policy practitioners, academic scholars, and security analysts to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced in implementing these policies and assessing their effectiveness. Respondents for the interview were selected based on their experience in the relevant field, and snowball sampling was utilized. Interviews were held with experts to get insights regarding the problems and institutional constraints faced during policy implementation.

² Sharon L. Caudle, "National Security Strategies: Security From What, for Whom, and by What Means," *Journal of Homeland Security and Emergency Management* 6, no. 1 (2009), <https://doi.org/10.2202/1547-7355.1526>.

Theoretical Framework

The SWOT analysis is used as the main analytical tool in this study. SWOT analysis is a strategic planning tool that has long been used to assess the internal factors i.e., Strengths and Weaknesses and external factors i.e., Opportunities and Threats that influence the success of organization programs and policies³ while it has typically been used in business and management contexts, recent research has shown that it may be utilized across disciplines. In this study, the method is adopted within social sciences to critically evaluate Pakistan's internal and national security policies.

This research paper examines three key policy frameworks: the NISP 2014, NISP 2018-2023, and the NSP 2022-2026 Each policy is analyzed using the following dimensions:

- **Strengths:** Include internal elements or innovations that boost policy effectiveness.
- **Weaknesses:** Structural or institutional flaws such as bureaucratic inertia, political division, or budget constraints.
- **Opportunities:** External characteristics in the domestic, regional, or global environment that may have been used to increase influence.
- **Threats:** External risks such as terrorism, hybrid warfare, or polarization that jeopardize policy objectives.

An analysis of official policy documents, government reports, and academic research papers is carried out. Triangulating these sources provides descriptive accuracy and critical depth. The systematic SWOT gives an opportunity to compare the policies overtime and see how the strategy of Pakistan has changed over time as counter-terrorism (2014) has transformed to preventive and rehabilitative (2018) and finally to the geo-economic and human security vision (2022).⁴

Applying a SWOT framework in this manner offers three major advantages. First it offers a rigorous methodology for determining not only what worked but also where gaps remained. Second it provides a comparative framework to track continuities and changes in Pakistan's evolving security doctrine. Third, it offers policy-relevant

³ Li-Chen Cheng, Kuanchin Chen, Ming-Chu Lee, and Kua-Mai Li, "User-Defined SWOT Analysis – A Change Mining Perspective on User-Generated Content," *Information Processing & Management* 58, no. 5 (2021): 102613, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ipm.2021.102613>.

⁴ National Security Division, *National Security Policy of Pakistan 2022–2026: Public Summary* (Islamabad: Government of Pakistan, 2022), 3–4, <https://nsd.gov.pk/SiteImage/Misc/files/NSP%20summary.pdf>.

insights by combining academic research with practical recommendations for governance and stability.

SWOT Analysis of the NISP 2014

Strengths	Weaknesses
First Comprehensive internal security policy addressing terrorism beyond military solutions.	Poor implementation due to bureaucratic inertia and lack of resources.
Emphasis on counter-terrorism and intelligence reforms through NACTA.	Weak inter-agency coordination and unclear federal provincial roles.
Integrated approach combining hard (military) and soft (madrassa reform and counter terrorism) measures.	Absence of monitoring and evaluation measures.
Inclusion of new dimensions: terror financing, border management, madrassa regulation, and intelligence fusion cell.	Limited stakeholder engagement (civil society, media, and academia).
Opportunities	Threats
Foundation for future policies ((National Action Plan) NAP 2015, NISP 2018, NSP 2022).	Rise of new extremist groups (TTP splinters, ISIS, Al-Qaeda).
Institutional reform via NACTA as a focal point for intelligence coordination.	Regional instability after Taliban resurgence in Afghanistan.
Addressing root causes of poverty, unemployment, illiteracy.	Exploitation of sectarian and sociopolitical divides by militant factors.
Potential for capacity building and modernization of law enforcement.	Use of cyber propaganda and digital radicalization.

Narrative Analysis

NISP 2014 marked Pakistan's first comprehensive attempt to establish an internal security framework.⁵ It acknowledged that terrorism was not merely an external narrative, but an existential internal security threat to the state's stability. The policy introduced institutional changes, most notably the formation of the National Counter-terrorism Authority (NACTA), and broadened the scope of security to encompass

⁵ Raza Rumi, *Charting Pakistan's Internal Security Policy* (May 2015), https://www.academia.edu/15261108/Charting_Pakistan_s_Internal_Security_Policy.

madrassa reforms, border management, intelligence sharing, and terror financing.⁶ Its multifaceted approach, which combined counter-terrorism efforts with legislative reforms and societal resilience-meant that the ad-hoc, reactive policy prevalent since the 9/11 attacks was coming to an end.

However, NISP 2014's implementation lagged behind its ambition. Bureaucratic inertia hindered NACTA from becoming fully operational;⁷ inter-agency coordination remained poor, and no effective monitoring procedures were devised. Furthermore, the absence of civil society, academia and the media implementation reduced overall societal support.

Despite these weaknesses, NISP 2014 paved the way for future policies influencing the National Action Plan (2015), NISP 2018, and eventually the NSP 2022, by identifying socioeconomic drivers of extremism, the policy offered opportunity for preventive initiatives, however, these were not fully implemented. At the same time, external threats including the resurgence of TTP, the emergence of ISIS, and cross-border militancy undermined its effectiveness.⁸ These organizations took advantage of state failures, sectarian conflicts, and social media propaganda to push their agenda.

SWOT Analysis of NISP 2018-2023

Strengths	Weaknesses
Focus on de radicalization, rehabilitation, and counter extremism programs.	Lack of coordination with provinces and weak federal-provincial synchronization.
Structured implementation with inter-agency coordination and capacity building.	Bureaucratic inefficiency, and institutional overlaps, especially within NACTA.
Counter narratives through media, academia, and religious scholars.	Uneven resource allocation and fragmented enforcement.
Use of digital platforms to combat online radicalization.	Weak provincial ownership due to late policy adoption.

⁶ Muhammad Makki and Syed Ali Akash, "From Counter-Terrorism to Counter Violent Extremism: An Analysis of Pakistan's Internal Security Policies," *Pakistan Journal of Terrorism Research* 2, no. 1 (2020), <https://pjtr.nacta.gov.pk/index.php/journals/article/view/101>.

⁷ Savail Meekal Hussain and Mehreen Zahra-Malik, "Political Instability and Its Implications for an Effective National Counterterrorism Policy in Pakistan," in *Pakistan's Counterterrorism Challenge*, ed. Moeed Yusuf (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014), 83–102.

⁸ Muhammad Abbas Hassan and Asadullah Khan, "Life Cycle of Terrorism: Case Study of Pakistan," *Defence and Security Journal* 4 (December 2019): 78–87, <https://dscsc.lk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/2019.pdf>.

Opportunities	Threats
Engagement of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in peace building and grass root initiatives.	Deep rooted sociopolitical polarization and sectarian divides.
Promotion of inclusive narratives, interfaith harmony, and coexistence.	Exploitation of ethnic grievances by extremist groups.
Strengthening oversight, transparency, and trust through civil society.	Political instability and weak democratic institutions undermining security consensus.

Narrative Analysis

The NISP 2018-2023 was an attempt to transition to a preventive and holistic framework instead of a reactive and counter-terrorism-driven alternative to its predecessor. It redefined security by incorporating community response, socioeconomic development and civil society involvement in the internal security agenda. The policy focused on balancing the use of coercion with softer approaches, based on the understanding that radicalization could not be countered through force alone.

Among the strengths of the policy was the focus on de-radicalization initiatives and rehabilitation, which includes vocational training to psychological counselling to reforming madrassas and counter-narrative campaigns. The Sabawoon and Mashal programs proved that community reintegration is achievable; local community efforts combined with cooperation among academia, media, and religious scholars, produced a more inclusive counter-extremism approach.⁹ In addition, NISP 2018 offered a systematic approach to the establishment of strengthening inter-agency cooperation, increasing the capacity and the use of online instruments that can be used to interfere with online extremist propaganda.

Despite these innovations, the policy suffered from major weaknesses that inhibited its effectiveness. Above all, it was plagued by a lack of alignment between the federal government and the provinces.¹⁰ Due to lack of political consensus, multiple mandates, and bureaucracy, there were unequal enforcement measures, and allocation

⁹ Zahid Yaseen and Muhammad Muzaffar, "Extremism in Pakistan: Issues and Challenges," *Journal of Politics and International Studies* 4, no. 1 (2018): 31–42, <https://jpis.pu.edu.pk/45/article/view/30>.

¹⁰ Ahmad Ali and Musarrat Amin, "Pakistan's National Internal Security Policies from 2014 to 2022: Gaps, Challenges, and Prospects," *Inverge Journal of Social Sciences* 2, no. 4 (December 2023): 56–63, <https://doi.org/10.63544/ijss.v2i4.69>.

of resources. Local ownership was undermined by provincial resistance, which was fueled by the perception that the policy had been rushed through in the final days of the federal government's term without meaningful consultation.¹¹ Consequently, there continued to be intelligence gaps, underdeveloped role of NACTA and inconsistent counter-terrorism activities.

However, the policy offered a lot of opportunities, especially through allowing CSOs to be active in peace building and counter-extremist activities. In order to advance diversity and tolerance, CSOs were involved in interfaith dialogues, grassroots rehabilitation, and awareness campaign.¹²

At the same time NISP 2018-2023 had to deal with external challenges which severely undermined its success. Extremist created instabilities by using distinctions of sociopolitical polarization, ethnic and sectarian differences to disrupt communities. The political instability, poor democratic institutions and mistrust among the marginalized groups specifically Pashtuns and Baloch, and the state, undermined the possible prospects of having a unified security system.¹³ Fault lines were heightened by the use of sectarian accounts by militant groups and thus the internal security environment was weakened and disputed.

SWOT Analysis of NSP 2022-2026

Strengths	Weaknesses
Shift to people-centric, Geo-economic framework.	Overambitious scope with limited funding.
Inclusion of human and economic security in national agenda.	Governance instability and lack of political continuity.
Focus on trade, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), and regional connectivity.	Resource drain from failing State-Owned Enterprise (SOEs) (PIA, Steel Mills, Railways).
Recognition of unemployment and poverty as security risks.	Weak policy attention to environmental and health security.

¹¹ Ihsan Ghani, "Pakistan's Response to Extremism and Terrorism," *ISSRA Papers* 11, no. 1 (June 2019): 1–19, <https://issrapapers.ndu.edu.pk/index.php/site/article/view/60>.

¹² Mohammad Makki, "Policy Perspectives on Countering Violent Extremism in Pakistan" (Policy Paper, Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Islamabad, August 2021), <https://sdpi.org/assets/lib/uploads/Pakistan-Resilient-Development-Network-oct-2021-1.pdf>.

¹³ Waqas Ur Rehman, "Political Polarization in Pakistan: Challenges and Way Forward," *International Journal of Human and Society* 3, no. 3 (September 2023): 521–26, <https://ijhs.com.pk/index.php/IJHS/article/view/791/565>.

Opportunities	Threats
Strategic geography for regional trade and connectivity.	Persistent regional tensions (India, Afghanistan).
China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, and energy corridors are enhancing economic integration.	Hybrid warfare tactics, cyber threats, and disinformation campaigns.
Potential normalization of trade with India; cultural diplomacy (Kartarpur corridor).	Socioeconomic inequalities are exploited by extremist and external actors.
North-South and East-West corridors position Pakistan as a transit hub.	Erosion of public trust and polarization due to digital manipulation.

Narrative Analysis

The NSP 2022-2026 marks a paradigm shift in the security thinking of Pakistan, shifting from military oriented models to people-oriented geoeconomics. It was a contrast to the earlier policies of focusing on human security, environmental sustainability as well as economic stability as the key points of national security. This wider vision realized that it was not only the outside factors that were causing instability in Pakistan but also the poverty, unemployment, and weakness of the society. The NSP also attached great importance to regional trade, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), and connectivity initiatives such as CPEC by connecting economic development to the national security objectives.¹⁴

The strength of this policy is in the fact that the security is reframed in a comprehensive manner. It is understood that economic insecurity could be a source of extremism and internal unrest, and so the focus on development and defense were the same. It focuses on creation of employment, growth of trade, and connectivity of the region as a move to reposition Pakistan from a geopolitical entity into a geoeconomics hub that could take advantage of its strategic location and economic potential.

Despite these innovations, NSP 2022-2026 also revealed significant weaknesses. The policy's broad ambitious goals frequently collided with Pakistan's limited financial

¹⁴ Muhammad Jahanzaib and Zahid Shahab Ahmed, "The China Factor in Pakistan's Geo-Economic Tilt," *International Studies* 61, no. 2 (2024): 145–69, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00208817241298339>.

resources and governance constraints. While it recognized non-traditional concerns such as climate change and health insecurity, these areas received less attention than its geo-economic focus. Furthermore, continuous governance instability as seen by insufficient civilian tenures, inconsistent decisions, and institutional inefficiencies, posed challenges to continuity. State-owned corporations that drain resources, such as PIA and Pakistan Steel Mills, have further hampered human development funding, having collectively recorded PKR 143 billion (USD 920 million) in losses during 2020–2021.¹⁵ Furthermore, the policy's view of remittances as an economic strength ignored the long-term effects of brain drain which weakened innovation and institutional capacity.

At the same time, the NSP provided greater opportunities to reshape Pakistan's regional and global role. Prioritizing trade integration and connectivity, the policy envisioned Pakistan as a transit and energy hub that would profit from initiatives like CPEC and TAPI pipeline. These efforts promised not just economic stability, but also increased diplomatic leverage. The possible normalization of trade with India, highlighted by Kartarpur Corridor proved the ability to translate cultural and economic diplomacy into confidence building measures. These prospects could bring Pakistan back to the position of a regional bridge rather than a security boundary.

NSP 2022-2026 was, in fact, the most progressive and most holistic endeavor to transform the security strategy of Pakistan. Its focus on geoeconomics and people-centered security is a further extension of the policy agenda; however, a lack of resources, ongoing governance problems, and regional instability continue to inhibit the transformative capacity of the policy. Although the approach focused on strategic strength of Pakistan and its development needs, its eventual success relied on the ability to defeat structural weaknesses and address the rapidly evolving external risks of the twenty first century.

National Internal Security Policy (2014-2018)

Pakistan's national internal security policy, introduced in 2014, is a comprehensive framework designed to address various internal security issues. The policy draws

¹⁵ Government of Pakistan, *Pakistan Economic Survey 2020–2021* (Islamabad: Finance Division, 2021), https://www.finance.gov.pk/survey_2021.html.

attention to several key themes that demonstrate how the government approaches national security in its formulation and implementation.

▪ ***Counter Terrorism and Counter Extremism***

Pakistan has long struggled with terrorism and extremism, which has significantly weakened its internal security and stability. Since the 9/11 incident, an ongoing wave of sectarian violence and anti-state terrorism has been observed in Pakistan, which is orchestrated by the domestic terrorist network comprising of Jihadi and extremist organizations.¹⁶ Terrorist violence has been intensified and diversified, with militant organizations also targeting the Pakistani government and its citizens.¹⁷ Paul Wilkinson argues that no universally accepted counterterrorism policy exists because every conflict involving terrorism possesses unique characteristics, illustrating that counterterrorism is as complex and multifaceted as the phenomenon of terrorism itself.¹⁸ In response to this, the government introduced NISP in 2014 to take a comprehensive approach to combat this threat. The NISP was created in reaction to Pakistan's escalating terrorist threat, which had grown to be a significant obstacle for the government.

The policy sought to give the nation a clear road map for dealing with terrorism's many facets in a comprehensive manner. Following 9/11, Pakistan joined international efforts to combat terrorism and continued to play a crucial role as a frontline state. The nation's involvement in the War on Terror was unavoidable because of a number of considerations, including supply routes, geography, and intelligence sharing. According to the Global Terrorism Index in 2011, Pakistan was ranked second among the countries most effected by asymmetric violence and extremism.¹⁹ To combat these threats, Pakistan has implemented a number of changes to the pre-existing legislative frameworks addressing terrorism since the 9/11 attacks, including the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA) of 1997, it also employed three different counterinsurgency

¹⁶ Saima Butt and Afira Wattoo, "Socio-Political and Economic Challenges of Sectarian Violence in Pakistan after 9/11: A Study of Lahore," *Political Horizons* 3, no. 1 (2025): 30–42.

¹⁷ Naeem Ahmed, "Pakistan's Counter-Terrorism Strategy and Its Implications for Domestic, Regional and International Security," *HAL Open Science* (2014), <https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00937552/>.

¹⁸ Paul Wilkinson, *Terrorism Versus Democracy: The Liberal State Response*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203087336>.

¹⁹ Faiz Ur Rehman, Muhammad Nasir, and Muhammad Shahbaz. "What have we learned? Assessing the effectiveness of counterterrorism strategies in Pakistan." *Economic Modelling* 64 (2017): 487–495. <https://doi.org/10.16/j.econmod.2017.02.028>

strategies to reduce violence: military assaults supported by a thorough National Action Plan (NAP), autonomous military operations, and peace agreements with terrorists.¹⁹ Since eliminating the root causes and expressions of insecurity is of the utmost importance, NISP concentrates on counter-terrorism and the prevention of violent extremism. The NISP eliminates terrorist networks and effectively promotes a peaceful atmosphere through law enforcement, intelligence, and community involvement. Establishing efficient counter-terrorism systems and enabling the NACTA as a coordinating body is one of the main pillars of NISP 2014. The strategy emphasizes focused operations against extremist strongholds, modernizing law enforcement, and intelligence sharing across agencies. In order to reintegrate those who have been impacted by extremist beliefs into society, the framework also advocates for de-radicalization initiatives. These actions are complemented by legal amendments that enable the prompt and efficient prosecution of crimes pertaining to terrorism.

▪ ***Strengthening Law Enforcement and Intelligence***

Investigating terrorist incidents and interrogating suspected terrorists requires a specialized set of skills for law enforcement officials. Specialized forces, an offensive counter-terrorist body, and a defensive anti-terrorist body are meant to combat terrorism. Indeed, numerous nations have established specialized police teams with operational expertise for counter-terrorism and anti-terrorism operations.²⁰ Therefore, in order to counter the increasing internal threats, Pakistan's NISP 2014 acknowledged the urgent necessity to fortify the nation's intelligence and law enforcement organizations. Thus, the police serve as the foundation for counter-terrorism operations that are focused on achieving results. For successful counter-terrorism operations, the police make use of their local expertise and relationships with the community. The public's initial interaction with law enforcement and the state's internal security apparatus typically occurs through the police. Therefore, both parties lose if there is a lack of mutual trust in a relationship. The primary objective of this effort was to modernize the police force, provide them with cutting-edge technology and training, and close the intelligence gaps between military and civilian organizations.

²⁰ Farhan Zahid, "Establishing a Counter Terrorism Force." *PIPS Research Journal* (2015): 83:90. <https://www.pakpips.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/FZahid-CTF.Pdf>.

Established in 2009, the NACTA appeared to be a positive step toward integrating and coordinating the national counter-terrorism effort between the police and military.²¹ NACTA, can have a significant impact on the overall national security arrangement by shifting accountability for national security procedures from the military to the non-military personnel government at the appropriate time.²² However, anti-terrorism legislation has not provided law enforcement and civil law organizations with the authority to manage cases efficiently.

Despite having substantially higher goals, NISP 2014 ran across several obstacles. Political unrest, bureaucratic roadblocks, and inadequate funding have prevented police units from becoming more capable. Additionally, the intelligence-sharing exercise initially advanced slowly due to unclear jurisdictions and authorities among many agencies. However, constant reforms, capacity-building initiatives, and focus have ensured these programs achieve the intended effectiveness, bolstering internal security measures.

▪ ***Socioeconomic Development and Community Engagement***

The National Internal Security Policy (NISP) 2014 focused on addressing the root causes of insecurity through socioeconomic development—recognizing that poverty, illiteracy, and a lack of economic opportunity create the conditions in which violence flourishes. The policy emphasizes that socioeconomic inequalities can undermine national security by fostering social instability and widespread dissatisfaction. Framed through the Copenhagen School of security studies, human security is inextricably tied to state security; thus, mitigating disparities in economic, health, and educational capacities is key to maintaining internal stability and reducing security threats in Pakistan.²³ Additionally, the policy recognizes that poverty in Pakistan is a structural problem that sustains inequality, particularly in rural and marginalized areas, rather than merely being a result of a lack of resources.

Along with socioeconomic growth, community engagement was recognized as a crucial element of NISP 2014's approach to improving internal security. To advance

²¹Hassan Abbas, *Stabilizing Pakistan Through Police Reform* (Washington, DC: Asia Society, 2012) https://asiasociety.org/files/pdf/as_pakistan_police_exec_sum.pdf

²² Waseem Ullah, Sajad Rasool, and Asif Salim. "Perils and Prospects of National Internal Security Policy and National Action Plan," *Gomal University Journal of Research* 32, no. 1 (2016). <https://gujr.com.pk/index.php/GUJR/article/view/1129>.

²³ Muhammad Tariq Niaz, "Socio-Economic Disparities and National Security of Pakistan." *Journal of Contemporary Studies* 11, no. 1 (2022): 99-113. <https://jcs.ndu.edu.pk/site/article/view/2015>

a narrative of tolerance, peace, and coexistence, the policy called for aggressive cooperation with media outlets, religious experts, and civil society organizations. The policy also advocates for a participatory approach to development that empowers local communities to recognize and address their security and developmental needs to ensure the success of community-based security programs. By being an active contributor to the establishment of peace and stability rather than a passive recipient of aid, the citizen strengthens and fortifies communities and lessens their susceptibility to extremist influences. Additionally, local administrations must put community-based security plans into action, utilizing their proximity on the ground to address local issues and build confidence between the public and state institutions. The goal of NISP 2014 was to create community-driven and sustainable strategies to combat insecurity by empowering local communities and encouraging inclusive involvement.

▪ ***Border Management and Security***

According to the NISP 2014, national border security is a crucial component of Pakistan's internal security system. The policy emphasizes the need for a thorough border management system to protect the state's territorial integrity in light of the history of cross-border terrorism, illegal arms smuggling, and drug trafficking. To prevent the illegal flow of weapons, drugs, and terrorists, border controls must be strengthened, according to NISP 2014. To destabilize Pakistan, the hostile elements are employing hybrid warfare strategies that take advantage of the country's porous borders. Only by strengthening physical barriers and incorporating cutting-edge monitoring technologies can these dangers be reduced and Pakistan's sovereignty be protected.²⁴

As it emphasizes avoiding cross-border infiltration into Pakistan through increased cooperation with neighboring nations for collaborative security measures, the NISP 2014 places Pakistan in a particularly challenging situation given its strategic border location sharing borders with Afghanistan and India. It recommends installing intelligence fusion cells across military and civilian organizations to further strengthen border security measures.²⁴ These cells would provide real-time situational awareness of on-the-ground developments, enabling prompt action to neutralize potential security breaches.

²⁴ Ayaz Ahmed Khan, "A Strategic Vision of Pakistan's Internal Security Dynamics," *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 58, no. 2 (2019): 121-136, <https://doi.org/10.46568/jssh.v58i2.15>

In an increasingly interconnected world, successful border management may need cooperation with neighboring nations rather than relying solely on internal safeguards. To limit the illicit flow of terrorists, weapons, and drugs, NISP 2014 strongly recommends the establishment of bilateral joint border security programs and intelligence-sharing frameworks with Afghanistan and Iran, among other regional equivalents.

▪ *Institutional Reforms and Governance*

NISP 2014 was aimed at modernizing the security apparatus of Pakistan by undertaking a total institutional reform in accordance with the evolving security environment in Pakistan. The policy was to overhaul the current laws and lay down the proper structures to enhance the working capacity of security agencies by understanding that the available institutions and laws were unable to address the multifaceted threats of terrorism and extremism. By aligning national security legislation with contemporary issues, NISP sought to create a cohesive and robust internal security framework to guarantee the stability of the country.

However, there is an inescapable connection between Pakistan's internal security environment and the tools the state has used to manage it, such as counter intelligence operations. Despite the critical need for reforms within the civil society and police organization both central and provincial governments have refrained from implementing these necessary changes.²⁵ These institutions' limited capacity is one factor contributing to their ongoing inability to provide security. However, it is closely linked to Pakistan's patronage politics' path dependency, which has impeded attempts to modernize and fortify these crucial institutions.

The fundamental idea behind these reforms was to increase accountability and transparency in security operations in order to restore public confidence. To guarantee transparency in security operations and adherence to democratic principles, the NISP 2014 established robust oversight mechanisms for intelligence and law enforcement agencies. In order to ensure smooth implementation, the policy also emphasized the goal of federally coordinated cooperation between federal, provincial, and local governments. It was believed that strong coordination among these levels of

²⁵ C. Christine Fair, "Pakistan's Internal Security Environment," SSRN Scholarly Paper 2475461 (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, July 23, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2475461>.

governance was essential to effectively address security issues and maintain a cohesive national response.

National Internal Security Policy (2018-2023)

Pakistan's second NISP 2018-2023 builds on the foundation laid by NISP 2014 to address the internal security challenges more effectively. In order to ensure long-term stability, it offers a balanced and well-rounded strategy for addressing new threats, bolstering institutional capacity, and striking a balance between hard and soft security measures. The policy highlights several key themes that encompasses both conventional and emerging dimensions of security.

▪ ***Comprehensive and Inclusive National Security***

Pakistan's NISP 2018–2023 adopts a holistic security paradigm, departing from the traditional military-centric strategy. Pakistan's security strategy has consistently been heavily biased toward preventing conventional security threats that emanate from outside its borders. However, over the last two decades, Pakistan has shown itself vulnerable to internal security threats, with terrorism being the most significant of these.²⁶ The paradigm recognizes the role of economic stability, social welfare, political inclusiveness, and environmental sustainability among other factors of national security that transcend military power.

This is meant to address the multifaceted issues that Pakistan is currently experiencing, so that the states are able to accommodate the changing threats. By treating human security and economic development as critical pillars, the policy recognizes that true security includes freedom from hunger, indignity, and poverty. Likewise, environmental sustainability is also acknowledged as an important component, given Pakistan's vulnerability to climate change and its rippling effect on livelihoods and resources. One of the key elements of this overall framework is human security that aims at ensuring the rights of the citizens and providing them with opportunities in the economic, medical, and training spheres. According to NISP 2018, if socioeconomic inequality is not addressed, it can act as a catalyst for social unrest, radicalization, and extremism. Thus, the goal of the policy is to create a society that is

²⁶Sidra Shabbir, "From Traditional Security to Human Security Approach: An Analysis of National Internal Security Policy of Pakistan (2018-2023)," *Pakistan Journal of Terrorism Research* 3, no. 1 (2021). <https://pjtr.nacta.gov.pk/index.php/journals/article/view/86>

more equal and inclusive in order to lessen its susceptibility to both internal and external threats.

▪ ***Strengthening Counter Terrorism and Addressing Extremism***

Given the constant threat posed by terrorism to national security, Pakistan's NISP 2018–2022 supports the bolstering of intelligence-based operations in their efforts to neutralize potential threats and dismantle terrorist networks. This strategy heavily relies on military and civilian intelligence services to conduct targeted operations to disrupt the operational and financial networks of terrorist organizations. However, the division of duties among several organizations, such as the military, provincial Counter Terrorism Departments (CTDs), and the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), complicates Pakistan's counter-terrorism framework. Even though these organizations are governed by a number of laws, including the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (2016), the Anti-Money Laundering Act (2010), and the Anti-Terrorism Act (1997), coordinated action against terrorism is frequently hampered by the absence of a single command structure.²⁷ The framework for counter-terrorism in NISP 2018, which supervise the coordination of national efforts by the various security and intelligence agencies, places a strong emphasis on strengthening the role of NACTA. The NISP can more effectively address the ideological underpinnings of extremism by promoting tolerance, critical thinking, and inclusive education, which ultimately strengthens society. Traditionally, Pakistan has operated mainly in a reactive mode regarding terrorism, extremism, and immediate security issues, characterized by a lack of policy coherence, no long-term planning, and a failure to own these policies. The NISP 2018 aims to break this reactive trend through greater stakeholder integration, enhanced accountability, and a more proactive, strategic approach to security issues.

▪ ***Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice Reforms***

Pakistan's NISP 2018-2023 emphasizes the dire need to modernize law enforcement agencies as a part of the broader strategy to enhance the internal security of the state. The policy advocates for the importance of equipping law enforcement agencies with

²⁷Taimur Khattak and Rana Jimshaid Asghar, "Strategic Counter Measures to Terrorism and Extremism in Pakistan and Insights from Home Land Security: A Need for the Enactment of Pakistan's National Counter Terrorism Department," *Inverge Journal of Social Sciences* 3, no.1 (2024): 61-74. <https://www.articles.defence.pk/article.php?jid=2464&id=393541>.

cutting-edge technology, infrastructure, and advanced training to enhance their effectiveness. However, the implementation of these reforms faces challenges that are rooted in the state military-civil divide where the civilian-led initiatives are often sidelined by the military dominance in policy making and security. Alongside law enforcement modernization, NISP 2018 also underscores the importance of reforms in the state's criminal justice system to ensure the fair and swift prosecution of terrorism-related cases. To recognize the high-risk nature of such cases the policy further advocates for the protection of prosecutors, witnesses and legal professionals, including judges who are frequently targeted in high-profile terrorism trials. By promoting transparency, strengthening judicial reforms and advancing public trust in the state's capacity to administer justice, NISP 2018-2023 strives to create a more robust and resilient internal security framework capable of addressing both the short and long-term threats to national security.

▪ ***Cyber Security and Technological Advancements***

In an era, where digital technology is fundamental to critical governance and infrastructure, Pakistan's NISP 2018 identifies cyber security as an important component of national security. Acknowledging the vulnerabilities posed by cyber threats, the policy promotes the creation of a comprehensive national cybersecurity policy to protect essential systems, prevent cyberattacks and reduce the risks associated with an increasingly interconnected digital landscape.

In order to deal with these issues, NISP 2018 calls for the creation of a universal National Cybersecurity Policy to protect critical infrastructure and counter cyber threats. The lack of a unified institutional structure in the country, which includes agencies such as the Pakistan Computer Emergency Response Team (PakCERT) and the FIA Cyber Crime Wing, however, does not support concerted actions. Although the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016 provides a legal framework to counter cybercrime, it lacks a comprehensive strategic vision. National Cybersecurity Policy 2021 will address these gaps by encouraging indigenization, elevating the partnership between the government and corporate entities, and creating a resilient cyber ecosystem.²⁸ Nevertheless, implementation is a serious issue, and the concerted actions of institutions and stakeholders should ensure the security of the digital future of Pakistan.

²⁸ Sara Ahmad, "Cyber Security Threat and Pakistan's Preparedness: An Analysis Of National Cyber Security Policy 2021," *Pakistan Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research* 5, no. 1 (2022): 25-40, <https://doi.org/10.37605/pjhssr.v5i1.381>.

Regardless of the gains achieved in the policy, several challenges were still poorly applied as the National Cybersecurity Policy 2021. Lack of skilled cybersecurity specialists is a major issue, as it is now harder to manage and respond to more sophisticated cyberthreats because of the lack of qualified specialists in Pakistan. The country badly requires a national workforce development strategy to train and retain cybersecurity professionals. Moreover, the coordination between the public and the private sector is yet to be optimal. Despite the significant role of the private sector in the construction and maintenance of digital infrastructure, most organizations do not possess highly developed cybersecurity systems capable of withstanding new, more sophisticated cyber threats.

To adequately resolve these issues, the primary concern of Pakistan needs to be the closer cooperation among governmental organizations, the commercial sector, and foreign stakeholders that will result in a unified and holistic strategy of cybersecurity resilience. In order to enhance response, more information sharing and the establishment of cyber defense groupings are necessary. Moreover, the reduction of vulnerabilities will also be significantly supported by the improvement of cybersecurity awareness and education across the board. Pakistan can create a strong digital infrastructure that safeguards vital systems and promotes confidence in its expanding digital economy by making investments in these areas.

▪ ***Socio Economic Development and Community Resilience***

Understanding that poverty, inequality, and insufficient access to education are often the primary factors contributing to insecurity, the NISP 2018-2022, in Pakistan, is heavily focused on addressing these factors by targeting them via specific socioeconomic policies. The policy aims at ensuring that the society becomes more stable and prosperous through economic growth, improved education, and reduced income inequality, thereby reducing the root causes of social unrest and extremism. Although these factors have largely been analyzed in isolation, examining the demography of violence and extremism in Pakistan demonstrates that the situation goes awry, presenting a complexly weaved nexus of socio-economic inducements.²⁹ The

²⁹Muhammad Makki and Syed Ali Akash, "Poverty, Regional Inequality, and the Role of Governance: Tracing Geographies of Violent Extremism in Pakistan," *GeoJournal* 88, no.3 (2023): 2635-50, <https://links.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10708-022-10766-6>.

increasing ethnic diversity, the dominant role of religious interests in the inner political situation of the country, makes the problem even more complicated.

In addition to socioeconomic development, NISP 2018 emphasizes the value of community involvement in fostering resistance to extremism. It is believed that collaboration with media outlets, religious leaders, and civil society organizations is essential to advancing social harmony, tolerance, and the fight against extremist ideologies. NISP hopes to strengthen local communities and ensure their active involvement in the process of national development through these collaborations.

National Security Policy (2022-2026)

The NSP 2022-2026 of Pakistan focuses on comprehensive and human centric approach to security balancing both the traditional and non-traditional security approaches. The policy highlights several key themes.

▪ *Economic Security as the Core of National Security*

Pakistan's NSP 2022-2026 identifies economic stability and growth, as the cornerstone, demonstrating the understanding that all aspects of national security are supported by a strong and resilient economy. Through a focus on sustainable growth, the policy aims to address internal vulnerabilities and the nation's ability to effectively respond to both the traditional and non-traditional security challenges. The nation realized that its economy needed to be strengthened in order to compete with its adversaries. The State thus announced a shift from Geo-strategic to Geo-economic thinking, to protect its national interests. The significance of strategic interests is undeniable, and their realization requires a solid economic foundation.³⁰ Therefore, it is believed that the best way to protect the nation's integrity is to shift from Geo-strategic to Geo-economic thinking. The key focus of this policy is on strengthening investment, trade and regional connectivity with initiatives like China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) are playing a transformative role in integrating the state into international market.³¹ The

³⁰ Samiya Ashraf, Ghulam Mustafa, and Ghazanfar Ali, "Pakistan's National Security Policy: An Analysis," *Annals of Human and Social Sciences* 4, no. 3 (2023): 177-176. [https://doi.org/10.35484/ahss.2023\(4-III\)16](https://doi.org/10.35484/ahss.2023(4-III)16).

³¹ Sumita Kumar, "The China– Pakistan Strategic Relationship: Trade, Investment, Energy and Infrastructure," *Strategic Analysis* 31, no. 5 (2007): 757-790. <https://doi.org/10.1080/097001607701662278>.

policy seeks to strengthen economic resilience and reduce vulnerabilities by focusing on infrastructure development and trade diversification.

NSP 2022-2026 emphasizes the need to make exports more robust and support domestic industries because of the necessity to become less dependent on foreign aid. It focuses on building an independent economy that tries to reduce the level of externalities, attain financial stability in the long term, and enhance sustainable growth. These measures are consequent, as the policy balances the economic power with national security agendas, where economic potential helps deliver to wider state policies.

▪ ***Internal Security and Social Cohesion***

The NSP 2022-2026 has given significant focus on domestic security and social integration as key pillars of national stability. It is an effort to make the society safer and more robust by combating terrorism, extremism, and sectarian violence through enhancing legal systems and law enforcers. Moreover, the policy recognizes that the governance system must be effective in order to ensure the security. An inefficient, sluggish and non-responsive Criminal Justice System (CJS), in this case presents a big threat to governance as well as national security. Enhancing the ease, openness, and effectiveness of the CJS is thus essential to the delivery of justice, preservation of confidence among the populace, and strengthening the stability of the state in general.³² This vulnerability exacerbates stability issues in the security domain by impacting not only the conventional facets of state sovereignty but also the internal human and social territories.

Given that effective governance and good law enforcement are two closely related concepts, the capability of the state to offer effective governance would consequently be threatened by the weak CJS. NSP 2022 is a citizen-centric policy that recognizes these challenges in order to guarantee the safety, security, dignity, and prosperity of its citizens. In the process of addressing the root causes of insecurity, including poverty, inequality and marginalization, the policy puts a high emphasis on tolerance, social cohesion, and ideological counter-narratives in addressing extremism. The policy points out that to address the issue of marginalization, poverty, and inequality, there is a need to strengthen the linkages between socioeconomic conditions and insecurity. These root causes are a breeding ground of violence and extremism.

³²Ali Asghar, "Criminal Justice System of Pakistan," *ISSRA Papers* 15, no. 1 (2023): 1-12.

▪ ***Traditional Security and Defense***

The NSP 2022 emphasizes the imperative of maintaining a formidable defensive posture to safeguard the territorial integrity of the country and prevent external aggression. The policy recommends dual approach to manage the emerging security issues in the region such as the provision of nuclear deterrence and the traditional military capacity. The main element of this strategy is Pakistan's policy of nuclear deterrence, which deters both the nuclear and conventional capabilities of India. The policy focuses on affordable defense practices, relying on nuclear deterrence to reduce dependence on large conventional armies that could otherwise strain the nation's economy. The NSP unites the traditional and nuclear military capabilities in an integrated structure to counter such evolving threats so as to have a flexible and adaptive defense alignment to both traditional and non-traditional security threats. The NSP advocates bolstering border security and developing counter-measures against unconventional conflict in order to fight new forms of warfare, such as hybrid warfare. These actions involve dealing with the asymmetric threats to the stability of the state, reinforcing borders, and installing advanced surveillance systems. By integrating traditional security systems with modern approaches, Pakistan is also striving to strengthen its security structure within a geopolitical environment that is increasingly getting volatile.

▪ ***Human and Climate Security***

The NSP 2022 stresses the critical link between human development and national security by highlighting the significance of addressing education and health care, food and water security. By ensuring access to these essential resources, the policy aims to promote social stability, reduce vulnerabilities, and create a foundation for sustainable national development. Human security is defined as “everyone’s right to live in freedom and dignity, free from poverty and despair,” from having equal opportunity to exercise all their rights and develop their human potential. Human security aims to protect people’s lives, livelihoods, and dignity in the face of present and future dangers. The fundamental goal of the human security approach is to eradicate fear, desire, and dangers.³³ By highlighting the triangular relationship between development, human

³³ Iram Khalid, “Food Security: Understanding Pakistan’s National Security Concern,” *Journal of Political Studies*, Special Issue (2018): 121–32.

rights, and peace and security, human security can draw attention to the crucial connections between these factors and make sure that strategies for reducing poverty are focused on the underlying causes and corrective measures required to stop the continuation of extreme poverty, violence, and other forms of fragility.

Likewise, one of the biggest risks to Pakistan's national security is water scarcity, which further threatens social cohesion, economic stability, and food production. Tensions over resource distribution both within and outside the nation have been made worse due to declining water supplies, brought on by population growth, inadequate management, and climate change. While the issues with the Indus Water Treaty (IWT) add geopolitical pressure, disputes over the Indus River System strains relations between provinces. The NSP 2022 highlights the urgent need for effective water management, climate adaptation, and regional cooperation to mitigate these threats.

In the light of growing threats posed by climate change NSP of Pakistan identifies that environmental degradation is one of the significant challenges to Pakistan's security. Pakistan remains highly vulnerable to rising temperatures, melting glaciers, and extreme weather events that disrupt agriculture, deplete water supplies, and endanger public health.³⁴ These climate-related issues put a strain on defense and governance capabilities in addition to endangering livelihoods. As a result, conflicts over resources and social unrest become increasingly likely. According to the NSP, this necessitates incorporating climate adaptation techniques into sustainable resource management as part of the plan of national security.

▪ *Regional and Global Partnerships*

Pakistan's NSP emphasizes on the significance of regional cooperation as a key component for security and economic growth. The policy draws attention on strengthening ties with neighbouring countries particularly with India and Afghanistan to address common challenges and promote peace and stability in South Asia. The NSP strives to transform the region into a hub of connectedness and wealth through the focus

³⁴ Zahid Hussain, Syed Aleem Gillani, and Muhammad Umer Hayat, "Climate Change and National Security Challenges to Pakistan: An Analysis," *Journal of Social Sciences Review* 4, no. 4 (2024): 61–67, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/388669143_Climate_Change_and_National_Security_Challenges_to_Pakistan_An_Analysis.

on friendly ties and economic collaboration. The nation is committed to regional stability and development as evidenced by its membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The SCO enhances the ability of Pakistan to address cross-border problems, such as terrorism and drug trafficking, because of the platform it provides that facilitates infrastructure building, commerce, and counterterrorism. Pakistan's position as a regional center for trade and energy is further reinforced by initiatives like the CPEC, which promotes economic connectivity with Central Asia and beyond.³⁵ In keeping with NSP 2022's goal of fostering peaceful relations to achieve long-term regional stability, the SCO also offers diplomatic opportunities to resolve long-standing issues.

Beyond regional cooperation the national security policy emphasizes on global collaborations to tackle transnational challenges like climate change, organized crime and cyber security. In addition to regional cooperation, the NSP emphasizes the necessity of broader international collaboration to address transnational challenges like organized crime, cybersecurity, and climate change. Pakistan has an interest in advancing its ability to react to new threats but at the same time plays its role in securing the world and promoting sustainable development, through the strengthening of alliances with its allies and participation in internationally accepted programs.

Comparative Analysis of the Policies

Comparative evaluation of NISP 2014, NISP 2018 and the NSP 2022 shows that there has been a consistent transformation in Pakistan security doctrine.

The NISP 2014 was essentially a reactive document that reacted to the increased terrorism and violent extremism. It marked the initial systematic effort to institutionalize counter-terrorism through NACTA, intelligence reforms and madrassa control. Nevertheless, the policy continued to be primarily based on coercive action and did not enjoy mass ownership by society or provincial authority.

NISP 2018 was a paradigm shift towards rehabilitation and prevention. It expanded the security scope to encompass de-radicalization, socioeconomic development and community participation. Programs such as Sabawoon and Mashal reflected innovative reintegration models and the policy clearly recognized the importance of civil society in the process of peace-building. Nevertheless, unequal and

³⁵ Rubina Ali, Irfan Ali, and Shaukat Ullah, "SCO as a Passage to Regional Security: Future Developments and Opportunities for Pakistan," *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal (LASSIJ)* 3, no. 1 (2019): 19–29, <https://doi.org/10.47264/idea.lassij/3.1.3>.

inconsistent implementation was caused by political fragmentation, bureaucratic inefficiencies and lack of provincial coordination.

However, the most decisive shift came with the NSP 2022-2026, which reformulated security through the prism of people-centric and geoeconomics consideration. It focused on human and economic security alongside traditional issues, recognizing that social injustice, poverty, and unemployment were just as destabilizing as outside threats. The policy identified trade, FDI, and regional connectivity projects including the CPEC to be significant towards long-term resilience. However, political instability, scarcity of resources and unresolved regional conflicts hampered its ambitious scope.

Insights from Expert Interviews

The SWOT analysis provided the structural framework of Pakistan's internal and national security policies. Expert interviews provide a more in-depth explanation of why these gaps exist. Across all interviews it was acknowledged that Pakistan has made progress in developing formal policy frameworks; nonetheless a consensus develops that the real crisis lies in the implementation. As one respondent remarked that Pakistan has never had a problem with policy formulation our crisis lies in execution.³⁶ Weak institutions, such as underfunded NACTA were constantly blamed for keeping otherwise well-crafted policies remained aspirational.

A second theme focused on the failure of blanket methods. Respondents noted that “one-size-fits-all” strategies ignores Pakistan's ethnic, provincial, and cultural diversity, resulting in poor grassroots ownership.³⁷ They stressed the need for localized, context-sensitive solutions, particularly after the 18th Amendment³⁸ provided provinces greater autonomy. Without this adaptation policies risk becoming irrelevant or being met with outright rejection. The presence of institutional trust and political will was also emphasized by the experts. Civil and military organizations often work in silos, which causes fragmentation and inefficiency. A number of respondents cautioned against undermining the trust of the people by arguing that institutional performances should focus more on autonomy, transparency, and planning in the long term.

³⁶ Assistant Research Associate, Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI), online interview by author, Islamabad, April 2025.

³⁷ Official from the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA), interview by author, Islamabad, March 2025.

³⁸ Assistant Professor, Centre for International Peace and Stability, National University of Sciences and Technology (NUST), in-person interview by author, Islamabad, May 2025.

Lastly, they recommended broadening the security paradigm beyond military intervention and use of coercion. They cautioned that suppressing dissent in the interest of security is an ongoing source of new complaints. Community engagement, inclusive governance, and education, instead, were deemed to be important in alleviating radicalization and resilience building. Although the emphasis of the NSP 2022 on human and economic security was a welcome change, experts cautioned that without adaptive measures, defined goals, and continuous review, the ambitious agenda risks existing on paper only.

The insights can supplement and complement the SWOT results, showing that while security structures in Pakistan are highly robust on paper, performance will remain low until localized ownership, adaptability, and institutional trust are achieved.

Conclusion

This study critically examined the changing internal and national security frameworks - NISP 2014, NISP 2018-2023, and NSP 2022-2026 through SWOT analysis supported by expert interviews. The results indicate the presence of a consistent pattern: although these policies are important steps to formalizing the security agenda of Pakistan, their revolutionary capabilities have been continuously undermined by the flaws in their implementation. Good policy goals and ambitious strategy have failed to achieve long-term outcomes, largely due to governance issues embedded in structure, institutional inertia and political fragmentation.

A major challenge in Pakistan lies in effective policy implementation. Recurring weaknesses such as bureaucratic inertia, overlapping institutional mandates, and poor inter agency collaboration have slowed effective implementation. Centralized forms have disrupted provincial ownership and disregarding specific realities while ignoring grassroots realities. In the same way, although rhetorically human security has been recognized, policy priorities have remained focused on coercive and military strategies, which restricts such policies in their long-term preventive potential.

The other theme is a poor relationship between society and the state. Limited engagement with communities, civil society organizations, and local actors have contributed to the mistrust of the population and allowed extremist narratives to fill the gap. In the absence of participatory approaches, national security practices can be seen as top-down measures as opposed to joint national undertakings. The disconnection

between the state and society has increased the failure of implementation and undermined local-level resilience.

The results of the analysis also show that the institutional reform is impeded by political unwillingness and policy discontinuity. The constant promises of improvement of NACTA and other implementing agencies have been unsuccessful because of the political changes, varying goals, and inability to fund them.

The security policies in Pakistan show that there is a major change in the counter-terrorism framework to a wider, people-focused vision of security. Nevertheless, the transformative potential of these policies is yet to be achieved to its fullest potential unless the underlying issues as per implementation, decentralization, and institutional capacity are dealt with. Durable peace cannot be achieved through sound policy frameworks alone, it needs political commitment, coordination across sectors, and integration of human security as part of national security policies.

Digital Storytelling as Strategic Communication: A Case Study of Indian Content on Netflix

Abeera Usman and Nabeel Hussain *

Abstract

In the digital era, we are no longer fighting on battlefields but on the screens watched by millions around the world. The evolution of digital media has been transformed by rapid advances in digital technologies and internet connectivity. The emergence of Over-the-top (OTT) platforms has revolutionized the digital media landscape, enabling unrestricted, on-demand access across borders. In the age of streaming platforms, entertainment content has emerged as a powerful tool to shape people's perceptions. In this setting, India is effectively using the OTT platform to construct an anti-Pakistan narrative. Bollywood productions use strategic communication through storytelling and shaping narratives by selective representation and tilting of history in their favor. By using qualitative techniques, this research has analyzed the meaning and interpretation using non-numerical data, including observations, documents, and media content. The emergence of a cluster of movies during the Modi era reflects strategic communication through storytelling as a powerful tool to construct an anti-Pakistan perception. This study analyzes scenes and dialogues of five recent movies streamed on Netflix during the Modi Era, that includes Dhurandhar, Saare Jahan sy Achaa, Fighter, Kandahar Hijack, and Mission Majnu. Moreover, widespread viewership of these films amplifies how India uses storytelling techniques to strategically communicate with a larger audience. These movies/series shape an anti-Pakistan perception by reinforcing the stereotype of Pakistan as an irrational state and a threat in the region. This could lead to damage to Pakistan's credibility as a state and could diplomatically isolate Pakistan. This consistently portrayed Pakistan as sponsor of terrorism, weak state and a threat to regional stability. Furthermore, the study pointed out obstacles in the Pakistani media industry that limit Pakistan's access to Netflix. Lastly, this suggests possible options for Pakistan to construct a counter-narrative by strategic storytelling in the digital media landscape.

Keywords: Strategic Communication, Digital Storytelling, Netflix, Indian Cinema, Over the Top Platforms, Anti-Pakistan, Media framing

Introduction

Digital platforms play a vital role in constructing the collective understanding of identity, culture, and even history. Within this context, Netflix emerged as a powerful tool due to its global reach and influence. In this setting, the Bollywood productions are significant in shaping narratives by selective representation and tilting of history in their favor. This growing Indian dominance on

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Netflix constructs a continuous anti-Pakistan narrative. This streaming uses strategic communication through storytelling to shape the narrative and influence people's perception internationally. Storytelling elements include emotions, hero-vs-villain format, thrill, and espionage, which are used to build a connection with the audience. On the other hand, strategic communication is the purposeful use of communication to achieve the objective of shaping perception.

The emergence of a cluster of movies during the Modi era reflects strategic communication through storytelling as a powerful tool for constructing an anti-Pakistan narrative. Indian movies/series on OTT have widespread reach and influence; however, it needs systematic analysis to understand the patterns of Indian movies and their narrative construction. Most of the literature covers the traditional media and general cinematic views; however, limited attention is paid to OTT platforms, e.g., Netflix, that have global reach and content available in multiple languages.

The study selected five Indian movies that were streamed recently on Netflix to ensure the content analysis is relevant and contemporary, reflecting current narratives and trends constructed by India. These movies/series, including *Dhurandhar*, *Saare Jahan se Accha*, *Fighter*, *Kandahar Hijack*, and *Mission Majnu*, are recently being streamed on Netflix and play a role in propagating politically driven narratives targeting Pakistan. The paper analyzes the scenes and dialogues of five selected movies/series streamed on Netflix during the Modi era as an instrument of strategic communication to build an anti-Pakistan narrative. The selected scenes and dialogues in movies/series associate Pakistan with terrorism as well as present Pakistan as an irrational state and a threat to the region. The study discusses the widespread viewership of Netflix and the storytelling techniques India uses in its content to strategically communicate with a larger audience. This could impact Pakistan's credibility as a state and could diplomatically isolate Pakistan. Lastly, the study suggests possible options for Pakistan to construct a counter-narrative by storytelling in the digital media landscape.

Theoretical Framework: Media Framing

Framing theory, by Robert Entman, describes the power of a communication text. Framing is widely used in social sciences and humanities, but there is no single theory that explains how frames are embedded within and represented in a text and how it shapes the thinking. Framing shows how information is presented in speeches, reports, books, and other forms of

communication. According to this theory, framing involves selection and salience.¹ This means communication chooses some aspects of reality, and in the message, makes them more noticeable and meaningful. India is using this technique in its Netflix content, associating Pakistan with terrorism and calling Pakistan a state sponsoring terrorism inside India. Framing involves promoting a particular problem, its causes, moral judgements by evaluating actions and people involved, and recommendations to resolve the identified issue.² Indian movies and series represent Pakistan as a threat and a sponsor of terrorism, which creates fear among people and disrupts regional stability, and India as a protector that must stop Pakistan. According to Entman, Framing exists at four stages in the communication process: the communicator, text (in the form of words, statements that reinforce facts, images), receiver, and culture.³ India is a communicator; movies and series on Netflix are text in the form of digital media, countries all over the world on Netflix watching that content are the receivers, and reflect cultural ideas based on security, nationalism, and counter-terrorism. An increase in salience increases the probability that the receiver will perceive it. The word salience means making information more memorable to the public through repetition and association with culturally familiar symbols.⁴ Indian movies/series production with a similar idea of fighting against terrorism in Pakistan reinforces this perception. Even if an idea is mentioned a single time can have a strong impact if it matches the audience's existing beliefs. The framing selects certain facts and directs attention away from other important aspects. Such as associating Pakistan with terrorism, while ignoring the fact that according to the Global Terrorism Index Pakistan ranks 1 out of 163 countries, with a score 8.574/10 most impacted with terrorism.⁵

Strategic Communication Through Storytelling

Strategic communication is the purposeful use of communication with stakeholders to achieve an objective. Strategic communication involves a master plan as per the behavioral preferences of the targeted audience to accomplish the organizational mission.⁶ Strategic communication is the

¹ Bertram Scheufele, "Framing Theory: Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm – by Robert M. Entman (1993)," *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (1993): 51, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>.

² Scheufele, "Framing Theory," 52.

³ Scheufele, "Framing Theory," 52.

⁴ Scheufele, "Framing Theory," 53.

⁵ "Global Terrorism Index," Vision of Humanity, last modified March 2025, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/global-terrorism-index/#/>.

⁶ "What is Strategic Communication," Columbus State University - A University System of Georgia Institution, accessed January 24, 2026, https://www.columbusstate.edu/academics/_docs/degrees/MA-Comm-what-is-strategic-communication.pdf.

effective development of a message, delivered using a high level of planning and audience research as per the end goals of a business or organization.⁷ The process includes who you are talking to, why you are talking to them, what form of communication you choose, and from which channel you share it.⁸

Storytelling is one of the means of strategic communication. In the digital world, storytelling using media is an effective form of strategic communication. In this media landscape, it requires more than facts to capture the audience's attention.⁹ Storytelling aims to inspire, evoke feelings in, and build trust with the audience. At the heart of a compelling story lies an emotional core. Through story, creating a narrative that aligns with the audience's experiences and values.¹⁰ Emotions drive decision-making more than logic; therefore, storytelling is a significant component of communication strategies. A compelling story follows a structural framework that enhances audience engagement by including an introduction, conflict, and resolution. In the digital era, visual storytelling has become a powerful tool for enhancing narrative impact, enabling brands to increase audience engagement through content such as behind-the-scenes and short documentaries.¹¹

While analyzing India, it is relying on this strategic communication through storytelling using the OTT platform such as Netflix by structuring its message around emotionally resonant story arcs that audiences easily recognize and internalize. The introduction stage presents India as a peaceful state that is closely aligned with the values of patriotism, safety, and national pride shared by its domestic people. The conflict stage presents Pakistan as a threat, an emotionally charged depiction of terrorism, and insecurity that invokes fear and anger, while making stories relatable to the audience by connecting these threats to the citizen experience and collective memory. The resolution stage depicts India as the rightful victor and morally justified. This makes a Hero vs Villain storyline, in which Pakistan is a villain and acts irresponsibly and aimlessly; however, India is the hero, acting as a responsible and rational actor. Audiences who are unfamiliar with the region will perceive India as a responsible state, while Pakistan as an irrational and rogue

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Evan Kropp, "Crafting Compelling Narratives Is Key to Effective Communication Strategies," College of Journalism and Communications Online Graduate Program, last modified June 4, 2025, accessed January 24, 2026, <https://onlinemasters.jou.ufl.edu/effective-communication-strategies/>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

state. This consequently, impacts public opinion and legitimizes India's security narrative internationally and rejects Pakistan's counter-narrative.

Strategic Communication Through Netflix Content

This part analyzes the five Netflix projects of India that shape a manipulated narrative against Pakistan, including *Dhurandhar* (2026), *Saare Jahan se Accha* (2025), *Fighter* (2024), *Kandahar Hijack* (2024), and *Mission Majnu* (2023). The dialogues that appear to construct a perception about Pakistan are quoted, and analyzed. This section analyzes these movies/series dialogues that use strategic communication through storytelling to construct a negative representation of Pakistan globally.

1. Dhurandhar (2026)

Dhurandhar is a fictional thriller movie set in the world of intelligence and covert warfare. The fictional intelligence asset Hamza (Ranveer Singh) was sent to Pakistan on a task to neutralize threats to the national security of India. Hamza, an Indian asset that enters in Lyari, Karachi, Pakistan, and joined the Rehman Dakait Lyari gangster group, intending to neutralize the terrorism threat from its roots. The movie presents Pakistani political parties as supporter of militant groups for their narrow party interests. The movie frames a clear anti-Pakistan narrative, framing terrorism as a Pakistan-backed phenomenon. A scene presenting the 26/11 attacks,

Scene/Dialogue	Analysis
Dialogue <u>Major Iqbal ISI to Rehman:</u> <i>"Rehman, come fast, you are missing the most incredible moment of our lives. We are eagerly waiting for you to join us.</i> <i>Rehman, this is the destruction your guns and ammo have unleashed. It seems like Gazwa e Hind is starting right here from Mumbai.</i> Scene <u>Headlines on Television:</u> <i>'Mumbai Terror Attack 7 places targeted encounter still on inside Oberoi Hotel</i>	This scene was the 26/11 Mumbai Terror Attack. The scene strategically communicates an anti-Pakistan narrative by portraying the Pakistani state institution as an enabler of terrorism by associating Pakistan with the 26/11 attacks. The scene and dialogue directly construct the link between the terrorist network and Pakistan's ISI. The presence of ISI Major Iqbal in the scene depicts Pakistan behind the 26/11 Mumbai attacks.

Dialogue <u>Major Iqbal dialed a Phone call:</u> <i>Salam o alaikum, Ali, you target the Taj Hotel, media is giving it maximum coverage. Have you started the fire yet? My brother, unless we see the fire blazing, the mood doesn't kick in; we need to scare them out of their minds</i> Scene Sound of Blast <u>News on TV:</u> <i>Six blasts in 35 minutes</i> Dialogue <u>Continued Phone call of Iqbal:</u> <i>Remember do not spare anyone in those rooms, they are infidels. Women, kids, old people Kill them all, my brother, everyone is an infidel, do not hesitate.</i> Scene <i>Nara Takbeer slogans in the room by the Rehman dakait. Then in the movie they displayed the actual 26/11 recordings between handlers and terrorists, encouraging and praising each other.</i>¹²	Major Iqbal from ISI was encouraging the terrorist to attack innocent civilians and enjoying those attacks that portray Pakistan as an inhumane and irrational state. The state security forces are sponsoring terrorism inside India and disturbing the regional stability.
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The same theme is reinforced in another scene, a dialogue between Rahman and Major Iqbal.

Scene/Dialogue	Analysis
Dialogue <u>Major Iqbal ISI:</u> <i>ISI thinks that along with Kashmir, we should spark the Punjab movement again, so they have requested</i>	The scene represents that Pakistan is taking responsibility of Mumbai terrorist attacks and planning another terror attack. The scene securitizes Pakistan as a state sponsoring

¹² Dhurandhar, directed by Aditya Dhar, (Netflix, 2026), 2:18:48 to 2:23:56.

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<i>something Mumbai style to go down in Amritsar on 15 August.</i> <i><u>Rahman</u>: I am always ready to serve ISI brother, sent the list to Uzair; the goodwill will reach ahead of schedule.”¹³</i>	terrorism and security forces collaborating with the terrorist group and contributes to the regional instability.
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The last scene of the movie,

Scene/Dialogue	Analysis
Scene <i>“What is Operation Dhurandhar? For the first time in the history of espionage, we will send our asset to infiltrate the Pakistani underworld, their mafia, their gangs. In fact, evidence has shown that directly or indirectly, Pakistan has been involved in nearly every major terror attack worldwide. When the ISI sends a terrorist organization to strike India, where do they get their arms and ammunition? From their underworld, that’s why by infiltrating these groups we will get first-hand intelligence on their mafia, their links with terrorists, and the ISI’s involvement. We are going to induct criminals for this operation, those who are either on death row or serving life sentences, people who have no purpose left in their lives. We will give them a purpose, and if we succeed, we might just have a killing machine in our hands.”¹⁴</i>	The movie ended on a declarative note, Pakistan is behind all the terrorist attacks, generalizing an Indian political claim. Throughout the scene, terrorism is repeatedly linked to Pakistan territory and ISI and portrayed as systemic and Pakistan-sponsored. However, India is securitized as a responsible and rational state fighting against terrorism for peace and stability.

¹³ *Dhurandhar*, 2:41:50 to 2:42:20

¹⁴ *Dhurandhar*, 3:13:19 to 3:15:04.

2. *Saare Jahan Sy Accha*

Saare Jahan sy Acha is a spy thriller series set in 1970.¹⁵ Pratik Gandhi as Vishnu Shankar, an Indian intelligence officer RAW, undertakes covert operations of penetration in Pakistan and sabotages Pakistan's nuclear program. The series depicts a Us versus Them mentality examined through dialogues where India is justified as a rational and responsible state and Pakistan as an irresponsible and irrational state, where its actions are presented as a threat to the whole world. In one scene, Kartika Kamra, her character name Fatima Khan, played the role of the journalist and editor, presented as a responsible Pakistani journalist who wrote the truth about the political leaders of Pakistan, who are evil and irrational elites in her writing. She speaks to her uncle, a part of those elites,

Scene/Dialogue	Analysis
Dialogue <u>Fatima Khan (Pakistani Journalist):</u> <i>"In the country where the Prime Minister himself intimidated reporters, is a country better off without a nuclear bomb. She added, I know Bhutto isn't accustomed to hearing the truth but, if possible, remind him, in our country, Prime Ministers change faster than the seasons, so better to stop viewing the public as slaves."</i>¹⁶	Fatima was shown as a sensible Pakistani journalist and a hero who was concerned about her state. Through her dialogue, an anti-Pakistan image was made, where the Prime Minister is threatening the journalist and frames Pakistan as an intolerant and oppressive state where civil liberties are under threat. Emphasis on the change of the political leadership represents institutional weakness and a lack of freedom for the media, suggesting that Pakistan is unstable enough to develop a nuclear arsenal.

Throughout the movie, this idea of weak institutions and deceptive leaders was reinforced. In another scene, between Vishnu Shankar (Indian Intelligence Officer) and Fatima Khan (Pakistan's Journalist).

¹⁵ *Saare Jahan Sy Accha*, created by Gaurav Shukla, directed by Sumit Purohit, (Netflix, 2025).

¹⁶ *Saare Jahan Sy Acha*, Season1, Episode 6, (Netflix, 2025), 8.19 to 8.50.

Dialogue/Scenes	Analysis
Dialogue <u>Vishnu Shankar</u>: <i>“Pakistan needs education, infrastructure, but it does not need a nuclear bomb. Bhutto enjoys a seven-course meal in Saudi and asks the People of Pakistan to eat grass but make a nuclear weapon, these all are your headlines, right? Or you just want to make these sensational headlines, as much as I know you, you want to bring change in your country. You yourself said that you work for your nation. Pakistan is about to make nuclear weapons and, in a few months, they will have a nuclear bomb. If a person like Bhutto got a nuclear weapon, then millions would die, and your country would be bankrupt.</i> <u>Fatima Khan</u>: <i>what if India develops Nuclear Arsenals? India has no plan of developing nuclear weapons.</i> <u>Vishnu Shankar</u>: <i>We are ready to sign the NPT and all this is a top secret.”¹⁷</i>	The RAW agent Vishnu Shanker is stating the headlines of Fatima Khan’s articles to remind her of the real needs of Pakistan. Both characters are presented as rational and responsible individuals who know the development of nuclear weapons is a dangerous, costly, and irrational decision by Pakistan. This framing ignores the reality that states pursue security and development simultaneously, especially when the enemy is conventionally strong and developing nuclear weapons. Indian conventional and nuclear development created a security dilemma for Pakistan, and it became necessary for Pakistan to build an arsenal to balance power with India. Moreover, Bhutto eats a seven-course meal while telling the people to eat grass, portraying Pakistani leadership as elitist, hypocritical, and indifferent to the public sufferings. This makes people interpret Pakistan as an irresponsible state whose leaders sacrifice the people for their destructive ambitions. The scene portrays Pakistan as a dangerous and irrational state whose nuclear facilities must be neutralized for global safety and securitizes the hostile action against Pakistan as significant and a responsible act of security.

¹⁷ *Saare Jahan Sy Achaa*, Season 1, Episode 4, (Netflix, 2025), 8:27 to 9: 32.

3. *Fighter*

In the movie *Fighter*, top Indian air force pilots are chosen to counter terrorism and protect India. The story is set when a major attack occurs on the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) in Srinagar. In the movie, the terrorist group backed by Pakistan is launching a terror attack on the CRPF. The story is fictional, yet inspired by the Pulwama and Balakot strikes. The brave pilots of Indian air force were tasked to destroy the terrorist camps inside Pakistan. The movie brings an anti-Pakistan narrative by depicting Pakistan as providing safe haven to terrorists to perform their mission. The movie justified India's response in Balakot as responsible, and successful, while Pakistan is presented as weak, dangerous, and a threat to the region. Throughout the movie, the scenes, dialogues, tone, and attire of actors reinforced an anti-Pakistan narrative. A scene at the ISI headquarters:

Dialogue/Scenes	Analysis
Dialogue <u>Police Officer:</u> <i>"Shame on us, their planning has been going on for so many days, and we did not get even a hint. Jaish is better than us; at least they can execute their plan.</i> <u>Police Clerk:</u> <i>In one way, we could say it is a favor for us from the Indian side that they targeted the Jaish's camp; if they had targeted our military bases, we all would have been martyred.</i> <u>Police Officer:</u> <i>Are you out of your senses? Are you calling the attack a favour?</i> <u>Police Clerk:</u> <i>No, sir, I am trying to say that we allowed Jaish's fighters to live in our land, and Indians know this. The attack is a declaration;</i> <u>Police Officer:</u> <i>(interrupted) that whenever they want, they can enter our home and kill us.</i>	The scene represents Pakistan as weak state depicting that even the terrorist group is better than Pakistani government. In this scene, a Pakistan ISI officer is praising the Indian attack on terrorists and is glad they did not attack military bases and kill them, illustrating Pakistan as a state that is unprepared, weak, and fearful of India. Moreover, the statement "now we should stop giving our bases to India" presents Pakistan's acknowledgement of giving living space to terrorists.

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<i>Is this what we are supposed to say to the public?</i> <u>Police Clerk:</u> <i>No, sir, I am just saying we should stop giving shelter to Mujahideens in our homeland.</i> Scene Terrorist named Azhar entered the room Dialogue: Azhar: <i>Continue your conversation that you do not need Mujahideens anymore, you are right, but if the thinking is small, how can our objective be big, we carried out suicide attack and they responded with airstrike, today we dug more than 300 graves, now Pakistani forces need to think bigger, because now we will not forget the graves and funerals and nor the revenge, now there will be no terror attack there will be war.</i>¹⁸	
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In another scene, an air force officer's father was watching the news on television, and the news broadcast,

Dialogue/Scenes	Analysis
Scene <u>Television News (broadcast):</u> <i>"Pakistan is releasing both of the pilots soon. This is the positive and significant impact of the Indian government's continuous negotiations; there is a wave of happiness among families of both officers and across the whole country that our brave soldiers are returning to the homeland."</i>¹⁹	The scene is fictional, and it recreates the real event. The tone in the scene represents Pakistan as an immoral and irrational state. The actual event and response of Pakistan in the Balakot crisis were rational, responsible, and peaceful towards India, which is completely ignored in the movie, and it

¹⁸ *Fighter*, directed by Sidharth Anand (Netflix, 2024), 1:04:23 to 1:06:06.

¹⁹ *Fighter*, 1:43:49 to 1:44:10.

Next Scene <i>One officer's dead body landed in the aircraft, and the one who went to receive it, sitting inside the aircraft is crying</i> Dialogue <u>Indian force pilot:</u> <i>(crying) they did not send the other pilot, and extremely tortured the one they sent after he was killed.</i>²⁰ Next Scene Inside the bureau, Dialogue <u>Military Officer:</u> <i>They are animals, the body was in pieces, in bloody pieces, this is their diplomacy? These are their ethics? They are saying he was already injured, the liars! I saw his injuries; he was murdered by them, tortured, and then murdered. How long will we be enduring this? Let's hand them down and break them into pieces.</i>"²¹	strategically portrays a negative image of Pakistan through storytelling via the movie. In reality, during the Pulwama Balakot episode, Pakistan's former Prime Minister Imran Khan stated that India accused Pakistan without any evidence, as Pakistan has no incentive for such actions.²² Pakistan has planned the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia's visit and the Investment conference for so long; why will Pakistan take such action at this time?²³ The Prime Minister added that Pakistan wishes to convey this message to the Government of India, our willingness for the investigation, in case any Pakistani is involved in this act.²⁴ If India provides any evidence against any Pakistani in this act, I (PM of Pakistan) guarantee we will take action against him, not under any pressure but because these actions are against Pakistan's national interest.²⁵ Moreover, Pakistan had captured an Indian pilot named Abhinandan after shooting down his plane in Pakistan-administered Kashmir. A day later, the former Prime Minister announced the release of the pilot as a peace gesture.²⁶ The foreign minister said we gave
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²⁰ *Fighter*, 1:48:07 to 1:49:56.

²¹ *Fighter*, 1:50:04 to 1:50:40.

²² Pakistan, Prime Minister's Office, Statement of Prime Minister Imran Khan on Pulwama Attack (Islamabad: Prime Minister's Office, 2019), https://www.pmo.gov.pk/pm_speech_details.php?speech_id=98.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ "No Compulsion or Pressure to Release Abhinandan, Did it for Peace: Qureshi," Dawn, March 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1467183>.

	India a message: we do not want to mistreat your citizens, we want peace. ²⁷ The actual response of Pakistan shows that Pakistan acted responsibly and rationally, while the movie is misleading the audience about Pakistan by presenting it as extremist in its thinking, and actions.
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4. IC-814: Kandahar Hijack

Kandahar Hijack is about the hijacking of an Indian airline flight IC-814 in December 1999. The flight was from Kathmandu (Nepal) to Delhi (India). Shortly after takeoff, hijackers seized the aircraft and forced it to fly across several locations for fueling, including Amritsar, Lahore, and Dubai, before landing at the hijacker's point, Kandahar, Afghanistan, which was under the Taliban's control. The hijackers demanded the release of militants. It was portrayed that the hijackers were operating with the support of the ISI. Several scenes and dialogues construct an anti-Pakistan narrative. Such as in a scene there are cross-talks:

Dialogue/Scenes	Analysis
Dialogue Person A (outside room): <i>"Hashmi is personally handling everything, the ISI is planning something big, they were gathered at guest house last night, they are not locals, they are Pakistanis, 5 of them were in Kathmandu for last 10 days planning something, I had placed a mike in their room."</i> ²⁸	Like many previous movies, this scene also portrays Pakistan as a sponsor of terrorism. The scene securitizes Pakistan security force i.e., ISI as an enabler of terrorism and propagating Pakistan as sponsor of terrorism inside India.

There is a scene in the series depicting a Joint Secretary of the Ministry of External Affairs, saying:

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ *IC 814: The Kandahar Hijack*, Season 1, Episode 1, directed by Anubhav Sinha, (Netflix, 2024), 3:46 to 4:15.

Dialogue/Scenes	Analysis
Dialogue <u>Joint Secretary of the Ministry of External Affairs (India):</u> <i>Moulana Allah Baksh Bahawalpur, Pakistan, says he runs a lot of madrasas across Pakistan, recruits’ youngsters across the world, and raises funds for his terror acts. Out of his five sons, one has been in the Kot Bhalwal Jail in Jammu for the past five years</i> <u>His Senior:</u> <i>Masood. Masood was a highly regarded name in the world of Islamic Jihad. His speeches inspired people from all over the world to join the Jihad movement. He entered India illegally to make peace between two Kashmiri terrorist groups and was arrested. There were three unsuccessful attempts to free Masood. During one attempt, his close friend Sajjad Afghani was killed. This was perhaps the fourth attempt.</i>²⁹	The dialogue linked the religious institution in Pakistan with extremism and terrorism. Moreover, through this scene, Pakistan is framed as the ground for the terrorists. The storytelling approach evoked moral clarity and urgency, demonstrating India as a responsible actor responding to the external threats, mainly from terrorism, coming from and supported by neighboring Pakistan.

Another scene:

Dialogue/Scenes	Analysis
Dialogue <u>The hijacked pilot:</u> <i>“Delhi control, this is IC-814, connect to Lahore, they want to take plane to Lahore.</i>	The terrorist’s insistence on landing in Pakistan is positioned as a problematic alternative in the scene. The statement, <i>Pakistan will not grant permission</i>, and the follow-up assertion, <i>Pakistan cannot be</i>

²⁹ IC 814: *The Kandahar Hijack*, 35:51-36:34.

<u>Indian officers (discussing in office):</u> Don't connect them to Lahore, that's their plan, if they take plane to Lahore, it will be a problem Message received in plane: IC184 Lahore has not permitted you to land <u>Hijacker:</u> They are lying tell them to connect us with Lahore directly, right now Pilot: IC184 connect to Lahore Scene Officers discussing in the office Dialogue <i>Person 1: Do we have any choice?</i> <i>Person 2: There's Amritsar, once they land there NSG will capture them, Game over, right</i> Scene Person 2 called Ravi (another character in office) Dialogue: <u>Person 2:</u> Ravi, (Ravi), if they land in Amritsar, we must storm the plane <u>Person 1):</u> Sir I suggest let them speak to Lahore ATC, Pakistan will not allow this and then they will have to land in Amritsar <u>Person 2:</u> What if Lahore give permission, then what happens, Pakistan cannot be trusted <u>Person 1:</u> Exactly.”³⁰	<i>trusted</i>, portray Pakistan as an untrustworthy and unpredictable actor. This selective framing propagating Pakistan as a risky and problematic state, while India is a disciplined and rational actor.
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³⁰ IC 814: The Kandahar Hijack, Episode 2, 12:45 to 14:10.

5. Mission Majnu

Mission Majnu is a Hindi thriller movie about an Indian intelligence operation in Pakistan in 1970s. In the movie, an intelligence officer was sent to Pakistan to expose the Pakistani nuclear weapons program. With a false identity, the main character was living as a citizen of Pakistan and gathering intelligence to expose Pakistan. Mission Majnu begins with the historical context from World War II, when the US dropped nuclear weapons on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, ending the war. The scene narrates:

Dialogue/Scenes	Analysis
Scene <i>“After the first drop of the nuclear bomb, it started a new race, the race to develop nuclear bombs. In 1971, Pakistan lost to India for the third time, and they wanted revenge at all costs. The only way for Pakistan to deter India is to make a nuclear bomb, but the war is not fought with weapons but intelligence, and India has RAW. Our Raw agents are infiltrated from Peshawar to Karachi, and they are not meant to use guns and ammunition, but to search for critical information and send it to Delhi, away from their homeland soil, the soldiers of the soil. This is the story of a brave soldier.”³¹</i>	The start of the movie created a Hero vs Villain perception, where Pakistan is presented as the villain, and India as the hero. The use of the word ‘Brave’ with an Indian soldier justifies India’s cause to send its soldier in Pakistan. Also, for heroic illustration, he was called a ‘soldier of the soil’ to build a sense of patriotism with the Indian soldier. The dialogues portray Pakistan as a villain, and the only way for Pakistan to deter India is by developing nuclear weapons.

The first scene of the movie:

Dialogue/Scenes	Analysis
Scene	The scene linked the religion with the suspicion that the religion could be used as a covert means to perform harmful activities in

³¹ Mission Majnu, directed by Shantanu Bagchi, (Netflix, 2023), 1:05 to 2:16.

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“The scene starts with Azaan in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, 1974, in which an Indian spy was offering prayer in the Mosque.” ³²	Pakistan. The city of Rawalpindi is connected with Pakistan’s military; in the scene, the city and religion are shown in a specific context.
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Another scene:

Dialogue/Scenes	Analysis
Dialogue <u>Bhutto</u>: <i>It is the time to show India its place, then the scene narrates, the nuclear facility location was chosen, project 706, Pakistan’s top secret.</i> <u>Bhutto (subsequent scene)</u>: <i>The international community must come together to condemn India’s irresponsible action.</i> Scene (narrates) <i>On one side, PM Bhutto was blaming India, and on the other hand, his illegal nuclear power was in action.”³³</i>	The portrayal of Pakistan’s leadership as hypocritical and dishonest to shape anti-Pakistan narrative without discussing the broader context of security dilemma and tensions between India-Pakistan in the region that made it necessary for Pakistan to develop nuclear weapons. This biased tone in the movie makes India appear as a good state and Pakistan as a bad state.

Last scene of the movie,

Dialogue/Scenes	Analysis
Scene (narrates): <i>“Due to the sacrifice of the Indian agent the Kahuta facility was exposed to the world, while Zia kept denying this reality.</i> <i>Zia said in the clip attached in this scene, why should Pakistan indulge in the nuclear proliferation, against which Pakistan on</i>	This scene propagating India as a hero state that can achieve its objective of exposing Pakistan. Through the statements, President Zia kept denying the truth, and truth cannot be hidden for so long, which shows Pakistani leadership is hypocritical. Referring to AQ Khan, the perception is made that Pakistan is an irresponsible nuclear-weapon state that is

³² Mission Majnu, 2:23 to 3:02.

³³ Mission Majnu, 14:27 to 14:50.

<i>principle is opposed, because we have no intention of developing any nuclear device sir. The scene further reveals that the truth does not stay hidden for so long, in 2004 AQ Khan accepted that Pakistan has sold the nuclear technology to rogue nations like Iran and North Korea, Pakistan was unable to conduct the nuclear test in the next 20 years and in 1998, India under PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee leadership conducted its second nuclear test and become the biggest nuclear power in the subcontinent, our tricolor does not fly with wind, it flies with the blood of our martyrs.</i>"³⁴	providing nuclear technology to North Korea and Iran, and contributing to nuclear proliferation. The patriotic dialogues at the end of the movie justifies India as a superhero, while Pakistan is portrayed as a dangerous, harmful, and weak state.
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Viewership of Streaming Content and Pakistan's Policy Options

The scenes and dialogues from the recent Netflix movies and series act as a propaganda campaign against Pakistan. These movies/series have a global reach and shape people's perception around the world where this content is being watched. Movie *Dhurandhar* streamed on January 30, after breaking box office record of 1000 crore during its theatrical run.³⁵ *Saare Jahan se Accha* was in the weekly top 10 list in its debut week and ranked within the top 5.³⁶ It earned 2.3 million views in its debut week with 9.5 million viewing hours.³⁷ *Fighter* earned 12.4 million views in the first 10 days. It was the third most popular movie on Netflix in 2024.³⁸ *Kandahar Hijack*, ranked 2

³⁴ *Mission Majnu*, 2:3:42 to 2:05:00.

³⁵ Sahelee Rakshit, "Dhurandhar on Netflix: Did Akshaye Khanna really OVERSHADOW Ranveer Singh? OTT Viewers React, says 'Not even...'," *Bollywood Life*, last modified January 31, 2026, <https://www.bollywoodlife.com/news-gossip/dhurandhar-ott-release-on-netflix-did-akshaye-khanna-overshadow-ranveer-singh-in-aditya-dhar-film-3314434/>.

³⁶ "Netflix's 'Saare Jahan Se Accha' OTT Verdict: Records Second Biggest Debut with 2M+ Views Among Hindi Shows of 2025," *Firstpost*, accessed January 25, 2026, <https://www.firstpost.com/entertainment/netflixs-saare-jahan-se-accha-ott-verdict-records-second-biggest-debut-with-2m-views-among-hindi-shows-of-2025-13926726.html>.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ HT Entertainment Desk, "Hrithik Roshan Reacts As Fighter Breaks Animal's Record, Becomes Biggest Bollywood Film on Netflix," *Hindustan Times*, last modified April 4, 2024, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/entertainment/bollywood/hrithik-roshan-reacts-as-fighter-breaks-animal-netflix-record-biggest-bollywood-blockbuster-101712228092031.html>.

globally and trended in 42 countries.³⁹ *Mission Majnu*, was in the top 10 list in 8 countries.⁴⁰ It earned 8.94 million hours of viewership in the first week.⁴¹

Movie/Series	Year	Trend	Viewership
<i>Dhurandhar</i>	2026	Record of 1000 crore in theater	Streamed on 30 January 2026
<i>Saare Jahan sy Accha</i>	2025	In the top 10 (debut week)	2.3 million views and 9.5 million viewing hours (debut week)
<i>Fighter</i>	2024	Third most popular (2024)	12.4 million (first 10 days)
<i>Kandahar Hijack</i>	2023	Ranked 2 globally, trend in 42 countries	4.1 million (debut week)
<i>Mission Majnu</i>	2023	Top 10 in 8 countries	8.94 million hours of viewership

Figure: Trending Statistics

The content gains a global audience because of platform reach, storyline techniques such as emotions and values attached to the character. Moreover, the use of universal genres such as thriller and action and the hero versus villain form structure, makes it easy for the audience to follow without questioning the underlying political framing. The strategic storyline of these series makes this content gain visibility and a huge viewership. However, the use of political context simultaneously shapes the narrative by framing India as a defensive and rational actor and Pakistan as a threat and source of regional instability. This context-driven framing with the storytelling approach makes the narrative appear credible and neutral. This, consequently, acts as a powerful force shaping the global audience.

³⁹ Bollywood Hungama, "Netflix's IC 814: The Kandahar Highjack Soars to No. 2 Globally, Trends in 42 Countries," *Bollywood Hungama*, last modified September 4, 2024, <https://www.bollywoodhungama.com/news/features/netflixs-ic-814-kandahar-highjack-soars-no-2-globally-trends-42-countries/>.

⁴⁰ Bollywood Hungama, "Sidharth Malhotra and Rashmika Mandanna Starrer Mission Majnu Clocks 8.94 Million Hours of Viewership on Its Opening Weekend on Netflix," *Bollywood Hungama*, last modified January 25, 2023, <https://www.bollywoodhungama.com/news/bollywood/sidharth-malhotra-rashmika-mandanna-starrer-mission-majnu-clocks-8-94-million-hours-viewership-opening-weekend-netflix/>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

On the other hand, Pakistan has a limited presence on Netflix, and is unable to build a counter-narrative on the same platform. The filmmaker Nabeel Qureshi shed light on Pakistan's limited presence on Netflix, which is due to the shifting dynamics within Netflix from a centralized office in Los Angeles to a regional office in India.⁴² This geopolitical climate has created hurdles for the promotion of Pakistani content on Netflix.⁴³

In an interview with Asif Raza Mir, he spoke about why Pakistani content is not recognized internationally, not because of the content, but because of the quality of this content.⁴⁴ He shared his experience, as when he was working with *Geo*, the first time we exported our content to Barbados, Poland, Australia, and even to India, they liked our content, but the issue was quality.⁴⁵ Our content has technical issues, including our editing, audio, and visuals.⁴⁶ Platforms like Netflix have high standards of quality.⁴⁷ According to Tahseen Shaukat, chief executive of BVC media, another reason is that Netflix has a total of 180 million subscribers and only 100,000 from Pakistan, which is why the platform is not acquiring Pakistani original content.⁴⁸ In India, the subscription rate is high, which is why global platforms in Indian original content do not invest in Pakistan because of a smaller number of subscribers.⁴⁹

Pakistan needs to work on its technical capacity to reach the competitive standards of the platforms to gain global visibility. However, the geopolitical factor will remain an obstacle. Netflix's regional positioning reinforces the narrative imbalance, limiting Pakistan to project its perspective globally. Therefore, the possible options for Pakistan, along with the technical capacity (editing, audio, video, pacing), are to strengthen its digital diplomacy by using YouTube and local and regional platforms, including Tamasha, Urduflix, SHOQ, and See Prime, to reach and strategically communicate with the global audience. In the digital age, global narrative is not only shaped by the use of the big platforms, but also by viral and credible independent content. For that,

⁴² Entertainment Desk, "Indo-Pak Tension Why Our Content Isn't on Netflix: Nabeel Qureshi," *The Express Tribune*, last modified December 7, 2023, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2449221/indo-pak-tension-one-of-the-reasons-why-our-content-doesnt-make-it-to-netflix-nabeel-qureshi>.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Images Staff, "Asif Raza Mir Explains Why There Are No Netflix Originals from Pakistan," *Dawn*, last modified July 19, 2021, <https://images.dawn.com/news/1188038/asif-raza-mir-explains-why-there-are-no-netflix-originals-from-pakistan>.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ "With Low Demand, Weak Storytelling, Pakistan Struggles to Break into Netflix," *Arab News*, last modified September 13, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1733891/pakistan>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Pakistan must focus on producing emotion-driven movies focused on everyday life and sacrifice to build connection and challenge the stereotypes rather than defensive messages. Moreover, using universal genres, such as thriller, spy, or crime or investigative series, brings algorithm visibility on YouTube and other OTT platforms. Consistent uploading of mini-series, documentaries, with good visual quality, clear audio, accurate subtitles, combined with thriller, emotional, and investigative storytelling strategies, can engage audiences and communicate Pakistan's perspective.

Conclusion

The expansion of the OTT platform has transformed digital entertainment into political and national narrative across borders. The research analyzed how recently streamed movies/series produced during the Modi era have contributed in Indian narrative building, focusing on dialogues, scenes, and characters. The analysis identified how repeatedly Pakistan was persistently linked with terrorism, threat, and regional instability. The selected movies represent the pattern of consistent narrative building by India against Pakistan. Additionally, it explored Pakistan's limited presence on OTT platform due to several factors including political, technical and economic factors. This research study does not claim that these productions directly shape the perception and determine their opinions. Instead, it is focused on the pattern of continuous narrative building through movies/series contributing to a broader political narrative shaped by India over a period of time. In this way, the research is focused on the pattern of narrative presented in Indian movies and series rather than measuring the influence on the audience. Future studies can build on these findings to conduct quantitative analysis of audience reception of these narratives, and examine how the viewers from all over the world perceive them and shape their narrative. Lastly, the policy makers should focus on strengthening Pakistan's presence on digital media, particularly the OTT platforms that have global reach and influence to counter-balance Pakistan's narrative globally.

Political Construction of Atmanirbharta under Modi:

Challenges and Constraints

M. Kumail Mehdi and Syeda Saba Batool *

Abstract

India is pursuing self-sufficiency in economic and military domains – an essential pre-requisite for leveraging its influence as a global power. The paper examines India's Atmanirbharta (self-sufficiency) policy, launched in 2020, and assesses how it has been framed as a core national value by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. It explores the policy decisions, administrative reforms, and resource mobilization undertaken to ensure Atmanirbharta remains a top priority for the Modi administration. Through the lens of constructivism, this paper describes the ideological narratives and identity-based discourses that shape Atmanirbharta. This study addresses two key questions: How has Indian government constructed Atmanirbharta to advance its global ambitions? Why has Atmanirbharta emerged as a central policy instrument for enhancing India's military and economic capabilities? The study undertakes a qualitative methodological approach to analyze both primary and secondary data. The findings suggest that despite structural and institutional constraints, the governing leadership has actively sought to construct a policy ecosystem that promotes domestic production. In this endeavor, Atmanirbharta functions not only as an economic but also as an ideological framework driving New Delhi's aspiration for a great power status. This study highlights how ideological narratives increasingly shape economic and security policymaking in rising powers.

Keywords: Atmanirbharta, Hindutva, Constructivism, Akhand Bharat, Constructivism, Strategic Autonomy

Introduction

Since independence, India has been pursuing great power ambition. Successive Prime Ministers from Jawaharlal Nehru to Narendra Modi have echoed New Delhi's civilizational exceptionalism and its moral right to transcend the legacy of colonialism.¹ Throughout history, India has largely focused on nonalignment, interest-based partnerships, and moral leadership in the Global South. However, the rise of Narendra Modi in 2014 and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has recalibrated its approach to becoming a global power.

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¹ Priya Chacko, *Indian Foreign Policy: The Politics of Postcolonial Identity from 1947 to 2004* (London: Routledge, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203147733>.

This paper explains how Modi's pursuit of Atmanirbharta has emerged as a strategic pillar, fulfilling the ambition of a great power. Launched in 2020, Atmanirbharta aims to achieve self-sufficiency across all fields, especially by establishing a military-industrial complex for India.² Under this initiative, several policies and structural reforms have been undertaken to create a conducive environment. The study employs a constructivist framework to analyze how, through historical narrative, speeches, and ideology, Narendra Modi constructed the vision of Atmanirbharta. It investigates two key questions: How has Indian government constructed Atmanirbharta to advance its global ambitions? Why has Atmanirbharta emerged as a central policy instrument for enhancing India's military and economic capabilities? It hypothesizes that Modi's ambition of making India a great power, through self-sufficiency, faces structural and social challenges. This paper is divided into five sections; the first section describes the theoretical framework of constructivism, the second section analyses the construction of the ideology of Atmanirbharta, the third section explains Modi's vision of Atmanirbharta, the fourth section explores the Indian policies for achieving self-sufficiency, and the final section examines the challenges to Atmanirbharta. Research methodology utilized for this paper is qualitative, involving a content analysis of Modi's speeches, BJP manifesto, policy documents, books, and journal articles.

Theoretical Framework

The traditional model of knowledge assumes everything as a copy of the external world, where learning is passive. The object creates impressions upon the minds through ideas, and people perceive it without actively participating in the construction of ideas. However, constructivism argues that knowledge is actively constructed in the learner's mind rather than passively received.³ Constructivists posit that ideas are born through cognitive acts, social interactions, and experiences. One of the core components of construction is subject-object interaction, in which the subject creates meaning and imposes it on the object.

Jean Piaget's theory of intellectual development is fundamental to constructivism.⁴ According to the theory, knowledge is not a copy of reality. To know an object is not to simply

² Ravi Kant and Vijay Mittal, "'Atmanirbharta' in Defence Manufacturing: We Are on Fast Track," *SP's Land Forces* accessed February 13, 2026, <https://www.spslandforces.com/story/?id=798&h=Atmanirbharta-in-Defence-Manufacturing-We-are-on-Fast-Track>.

³ George M. Bodner, "(PDF) Constructivism: A Theory of Knowledge," *Journal of Chemical Education* 63, no. 10, (October 1986): 873-77, <https://doi.org/10.1021/ed063p873>.

⁴ "Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development: A Guide," *Structural Learning*, accessed February 13, 2026, <https://www.structural-learning.com/post/jean-piagets-theory-of-cognitive-development-and-active-classrooms>.

observe and replicate it; it is to act on it, modify it, and transform it. Ultimately, to know an object is to understand the process of its transformation and, consequently, how it is constructed.⁵ Through these processes, cognitive structures evolve qualitatively and quantitatively, leading learners to a profound understanding. It highlights that learning is not a linear process but a dynamic one influenced by active engagement, exploration, and reflection.⁶

In the context of IR, constructivism offers a novel analysis that does not reject the role of material capabilities but identifies social variables that influence a state's behavior.⁷ An international reality is born out of the interaction at the international and domestic levels, which shape interests.⁸ To understand behavior, one needs to analyze identity, norms, discourse, and social interaction. Constructivists argue that agency and structure mutually shape each other, enabling change. For them, identities and interests are socially constructed and influence state actions. Social norms also play a key role in shaping appropriate behavior. Within constructivism, conventional theorists focus on causality and meanings to explain why certain actors behave or why a phenomenon occurs by identifying cause-and-effect relationships.⁹

The basis of constructivism is anti-foundationalism and anti-positivism. While foundationalism and positivism believe in objective reality and fixed human nature, constructivism emphasizes the role of values, norms, and identity.¹⁰ Through social interaction and language, meaning is assigned, and ideas are constructed. These meanings and ideas drive human action and behavior, which makes reality subjective. Unlike foundationalism and positivism, constructivism acknowledges the value of shared experiences and identities.¹¹ Therefore, constructivism prioritizes the subjective nature of reality, where knowledge and ideas are actively constructed through human interaction.

⁵ Jerome Proulx, "Constructivism: A Re-Equilibration and Clarification of the Concepts, and Some Potential Implications for Teaching and Pedagogy," *Radical Pedagogy* 8, no. 1 (2006), accessed February 13, 2026, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337544288_Constructivism_A_re-equilibration_and_clarification_of_the_concepts_and_some_potential_implications_for_teaching_and_pedagogy.

⁶ Andrew Allen, "An Introduction to Constructivism: Its Theoretical Roots and Impact on Contemporary Education," *Journal of Learning Design and Leadership* 1, no.1 (2022): 1-11.

⁷ Mark Olssen, "The Epistemology of Constructivism," *Access: Contemporary Issues in Education* 13, no. 2 (1995):82-94.

⁸ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 35.

⁹ Olssen, "The Epistemology of Constructivism," 85.

¹⁰ Allen, "An Introduction to Constructivism," 5.

¹¹ Allen, "An Introduction to Constructivism," 5.

Constructivist scholar, Nicolas Onuf argues that language (promises, threat perception, declarations, etc.) creates rules.¹² States also participate in an international reality, where they accumulate power by spreading their version of rules to others. For instance, when a state declares that it would protect another, it is not merely a declaration, but an act that constructs a political reality. Another scholar, Alexander Wendt, describes the effect of varying social variables on interstate relations. Wendt illustrated this with the example that 500 British nuclear weapons pose less threat to the US than five North Korean ones, not due to material power but because of the meaning assigned to these relationships.¹³

In the context of this paper, theoretical lens of constructivism helps explain the formation of the concept of Atmanirbharta by India under the Modi regime. The roots of this reality lie in Hindutva's belief that they need to restore the glory of Hindus. The goal is to increase power and use this concept as a potent tool to mobilize and reinvent the Indian defense industry. A developed military-industrial complex would increase Indian weapons sales as part of a broader foreign policy framework, to gain leverage and prestige, with states interested in purchasing arms from it. Organizational changes, narrative construction, and resource allocation by the BJP government explain social interaction, identity, and norms. In the next section, the construction of Atmanirbharta is explained in detail.

The Construction of Atmanirbharta

According to Modi, he and his administration are guiding India out of twelve centuries of slavery.¹⁴ These were characterized by the humiliation at the hands of both Muslim rule and colonial rule in the subcontinent. Rather, his administration believes in bringing a new period of Amrit kaal,¹⁵ a Vedic idea about the gates of pleasure opening to the world. It is important to understand Modi's vision and motives behind Atmanirbharta. Modi belongs to a nationalist party i.e., BJP having roots in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The RSS originated as a shadowy cabal for the revival of Hindu pride after a long history of Muslim and colonial rule in India. Its early leaders openly drew inspiration from the nationalist and fascist parties

¹² Nicholas Greenwood Onuf, *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations*, (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), <http://archive.org/details/worldofourmaking00onuf>.

¹³ Sarina Theys, "Introducing Constructivism in International Relations Theory," *E-International Relations*, February 23, 2018, <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/02/23/introducing-constructivism-in-international-relations-theory/>.

¹⁴ "1,200 Years of Servitude: PM Modi Offers Food for Thought," *Firstpost*, June 13, 2014, <https://www.firstpost.com/politics/1200-years-of-servitude-pm-modi-offers-food-for-thought-1567805.html>.

¹⁵ India Today Web Desk, "What Is Amrit Kaal That Nirmala Sitharaman Repeatedly Mentioned in Budget Speech?" *India Today*, February 1, 2023, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/amrit-kaal-nirmala-sitharaman-budget-2023-narendra-modi-2329026-2023-02-01>.

of Europe in the 1930s and 1940s.¹⁶ The religio-political values of RSS focus on tangible aspects and power dynamics, irrespective of moral rhetoric. Moreover, BJP under the ideological framework of RSS believes in a collectivist-majoritarian moral base, in which all are not included.

Modi constructed the vision of Atmanirbharta by amalgamating the historical narrative, evolving national identity, and the collective aspirations of its people. While celebrating Diwali with Indian troops, Modi said “when the jawans of India fight with the weapons made in the country, their faith will be at its peak, and their attacks will come with a surprise element for the enemy while crushing the enemy’s morale.”¹⁷ The example provides evidence on how Modi is linking indigenous arms production with national pride and trust for the soldiers, underscoring unity and psychological advantage over the enemy.

Constructivists argue that material capabilities and factors such as identity, culture, and historical memory shape a state’s behavior. Modi’s emphasis on indigenous arms manufacturing reflects this constructivist approach, as it seeks to reconstruct India’s self-image as a powerful and self-sufficient nation. Inspiration was drawn from figures such as Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, whose naval strategies symbolized maritime prowess of Hindus during the reign of Maratha dynasty.¹⁸ Further, for honoring former Hindu dynasties, the names of different Indian weapon systems have also been named after them, for instance, the Nilgiri frigate. Modi intertwines a historical consciousness with contemporary strategic imperatives. For example, he linked INS Nilgiri, honoring the Chola dynasty, and INS Surat, reasserting Gujarat’s historical trade links.¹⁹ The Doctrine of Security and Growth for All (SAGAR) further reinforces this reimagining of India’s maritime and defense identity in the region, positioning India as a responsible stakeholder in Asia-Pacific security.²⁰ The prioritization of domestic defense production, 39 out of 40 naval vessels inducted into the Indian Navy are now

¹⁶ Mujib Mashal and Hari Kumar, “From the Shadows to Power: How the Hindu Right Reshaped India,” *The New York Times*, December 26, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/26/world/asia/india-hindu-right-rss-modi.html>.

¹⁷ I. N. Bureau, “Celebrating Diwali with Troops in Kargil, PM Modi Cites Military Doctrines for a New India,” *Indian narrative*, October 25, 2022, <https://www.indianarrative.com/india-news/celebrating-diwali-with-troops-in-kargil-pm-modi-cites-military-doctrines-for-a-new-india-64244.html>.

¹⁸ Chanakya Policy & Research Foundation, “The Lion of the Seas: Shivaji’s Enduring Naval Vision – Chanakya Policy & Research Foundation,” accessed February 13, 2026, <https://chanakypolicyresearch.com/the-lion-of-the-seas-shivajis-enduring-naval-vision/>.

¹⁹ The Samikhsya, “Three Naval Warships: PM Modi Dedicates to the Nation,” *The Samikhsya*, January 15, 2025, <https://thesamikhsya.com/business/three-naval-warships-pm-modi-dedicates-to-the-nation>.

²⁰ Staff Writer, “DRDO: Pioneering India’s Journey to Self-Reliance & Naval Supremacy On The Global Stage,” *Indian Aerospace and Defence Bulletin*, November 2, 2024, <https://www.iadb.in/2024/11/02/drdo-pioneering-indias-journey-to-self-reliance-naval-supremacy-on-the-global-stage/>.

built in India, demonstrates how national security is being framed not merely in terms of military strength but as a broader narrative of sovereignty and self-sufficiency.²¹ The symbolic shift in the Indian Navy's insignia to reflect Shivaji's legacy is a powerful example of constructivist logic, linking material changes (shipbuilding, military production) with ideational constructs (national pride, historical continuity).

Narendra Modi's Atmanirbharta reflects a constructivist approach to economic sovereignty, in which shared beliefs and national identity shape policy decisions. Rather than viewing economic autonomy in terms of material constraints, Modi's emphasis on reducing import dependence is rooted in the social construction of self-reliance as a core national value.²² Speaking at the Utkarsh Odisha (Make in Odisha Conclave 2025), he framed economic strength not merely as an outcome of industrial policy but as an expression of India's aspirational identity in the global order.²³ These policies are also for the consumption of domestic audience and strengthening the voter-base for the party. In a survey conducted by the Center for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), 63% of respondents believe that India's global status has risen since Modi took office in 2014.²⁴ The same poll found that most Indians believed that the country's global influence has grown. Narendra Modi's ambition to construct a global identity as an influential power has appeal among the public.

Constructivist thought suggests that state behavior is influenced by ideational factors, such as historical narratives and collective perceptions, rather than just economic rationality. Modi's push for "Make in India (2014)" and "Vocal for Local (2020)"²⁵ reinforces a sense of national purpose, positioning domestic manufacturing as integral to India's self-image as a rising power. In his manifesto, he promised to achieve strength by combining product design

²¹ Abdul Moiz Khan and Usman Haider, "Indian Naval Modernization: From Buyers to Builders Navy and Implications for Indian Ocean Region Security," *Strategic Perspectives* 3, no. 1 (2025), <https://strategicperspectives.cissajk.org.pk/indian-naval-modernization-from-buyers-to-builders-navy-and-implications-for-indian-ocean-region-security/>.

²² "Reduce Import Dependence, up Manufacturing: Prime Minister Modi," *The Economic Times*, March 3, 2022, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/make-in-india-is-need-of-the-hour-prime-minister-modi/articleshow/89963216.cms>.

²³ Express News Service, "Can't Accept Export of Raw Materials; Value Addition Must Happen in India: PM Modi at Odisha Conclave," *The New Indian Express*, January 28, 2025, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2025/Jan/28/cant-accept-export-of-raw-materials-value-addition-must-happen-in-india-pm-modi-at-odisha-conclave>.

²⁴ "Public Opinion - #9YearsOfPMModi: NDTV-CSDS Survey," *NDTV*, accessed February 13, 2026, <https://www.ndtv.com/9YearsOfPMModi>.

²⁵ "Vocal for Local' Making India Emerge as Factory of World: PM Modi," *Business Standard*, March 1, 2025, https://www.business-standard.com/india-news/vocal-for-local-making-india-emerge-as-factory-of-world-pm-modi-125030100233_1.html.

and manufacturing in India.²⁶ By rejecting the traditional model of exporting raw materials and re-importing finished goods, he challenges the entrenched global economic hierarchies that have historically positioned India as a supplier rather than a producer of high-value goods.²⁷ Modi is trying to cultivate a new industrial culture through Production-Linked Incentives (PLI) and investment in strategic sectors such as defense, energy, and technology. This shift is not just about economic gain but also about redefining India's role in global supply chains through an identity-driven approach to policymaking.²⁸ Modi's narrative of self-reliance fosters a collective national consciousness that sees domestic production as a patriotic and strategic imperative. By mobilizing state-industry partnerships and advocating research-driven innovation, he envisions India as an architect of global economic norms rather than a passive participant.

Modi's Vision of Atmanirbharta

Kautliya's "Arthashastra" provides an enduring strategic foundation for India's contemporary efforts to emerge as an influential power. The Arthashastra is one of the most significant texts in Indian history and tradition. The concept of Atmanirbharta is reflected in the Arthashastra, where economic power is considered the foundation of state power.²⁹ Kautilya argued that a strong economy and indigenous production were essential for sustaining military strength and political independence. He explicitly warns against dependence on external powers.³⁰

Moreover, Atmanirbharta also finds its roots in Mahatma Gandhi's Swadeshi movement (1920s), which emphasized self-reliance as a moral, political, and economic principle.³¹ After its independence in 1947, India's commitment to Atmanirbharta weakened, particularly in sectors like defense. Driven by immediate security threats, limited industrial capability, and Cold War alignment, New Delhi relied on foreign suppliers for arms, aircraft, and military technology. The USSR became the top supplier of weapons to India, accounting

²⁶ Bharatiya Janata Party, *Modi-Ki-Guarantee: Sankalp Patra 2024*, official party manifesto (New Delhi: Bharatiya Janata Party, 2024), accessed February 13, 2026, https://www.bjp.org/files/inline-documents/Modi-Ki-Guarantee-Sankalp-Patra-English_0.pdf.

²⁷ Express News Service, "Can't Accept Export of Raw Materials; Value Addition Must Happen in India: PM Modi at Odisha Conclave," *The New Indian Express*, January 28, 2025, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2025/Jan/28/cant-accept-export-of-raw-materials-value-addition-must-happen-in-india-pm-modi-at-odisha-conclave>.

²⁸ *Economic Times*, "Reduce Import Dependence, up Manufacturing."

²⁹ Indranil Roy and Saurabh Pran Sharma, "From Arthshastra to Atmanirbhar and Viksit Bharat: A Continuum of Indian Economic Thought Towards Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals," *International Journal of Advance and Innovative Research* 12, no. 2 (2025): 484-89.

³⁰ Roy and Sharma, "From Arthshastra to Atmanirbhar and Viksit Bharat," 486.

³¹ Ramesh Kumar, "The Idea of Atmanirbhar Bharat: Mahatma to Modi," *Kalyan Bharati* 24, (2021).

for 70% of New Delhi's aircraft, tanks, and submarines.³² This dependency made New Delhi the second-largest importer of arms, created technological stagnation, foreign dependence, and fiscal burdens.³³ The contrast between Gandhian self-reliance and import dependency highlights a long-standing tension between economic autonomy and pragmatic security needs in New Delhi's strategic trajectory.

However, in recent years, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has redefined and reinvigorated the concept through the announcement of Atmanirbharta on May 12, 2020,³⁴ the project aims to make India a self-sufficient, self-confident, and globally competitive economy by promoting domestic industries, reducing reliance on imports, and fostering innovation. From agriculture, chemicals, machinery, electronics, medical devices, etc., New Delhi aims to build everything indigenously.

Modi views past policies as lacking assertiveness in India's interests and argues that it must approach the future with a mindset of fierce autonomy.³⁵ Through self-reliance, New Delhi not only wishes to attain its perceived rightful place but also to be an influential power.³⁶ While speaking at an event in 2025, PM Modi said, "The only enemy of India is dependence on other countries; we need to defeat this dependence on others. We must understand that the more dependent we are on others, the higher the failure rate is. Atmanirbharta is the only solution to all our problems."³⁷

Indian Policies for Atmanirbharta

Sectors such as agriculture, mining, pharmaceuticals, and defense are included in the priority category, where public funding and private partnerships will be strengthened. A hefty dollar package was allocated to stimulate domestic production of goods. PM Modi conducts regular

³² Andrzej Korbonski and Francis Fukuyama, *The Soviet Union and the Third World: The Last Three Decades*, with Internet Archive (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), <http://archive.org/details/sovietunionthird0000korb>.

³³ "Tensions with China, Pak Driving India's Arms Imports, Shift towards Western Suppliers: SIPRI - The Tribune," accessed February 13, 2026, <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/india/tensions-with-china-pak-driving-indias-arms-imports-shift-towards-western-suppliers-sipri/>.

³⁴ Kumar, "The Idea of Atmanirbhar Bharat."

³⁵ Ian Hall, "Interpretivism and the Analysis of India's Foreign Policy: Interpreting the Jaishankar Doctrine," *Studies in Indian Politics* 13, no. 1, (2025): 61-73, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/385864854_Interpretivism_and_the_Analysis_of_India%27s_Foreign_Policy_Interpreting_the_Jaishankar_Doctrine.

³⁶ John D. Ciorciari, "What Kind of Great Power Will India Be?," *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2009), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2269299>.

³⁷ "India's Biggest Enemy Is Its Dependence on Other Nations; Self-Reliance Only Remedy: PM Modi," *Daily Excelsior*, September 20, 2025, <https://www.dailyexcelsior.com/dependence-on-other-nations-indias-only-enemy-atmanirbharta-only-medicine-pm-modi/>.

ministerial meetings to assess progress, address challenges, and drive improvements, ensuring that self-reliance remains a national priority.

▪ **Industrial Indigenization**

According to Robert Gilpin, economic development makes a state capable of projecting power and influencing international relations.³⁸ In this regard, Narendra Modi's foreign policy goals prioritize economic dividends to build India's capacity and capability. When the BJP assumed power in 2014, New Delhi was the world's tenth largest economy; today, it ranks 4th.³⁹ The 'Make in India (2014)' initiative is transforming it into the world's second-largest mobile phone assembler, strengthening the manufacturing sector. Besides, initiatives such as Digital India, Smart Cities, Clean India, and Ease of Doing Business help realize India's potential for economic power.⁴⁰

The initiative enhances research and development (R&D) and encourages self-sufficiency.⁴¹ A Research, Development, and Innovation Scheme (RDI) was launched to encourage the private sector to scale up research, development, and innovation in other sectors relevant for economic security, strategic purpose, and self-reliance.⁴² The Indian government paved the way for 74% foreign direct investment (FDI) in defense manufacturing, leading to increased domestic production and reduced dependence on imports.⁴³ This reform, along with improvements in licensing, simplifications of the export process, and enhancements in regulations, has been significant in the defense sector. While addressing the inauguration of ammunition facilities in 2026, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said that Defense exports were just Rs 1,000 crore 10 years ago but have now increased to Rs 25,000 crore; the government's target is Rs 50,000 crore by 2029-30.⁴⁴ Moreover, India has enacted the Sustainable Harnessing

³⁸ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), <https://www.rochelleterman.com/ir/sites/default/files/Gilpin1981.pdf>.

³⁹ "India's Economic Growth Picks up on Rising Government, Consumer Spending | Reuters," accessed February 13, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/indias-economic-growth-picks-up-rising-government-consumer-spending-2025-02-28/>.

⁴⁰ "Economic Implication of PM Modi's Foreign Policy.Pdf," n.d., accessed February 13, 2026, <https://library.bjp.org/jspui/bitstream/123456789/2713/1/Economic%20Implication%20of%20PM%20Modi%207s%20Foreign%20Policy.pdf>.

⁴¹ Kumar, *The Idea of Atmanirbhar Bharat: Mahatma to Modi*.

⁴² VisionIAS, "Research Development and Innovation (RDI) Scheme," Current Affairs | Vision IAS, August 19, 2025, <https://visionias.in/current-affairs/monthly-magazine/2025-08-19/economy/research-development-and-innovation-rdi-scheme>.

⁴³ "(PDF) Vision of 'Atma Nirbhar Bharat' Role and Significance of MSME," *ResearchGate*, ahead of print, October 22, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.33516/maj.v55i12.44-47p>.

⁴⁴ "Wars Now Complex Due to New Dimensions, Says Rajnath Singh; Hails Private Sector Defence Production Role," *The Economic Times*, January 18, 2026, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/wars-now>

and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India Act 2025 (SHANTI Act), allowing private companies and foreign investors to enter the nuclear energy industry for the first time in more than sixty years. The new law limits overseas ownership in civilian nuclear projects to 49% and is designed to draw nearly \$214 billion in investment as the country works toward expanding nuclear power capacity to 100 GW by 2047.

▪ *Indigenizing the Defense Industry*

In a significant move towards indigenous defense production, the Indian government has banned the import of 101 defense items.⁴⁵ The motive is to produce them indigenously under the Atmanirbharta. Banned items include major armaments such as artillery guns, assault rifles, corvettes, sonar systems, transport aircraft, ammunition, radars, conventional diesel-electric submarines, communication satellites, and shipborne cruise missiles.⁴⁶ The belief is that these initiatives enhance national security while creating employment opportunities in the defense manufacturing sector.

India's foreign policy has played a crucial role in achieving military modernization through proactive engagement in defense diplomacy and strategic partnerships.⁴⁷ Defense cooperation, a vital component of this diplomacy, involves joint military efforts between nations to achieve shared security objectives. Indian foreign policy, as outlined by former foreign secretary Shivshankar Menon, prioritizes a peaceful periphery, strong ties with major powers, and addressing future challenges.⁴⁸

Between 2019 and 2024, India's defense exports to the US exceeded USD \$2.8 billion, accounting for half of its overall defense exports during that period but only a small share of US arms imports.⁴⁹ Another significant development in bilateral defense ties is the strategic semiconductor partnership between the US and India. To facilitate technology transfers, the US Space Force is partnering with the Indian startup 3rdiTech to manufacture semiconductors for national security applications in India. The government's decision to allocate a fund of Rs

complex-due-to-new-dimensions-says-rajnath-singh-hails-private-sector-defence-production-role/articleshow/126644241.cms.

⁴⁵ "Govt Bans Import of 101 Defence Equipment Items," *The Indian Express*, August 10, 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/govt-bans-import-of-101-defence-equipment-items-6548085/>.

⁴⁶ Vivek Raghuvanshi, "India Announces Ban on 101 Imported Arms. Who Benefits, and Who Loses Out?," *Defense News*, August 13, 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/asia-pacific/2020/08/13/india-announces-ban-on-101-imported-arms-who-benefits-and-who-loses-out/>.

⁴⁷ Arvind Dutta, *Role of India's Defence Cooperation Initiatives in Meeting the Foreign Policy Goals*, n.d.

⁴⁸ Dutta, *Role of India's Defence Cooperation Initiatives in Meeting the Foreign Policy Goals*.

⁴⁹ Anondeeta Chakraborty, "India's Rise in Global Defense Exports and the Way Forward," *South Asian Voices*, September 15, 2025, <https://southasianvoices.org/def-f-in-n-india-defense-exports-09-15-2025/>.

34,000 crores for the National Critical Minerals Mission, including global exploration and acquisition of 24 critical commodities by 2030-31, demonstrates its intent to capitalize on the opportunities. This move positions New Delhi alongside global powers competing for secure access to vital resources essential for technology, renewable energy, and industrial growth.⁵⁰

The initiative also aims to enhance India's competitiveness in global supply chains. The government has emphasized that self-reliance is rooted in self-confidence, positioning New Delhi for tough competition in the global economy. The focus on innovation, digital transformation, and skill development is critical to ensuring that India remains competitive with leading economies.⁵¹ Despite the focus on self-reliance, New Delhi has not abandoned industrialization or globalization. Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal has clarified that India remains committed to engaging with trusted global partners.⁵² The 'Make in India (2014)' and 'Make for the World (2020)' strategies emphasize that India will continue to be an integral player in global trade and supply chains.

Institutionalizing Atmanirbharta in Defense

Modi's self-reliance has also facilitated structural and organizational changes within India's defense framework.⁵³ For example, the appointment of the Chief of Defense Staff (CDS) in 2019 and the establishment of the Department of Military Affairs marked a pivotal step in integrating the three branches of the armed forces, streamlining procurement, and accelerating indigenization efforts.⁵⁴ The Five-Year Defense Capital Acquisition Plan (DCAP) and the Two-Year roll-on Annual Acquisition Plans under the Integrated Capability Development Plan (ICDP) have further reinforced India's commitment to reducing import dependency and enhancing self-sufficiency in defense production.⁵⁵ To support defense startups and invest in

⁵⁰ Observer Research Foundation, "India's Critical Minerals Mission: From Ambition to Action," Orfonline.Org, accessed February 6, 2026, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/india-s-critical-minerals-mission-from-ambition-to-action>.

⁵¹ "Digital Transformation in India: A New Era of Innovation," Startup House, June 16, 2024, <https://startup-house.com/blog/digital-transformation-india>.

⁵² "Supply Chain: India Today Is Land of Opportunity, Trusted Partner in Global Supply Chains: Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal - The Economic Times," accessed February 13, 2026, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/india-today-is-land-of-opportunity-trusted-partner-in-global-supply-chains-commerce-minister-piyush-goyal/articleshow/96848087.cms?from=mdr>.

⁵³ Staff Writer, "India's Defence Sector: Reforms That Perform," *Indian Aerospace and Defence Bulletin - News for Aerospace and Defence in India*, May 1, 2023, <https://www.iadb.in/2023/05/01/indias-defence-sector-reforms-that-perform/>.

⁵⁴ "Doc202110501.Pdf," n.d., accessed February 13, 2026, <https://static.pib.gov.in/WriteReadData/specificdocs/documents/2021/oct/doc202110501.pdf>.

⁵⁵ "Enhancement of Capacity of Defense Forces," accessed February 13, 2026, <https://pib.gov.in/pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1795536>.

domestic research and development (R&D), the Ministry of Defense has allocated over USD \$56 million over five years under the Innovations for Defense Excellence (iDEX) program.⁵⁶

The implementation of the Theatre Command System is another major reform under this vision, fostering seamless coordination between the Navy, Army, and Air Force. This system not only optimizes wartime preparedness but also streamlines resource procurement and allocation. Furthermore, as the role of R&D leads to innovation,⁵⁷ the Defense Research and Development Organization (DRDO) has launched the Technological Development Fund 2014 (TDF), which provides funding for research. Consequently, new weapon systems, sensors, communications, AI, Robotics, etc., have been identified by the R&D to conduct research and drive innovation.⁵⁸

Atmanirbharta in the defense sector has become a catalyst for national pride and strategic will. According to the constructivist lens, New Delhi's pursuit of self-reliance in the defense industry is not merely an economic or strategic necessity but a transformation of national consciousness. For example, the establishment of Defence Industrial Corridors in Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu by 2024-2025⁵⁹ exemplifies this ideological shift. These corridors are a tangible manifestation of Modi's Atmanirbharta doctrine, manufacturing arms for the Indian military. As highlighted in his address, the corridor aims to restore Bundelkhand's legacy of valor while enhancing India's strategic strength.⁶⁰ The Bundelkhand had been a land of resistance and defiance against the Mughals and the British colonials. With investments surpassing Rs. 3700 crores (446 million USD) at its inception and a total of 68 MoUs signed, the project has gained significant momentum.⁶¹ The presence of major defense manufacturers such as Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL), Bharat Electronics Limited, Bharat Dynamics Limited, and Brahmos Aerospace underlines the corridor's potential to reduce reliance on imports while fostering domestic innovation.⁶² The six nodes of the corridor – Agra, Aligarh, Chitrakoot, Jhansi, Kanpur, and Lucknow – facilitate seamless collaboration

⁵⁶ Chakraborty, "India's Rise in Global Defense Exports and the Way Forward."

⁵⁷ Edwin Mansfield, "R&D and Innovation: Some Empirical Findings," in *R&D, Patents, and Productivity* (University of Chicago Press, 1984), <https://www.nber.org/books-and-chapters/rd-patents-and-productivity/rd-and-innovation-some-empirical-findings>.

⁵⁸ Writer, "India's Defence Sector."

⁵⁹ Writer, "India's Defence Sector."

⁶⁰ Writer, "India's Defence Sector."

⁶¹ "Doc2021121410.Pdf," n.d., accessed February 13, 2026, <https://static.pib.gov.in/WriteReadData/specificdocs/documents/2021/dec/doc2021121410.pdf>.

⁶² "Doc2021121410.Pdf."

between start-ups and large-scale industries.⁶³ A crucial aspect of this change is the integration of advanced technology into indigenous defense manufacturing.

Role of the Private Sector

A key measure within the Indian government's self-reliance is the enhanced role of the private sector. Today, more than 300 private companies have been registered in India, of which 110 have begun producing defense items for the Indian military.⁶⁴ The government has announced a hefty Rs 100,000 crore for private-sector research and innovation in defense, indicating a strong commitment to fostering a robust defense industrial complex.⁶⁵ The measure has been taken to enhance the Indian defense sector's capacity to produce cutting-edge weapon systems at reasonable prices, thereby gaining the attention of countries in the global South that cannot afford expensive Western armaments. The idea is to sell high-end systems at lower prices to attract their attention, which is only possible by attracting a fair amount of private sector investment.

Private companies, such as TATA and Larsen & Toubro (L&T), are involved in manufacturing multiple weapon systems.⁶⁶ The TATA group is playing a significant role in manufacturing helicopters, transport aircraft, and fighters. Its facility in Vadodara is indigenously making C-295.⁶⁷ Additionally, TATA is involved in manufacturing semiconductors. L&T will also soon commence designing and production of advanced Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs).⁶⁸ Besides, L&T is also producing indigenous equipment like self-propelled guns (K9-Vajra), missile launchers, and submarine hulls, significantly reducing reliance on imports. Zen technologies are also driving the production of UAV

⁶³ "Defence-Corridor-by-Lt-Gen-Dushyant-Singh-Retd-on-23-Jul-2020.Pdf," n.d., accessed February 13, 2026, <https://cenjows.in/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Defence-Corridor-by-Lt-Gen-Dushyant-Singh-Retd-on-23-Jul-2020.pdf>.

⁶⁴ "333 Private Companies into Defence Production in India: Centre," Ahmedabad Mirror, accessed February 13, 2026, <https://www.ahmedabadmirror.com/333-private-companies-into-defence-production-in-india-centre/81803946.html>.

⁶⁵ "Budget 2024: Budget 2024: Sitharaman Announces Rs 1 Lakh Crore Corpus for R&D Push in the Country - The Economic Times," accessed February 13, 2026, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/tech/technology/budget-2024-rs-1-lakh-crore-corpus-for-rd-push-in-the-country/articleshow/107318016.cms?from=mdr>.

⁶⁶ Manjeet Negi, "Tata Advanced Systems, Larsen and Toubro Deliver 100th Missile Launcher for IAF's Akash Project," India Today, June 22, 2022, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/iaf-akash-100th-missile-launcher-tata-system-larsen-toubro-1965221-2022-06-21>.

⁶⁷ "Aerospace and Defence | Tata Group," accessed February 13, 2026, <https://www.tata.com/business/aerospace-defence>.

⁶⁸ "L&T Signs up with Start-up to Develop Submarine Launched UAVs," accessed February 13, 2026, <https://imrmedia.in/lt-signs-up-with-start-up-to-develop-submarine-launched-uavs-2/>.

propulsion, autonomous robotics, and aerospace components.⁶⁹ Besides, fighter jet, submarine, helicopter, and armored vehicle manufacturing have been promoted.⁷⁰

Likewise, Adani Enterprises is advancing in manufacturing autonomous systems and aerial technologies for defense purposes.⁷¹ It is contributing to AI-enabled systems, sensors, and electronic warfare. For example, India's burgeoning drone industry has seen substantial growth under the "Make in India (2014)" Initiative. The Bharat Drone Shakti event in 2023, showcasing over 75 drone start-ups, signified India's ambition to become a global drone hub by 2030.⁷² Adani Defence and Aerospace's development of the Drishti 10 UAV, with 70% indigenous components, highlights India's progress in reducing foreign dependency.⁷³

Recently, India signed a deal with the US to start the joint manufacturing of MQ-9B drones in India.⁷⁴ Likewise, an Indian private company, Alpha Tocol, produced the first rear fuselage for the Light Combat Aircraft, which was later handed over to Hindustan Aeronautics Limited.⁷⁵ Speaking at the event, Defense Minister Rajnath Singh emphasized the collaboration between private and public enterprises to steer the country's drive for indigenous arms production.⁷⁶

Arms Export and Defense Diplomacy

Defense diplomacy establishes military-related diplomatic activities (joint exercises, military visits, peacekeeping, and defense cooperation agreements) that build trust and cooperation without coercion.⁷⁷ The Role of Defense Diplomacy in the Evolving International Stature of India argues that post-Cold War Indian foreign policy pivoted from non-alignment toward diversified defense engagement with multiple partners beyond traditional ties, reflecting

⁶⁹ APDR, "India's Zen Technologies Expands Defence Portfolio," *APDR*, February 22, 2025, <https://asiapacificdefencereporter.com/indias-zen-technologies-expands-defence-portfolio/>.

⁷⁰ "18.02.008. 20240904.Pdf," accessed February 13, 2026, <https://ijsi.in/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/18.02.008.20240904.pdf>.

⁷¹ NDTV Profit Desk, "Adani Defence Systems to Obtain 85% Stake in Air Works India for Rs 400 Crore," NDTV Profit, December 23, 2024, <https://www.ndtvprofit.com/business/adani-defence-systems-to-obtain-85-stake-in-air-works-india-for-rs-400-crore>.

⁷² *India's Emerging Drone Industry A Point of View*, 2022.

⁷³ *India's Emerging Drone Industry A Point of View*, 2022.

⁷⁴ "MQ-9B Deal: A Capacity Upgrade for India-US Relations," Orfonline.Org, accessed February 13, 2026, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/mq-9b-deal-a-capacity-upgrade-for-india-us-relations>.

⁷⁵ Staff Writer, "India Soars Towards Aatmanirbharta: First Rear Fuselage for LCA Mk1A Handed Over To HAL By Indian Private Industry," *Indian Aerospace and Defence Bulletin - News for Aerospace and Defence in India* (blog), March 10, 2025, <https://www.iadb.in/2025/03/10/india-soars-towards-aatmanirbharta-first-rear-fuselage-for-lca-mk1a-handed-over-to-hal-by-indian-private-industry/>.

⁷⁶ Writer, "India Soars Towards Aatmanirbharta."

⁷⁷ Dinesh Kumar Pandey, "The Role of Defence Diplomacy in the Evolving International Stature of India," *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* 18, no. 3/4 (2023): 229–44.

broad security interests and status aspirations.⁷⁸ It should be noted that the development of a sound military industrial complex requires significant material resources and policy alignment.

From 2014 to 2024, India's defense investment ballooned from 4312 crores Indian rupees to 88,319 crores.⁷⁹ According to the defense minister, Rajnath Singh, India is moving fast towards arms exports. Besides, India's military-industrial complex is gaining global traction, with the Kalashnikov AK203 manufacturing facility in Uttar Pradesh now operational and attracting interest from African nations. Likewise, TATA Advanced Systems secured a contract to manufacture 150 wheeled armored Platform combat vehicles for the Moroccan military, marking the largest deal for Indian-made armored vehicles globally.⁸⁰

India's proactive defense exports extend beyond Africa. On April 19, 2024, India delivered the first batch of Brahmos missiles to the Philippines, followed by the delivery of the second batch on April 21, 2025, under a \$375 million deal. New Delhi is in negotiations with other Southeast Asian nations (Indonesia, Vietnam, and Malaysia) as part of its extending strategic influence and Act East policy to counter China.⁸¹ Similarly, Armenia has emerged as a key partner, with India set to deliver its indigenously developed Akash-1S Air Defense system and Pinaka multi-barrel rocket systems, artillery howitzers, anti-tank rockets, and Anti-drone systems.⁸² This deepening military cooperation signifies Armenia's strategic distance from Russian dependency while enabling India to expand its geopolitical footprint in the South Caucasus.

India is actively crafting a new global narrative through arms diplomacy, moving beyond traditional realist power equations to a constructivist approach that emphasizes identity, historical continuity, and strategic autonomy. PM Modi's *Atmanirbharta*, driven by an active foreign policy, seeks to position India as a civilizational powerhouse and a nation reclaiming its unique stature on the world stage. By leveraging its indigenous defense industry, diplomatic

⁷⁸ Pandey, "The Role of Defence Diplomacy in the Evolving International Stature of India."

⁷⁹ "Why the World Wants Indian Weapons | India Today Global Exclusive," India Today, August 27, 2024, <https://www.indiatoday.in/global/story/why-the-world-wants-indian-weapons-india-today-global-exclusive-2588816-2024-08-27>.

⁸⁰ GatewayHouse, "Atmanirbhar in Africa," Africa, *Gateway House*, October 22, 2024, <https://www.gatewayhouse.in/atmanirbhar-in-africa/>.

⁸¹ "India's Increased Defence and Security Engagement with Southeast Asia," *IISS*, accessed February 13, 2026, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2024/04/indias-increased-defence-and-security-engagement-with-southeast-asia/>.

⁸² "An Analytical Review of India's Defence Exports," November 12, 2024, <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2024/november/12/An-Analytical-Review-of-India-s-Defence-Exports>.

engagements, and strategic partnerships, India is reinforcing its role as a pivotal global actor, shaping alliances that reflect its long-term aspirations for leadership in a multipolar world.

Challenges to Atmanirbharta

Under Atmanirbharta, the Modi government is enhancing public-private partnerships, bringing in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), and funding R&D to boost arms production. However, key challenges impede Modi's vision of making India a global arms supplier.

1. Structural and Historical Constraints

The colonial era under British rule systematically dismantled the subcontinent's indigenous arms production and industrial environment, notably seen in the suppression of advanced technologies like Tipu Sultan's iron-cased rockets.⁸³ This disruption left a lasting vacuum in domestic manufacturing capabilities and technological self-reliance that persisted into the post-independence era. Following independence, India's defense procurement infrastructure came to be dominated by state-run enterprises such as Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL), the Ordnance Factory Board, and the DRDO. While these institutions have laid foundational work, inefficiencies, bureaucratic delays, and underfunding have hindered productive capacity. For instance, in 2024, there were projects that DRDO declared successful even though they did not achieve key objectives. 'In 119 of 178 projects,' said the CAG report, the original time schedules could not be adhered to. In 49 cases, the additional time was in fact more than 100 percent of the original timeframe.'⁸⁴ Despite ten years in power of the Modi government, structural and historical lacuna remain that cannot be resolved in the short time.

2. R&D and Innovation Gaps

In the post-World War II era, massive public investment, particularly in the US, enabled breakthroughs in military technology. These investments not only addressed market failures by funding high-risk, high-cost innovations that private firms avoided but also cultivated academic excellence, which laid the base for modern military innovation.⁸⁵ According to the Economic Survey 2025, in India, the gross expenditure on R&D has increased from Rs 60,196 crore in

⁸³ "Tipu's Mysorean Rocket: The Remarkable Tale Of The World's First Iron-Cased War Rockets That Changed Warfare Forever!," accessed February 13, 2026, <https://www.southtourism.in/blog/the-revolutionary-tipu-sultans-mysorean-rocket>.

⁸⁴ Northlines, "DRDO Biggest Hindrance to Atmanirbharta in Defence," *Northlines*, March 26, 2024, <https://thenorthlines.com/drdo-biggest-hindrance-to-atmanirbharta-in-defence/>.

⁸⁵ "Chapter 29 - Military R&D and Innovation," ResearchGate, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0169-7218\(10\)02013-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0169-7218(10)02013-7).

FY-2011 to Rs 1,27,381 crore in FY-2021.⁸⁶ However, this is 0.64% of GDP, which is insufficient and lower than that of major arms-producing countries like the US, China, and Russia. Unlike India, the private sector in these countries contributes more than 70% to national R&D.⁸⁷ Likewise, a mutually reinforcing collaboration between government, industry, and academia has been pivotal in fostering innovation across various sectors, including defense.⁸⁸ This triple helix model highlights the significance of the three pillars in enhancing national capacity. Talking about India, a major issue is the persistent disconnect between industrial needs and academic research.⁸⁹ The universities often conduct basic or theoretical research, while industries require applied research and technological development for military use. Traditional academic approaches in India prioritize theoretical work over practical and real-world applications.

3. Technology Transfer Limit

Additionally, India's major arms suppliers- Russia, the US, France, etc. offer varying levels of technological transfer, but few deliver across all four levels of technology transfer.⁹⁰ Moscow provides the broadest scope: it supports Technology 1 (operational skills) and Technology 2 (design transfer) through licensed production of Su-30MKI and T-90 tanks, and Technology 3 (adaptation) via joint ventures, such as Brahmos.⁹¹ However, full Technology 4, creating weapons independently, remains limited, as New Delhi still relies on imported subsystems and knowledge frameworks. Likewise, in 2012, the US signed an agreement, the Defense Trade and Technology Initiative (DTTI), with India. It primarily provides Technology 1 (for C-17 transport aircraft, P-8I patrol aircraft). Joint ventures are involved in the manufacturing of electromagnetic aircraft launch systems (EMALS) and striker vehicles. However, high-end

⁸⁶ Moneycontrol News, "Economic Survey 2025 Live: AI Impact on Labour Will Be Globally Felt but Problem Magnified for India, Warns Economic Survey," Moneycontrol, January 31, 2025, <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/business/economic-survey-2025-live-updates-nirmala-sitharaman-india-economy-gdp-growth-cea-v-anantha-nageswaran-speech-liveblog-12924859.html>.

⁸⁷ News, "Economic Survey 2025 Live."

⁸⁸ "(PDF) Driving Innovation in the Defense Sector: Unlocking the Power of Industry, Academia, and Government Collaboration," *ResearchGate*, ahead of print, March 13, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.55927/fjmr.v4i2.48>.

⁸⁹ "(PDF) Driving Innovation in the Defense Sector."

⁹⁰ Keith Krause, *Arms and the State: Patterns of Military Production and Trade* (Cambridge University Press, 1992).

⁹¹ "(PDF) India-Russia Military-Technical Cooperation: Beyond Commercial Relations," *ResearchGate*, accessed July 22, 2025, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317740541_India-Russia_Military-Technical_Cooperation_Beyond_Commercial_Relations.

design and critical components, especially for stealth fighters or high-end avionics, remain more restricted, making full transfer of Technology 3 or Technology 4 rare.⁹²

4. Overreach and Political Economy

Modi's ambition to achieve self-reliance (Atmanirbharta) in all sectors points to a strategic overreach. Two examples highlight excessive hopes and political bias within Modi's vision. At Semicon India 2025, Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared, underlining India's ambitions in the semiconductor sector, that the day is not far away when India's smallest chip will drive the world's biggest change, describing semiconductors as the "digital diamonds" of the twenty first century, tiny yet immensely powerful components driving global innovation and economic growth.⁹³ It should be noted that this advanced technology requires a deep industrial base, for instance, sub -10nm nodes, that primarily exists in the USA, Taiwan, and South Korea. So far, New Delhi has spent \$11 billion on creating an ecosystem and the required capabilities.⁹⁴ Plants in Gujarat and Assam have been operating since 2021, which can produce 28nm to 110nm chips. The Modi government's support for the chip sector, while unprecedented for India, is still dwarfed by the \$48 billion committed by China and the \$53 billion provisioned under the US Chip Act.⁹⁵ Besides, it has been argued that the two major private firms involved in chip making project, the TATA group and the Murugappa group, contributed \$91 million and \$15 million to Modi's 2024 election campaign.⁹⁶

5. Credibility Issues

In November 2025, at the Dubai Air Show, a Tejas Light Combat Aircraft crashed, killing the pilot, raising concerns about its reliability and export potential.⁹⁷ Tejas is a national trophy in aerospace technology and a major pillar in Atmanirbharta.⁹⁸ To replace outdated Soviet-built

⁹² DFNC RU, "Russia, India Defence Cooperation - Destined to Grow!," *New Defence Order. Strategy*, March 16, 2020, <https://dfnc.ru/en/analytics/russia-india-defence-cooperation-destined-to-grow/>.

⁹³ "PM Modi's Fab Plan to Change the World and Boost India's Atmanirbharta," *The Economic Times*, September 2, 2025, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/cons-products/electronics/pm-modi-semicon-india-2025-vikram-chip-fab-plan-india-atmanirbhar-bharat-semiconductors/articleshow/123651998.cms?from=mdr>.

⁹⁴ "Why India Shouldn't Obsess over Atmanirbharta in Chipmaking," *The Times of India*, n.d., accessed February 13, 2026, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/why-india-shouldnt-obsess-over-atmanirbharta-in-chipmaking/articleshow/113423003.cms>.

⁹⁵ Aggam Walia, "Can India Catch up with the US, Taiwan and China in the Global Chip Race?," *Al Jazeera*, accessed February 13, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2025/12/18/can-india-catch-up-with-the-us-taiwan-and-china-in-the-global-chip-race>.

⁹⁶ Walia, "Can India Catch up with the US, Taiwan and China in the Global Chip Race?"

⁹⁷ "Tejas Crash in Dubai Raises Questions of Fighter Jet's Reliability," accessed February 13, 2026, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/12/tejas-crash-in-dubai-raises-questions-of-fighter-jets-reliability/>.

⁹⁸ "Tejas Crash in Dubai Raises Questions of Fighter Jet's Reliability."

MiG-21s, the last of which retired in 2025, New Delhi began the Tejas program in the 1980s. Due to late deliveries by Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL), New Delhi signed a 7 billion dollar deal with HAL for 97 LCA Tejas in September 2025.⁹⁹ For exporting Tejas, New Delhi has been targeting markets in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and HAL also opened an office in Malaysia in 2023.¹⁰⁰ However, the crash in front of global arm buyers undermined Tejas' export potential. According to one former HAL officer, the disaster in Dubai "rules out exports for now."¹⁰¹

Conclusion

India's pursuit of Atmanirbharta to construct a global identity as an arms exporter under Narendra Modi, marking a departure from its historical role as one of the world's largest arms importers. It describes the constructivist background of Modi's vision of Atmanirbharta, which is driving New Delhi's objectives for self-reliance and economic growth. Through historical narrative and ideational factors, Modi made a self-reliant India in defense manufacturing a core national value, which must be pursued to gain prestige and influence. The roots of this constructivist vision lie in the ideology of Hindutva, which resonates with India's aspiration to assert influence at the international level. Through various schemes (Index scheme, Technological Development Fund, etc.) and structural changes (role of private companies in manufacturing indigenous arms, Defense Capital Acquisition Plan (DCAP), etc.), the Modi government has made significant strides towards self-reliance by local arms production.

New Delhi's impressive economic growth and technological advancements have necessitated the development of a robust local defense industry. Besides, India's strategic partnership with the US is beneficial in gaining access to cutting-edge military technologies. As India is moving towards self-reliance in defense manufacturing, its arms exports are rising. Consequently, New Delhi, by selling arms, will gain leverage and prestige, thereby extending its strategic influence well beyond South Asia. This strategic influence is one among many perks of having a strong military-industrial complex, which India is striving to achieve. However, as this study demonstrates, there remains essential challenges that must be met if

⁹⁹ AFP NEWS, "LCA Tejas: India Signs \$7B Deal For 97 'Made In India' Mk-1A Fighter Jets That Will Replace MiG-21 Aircraft," *Eurasian Times*, September 25, 2025, <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/lca-tejas-india-signs-7-billion-contract-for-97-made-in-india-fighter-jets-that-will-replace-mig-21-aircraft/>.

¹⁰⁰ Shivam Patel and Tim Hepher, "Tejas Crash Dampens Export Hopes for Indian Fighter Jet," *Asia Pacific, Reuters*, November 23, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/tejas-crash-dampens-export-hopes-indian-fighter-jet-2025-11-23/>.

¹⁰¹ Patel and Hepher, "Tejas Crash Dampens Export Hopes for Indian Fighter Jet."

New Delhi wishes to become a global arms exporter and advance the philosophy of *Atmanirbharta*.

Navigating the Post-Western Moment: Russia–Pakistan Cooperation as a Case Study of Emerging Multipolar Diplomacy

Amina Munir*

Abstract

The study examines Russia–Pakistan cooperation between 2014 and 2026 as a case study of how middle powers and recovering great powers practise adaptive diplomacy in a multipolar international system. It poses a single guiding question: how and why have two states with divergent strategic identities and Cold-War-era hostility constructed a sustained pattern of selective cooperation and what does this partnership reveal about state behaviour in the post-Western order? The study employs a qualitative case-study design built on process tracing of bilateral agreements, official communiques and multilateral statements, complemented by discourse analysis of foreign-policy declarations from both governments. Five empirical domains are reconstructed: defence and counterterrorism, Afghanistan diplomacy, energy and oil trade, Eurasian connectivity and multilateral engagement through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). The findings indicate that the relationship is neither an alliance nor a tactical convergence but a structured pattern of hedging-driven selective partnership shaped by three reinforcing logics, shared interest in regional stabilisation following the United States withdrawal from Afghanistan, complementary needs created by Western sanctions on Russia and Pakistan's geo-economic pivot and a shared preference for non-Western multilateral platforms. The article contributes to International Relations theory by showing that adaptive diplomacy now operates through layered, non-exclusive partnerships rather than fixed alignments, with implications for the future Eurasian security architecture and for ongoing debates on global order transition.

Keywords: Post-Western international order, Multipolar diplomacy, Russia–Pakistan cooperation, Strategic hedging, Eurasian security, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

Introduction

The international order is slowly shifting away from a unipolar period that dominated the post-Cold War international system. With the new setting increasingly characterised by scholars as a post-Western order, authority, influence and normative leadership are no longer found solely in the Euro-Atlantic core but spread across a broader array of both state and non-state entities.¹ In this context, the politics of alignment has become more pliable. Today, states are not picking between rigid blocs; they are building layered partnerships, a kind of coalition focused on distinct issue areas where they can

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¹Amitav Acharya, *The End of American World Order*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 1–14.

gain maximum strategic autonomy without excessive exposure to any one patron.² It is most clearly seen by middle powers and recovering great powers in contested regional spaces and it is in such regional areas that the limits of conventional alliance theory are most clearly visible.

The dynamics of relations between Russia and Pakistan are one such case that shows how these adaptive practices play out. During the entire Cold War period, the two states were adversaries in the bipolar competition, with Pakistan being a charter member of the United States-led Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) and the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO), and the Soviet Union engaged in a deep strategic partnership with India with arms transfers, diplomatic backing and the 1971 Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation.³ The problem of mutual suspicion continued to fester for long after the Cold War had ended and Pakistan's reliance on the USA was further exacerbated to control the spread of militancy spreading from Afghanistan. However, since around 2014, both sides gradually moved forward towards a more substantive relationship, addressing not only defence cooperation and counterterrorism training, but also diplomacy, Afghanistan, energy, trade and the coordination of multilateral efforts under the SCO.

The conventional International Relations theories are unable to explain this process. The balance of threat theory suggests that states under acute threat will engage in strong alliances with other states in order to combat the common threat,⁴ while the Structural Realist view suggests the possibility of balancing or band wagoning against the strongest power.⁵ Russia is not the one that has abandoned a strategic partnership with India and Pakistan has not changed their security ties with the United States or all-weather partnership with China. In contrast, the two states have developed a clearly defined and limited, sectoral and non-exclusive form of cooperation without falling into any given category of alliances. The paper addresses two core questions: Empirically, what is the nature of Russia–Pakistan cooperation? Theoretically, what does this continuity in cooperation tell us about state behaviour in systemic transition?

Current scholarship on Russia-Pakistan relations focuses either on the relationship as a battleground, a reaction to the changing US policy for both countries, or as a result of the Sino-Russian

²Amitav Acharya, "After Liberal Hegemony: The Advent of a Multiplex World Order," *Ethics & International Affairs* 31, no. 3 (2017): 271–85.

³Hasan-Askari Rizvi, *Pakistan and the Geostrategic Environment: A Study of Foreign Policy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 67–82.

⁴Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 17–33.

⁵Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 125–28.

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connection with Islamabad, downplaying the bilateral relationship as a tool of larger great-power games.⁶ Only a few studies investigate the relationship as a political form of adaptive diplomacy, and even fewer connect bilateral cases to theoretical discussions on multipolar transition, multipolar hedging, and multipolar network diplomacy. Although the empirical aspects of the partnership have recently been studied by Pakistani-origin publications, these works have not analyzed them within a comprehensive analytical framework based on recent debates surrounding the post-Western order. This article aims to fill this gap.

The article concludes that Russia–Pakistan relations can be analysed as a form of adaptive multipolar diplomacy, a structured non-binding form of collaboration, where two states with overlapping interests, asymmetric capacities and different relationships to the Western order collaborate on a set of limited issues and maintain ‘room to manoeuvre’ with other powers. It is expanded by three pillars of analysis: hedging, selective partnership and network diplomacy, and is supported by empirical evidence from the time frame 2014–2026. The contribution is of two kinds. Theoretically, the study extends the literature on hedging from its original focus on the Southeast Asian context to the case of South Asia, involving a former hostile dyad, and it operationalises the concept of network diplomacy in a context where both players are already in a different network. It is empirically the first systematic, source-traced reconstruction of Russia–Pakistan cooperation as a single case study in five domains.

Section 2 develops the conceptual foundation followed by the research design in Section 3. Section 4 presents the empirical record of Russia–Pakistan cooperation across five key domains, while Section 5 provides the analytical synthesis. Section 6 explores the broader regional implications, and Section 7 concludes the paper.

Conceptual Foundation: The Post-Western Order, Hedging and Network Diplomacy

■ *The Post-Western Order and the Multiplex World*

A post-Western international order is based on the premise that a single core of material power no longer exists, normative authority and institutional leadership in the West. Acharya’s concept of a multiplex world provides a description of this context: a world of multiple centres of power, with

⁶Andrew Korybko, “Russia’s Pakistani Pivot: Strategic, Tactical or Symbolic?” *Russia in Global Affairs* 18, no. 3 (2020): 84–101.

multiple overlapping institutional layers and multiple, parallel, non-convergent normative traditions.⁷ Another perspective is by Buzan & Lawson, who claim that the current one is an “international social structure shift.” affecting not only material capacities but also norms and institutions, as well as “recognised patterns of interaction.”⁸ Ikenberry, from a more measured liberal perspective, agrees with him that the rules-based order is under stress, but does not want to read into the situation that a new, coherent architecture is taking its place.⁹ All these accounts concur on one important descriptive fact: this is a more pluralistic, more institutionally complex, and more revisionist, or flexible, era of international politics than the unipolar 1990s.

In realist scholarship, multipolarity is analysed as pushing towards a greater polarity of power relations.¹⁰ However, even realist analysis recognises that states in the modern era are engaged in what Lo calls “qualified partnerships”, forms of “cooperation with ongoing low-level hedging against the partner.”¹¹ Lukin’s analysis on the Sino-Russian rapprochement is parallel: Even in the closest recent entente, it is more flexible than a treaty alliance, with each partner being allowed to pursue its own relationships with third parties.¹² These analyses come together to suggest that the tension of multipolarity gives more weight to the option for flexibility than commitment.

■ *Hedging and Strategic Autonomy*

The idea behind hedging arose from the studies of Southeast Asia that led Goh to view the concept as a combination of engagement and indirect balancing to deal with uncertainties regarding the intentions of a rising power.¹³ Kuik then differentiated between hedging behaviours on a ‘balancing-bandwagoning’ continuum.¹⁴ Tessman expanded this concept by making it a rational response to uncertainty in the distribution of power in the future.¹⁵ Haacke restitches strategic autonomy in

⁷Acharya, “After Liberal Hegemony,” 271–76.

⁸Barry Buzan and George Lawson, *The Global Transformation: History, Modernity and the Making of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 1–24.

⁹G. John Ikenberry, “The End of Liberal International Order?” *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2018): 7–23.

¹⁰John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, updated ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014), 360–411.

¹¹Bobo Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), 99–124.

¹²Alexander Lukin, *China and Russia: The New Rapprochement* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 145–72.

¹³Evelyn Goh, *Meeting the China Challenge: The U.S. in Southeast Asian Regional Security Strategies* (Washington, DC: East-West Center, 2005), 1–8.

¹⁴Cheng-Chwee Kuik, “How Do Weaker States Hedge? Unpacking ASEAN States’ Alignment Behavior toward China,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 17, no. 55 (2008): 159–85.

¹⁵Brock F. Tessman, “System Structure and State Strategy: Adding Hedging to the Menu,” *Security Studies* 21, no. 2 (2012): 192–231.

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hedging: preserving freedom of action in various foreign-policy areas.¹⁶ In these contributions, hedging is seen, first, as a means of mitigating uncertainty, which is not an attempt to stave off an existing threat, and second, as a policy that pursues multiple dimensions of foreign policy at the same time.

Pakistan has embraced the language of hedging both at the level of scholarship and policy talk. Husain charts the country's shift from a security-based to geo-economic foreign policy, and Saghir, Karim and Saleem define Pakistan's modern foreign policy as being one that has to be "multidirectional balancing", building multiple non-exclusive ties with China, the USA, the Gulf states and Russia.¹⁷ Lodhi's previous analysis on Pakistani strategic thinking predicted this trend, stating that the country's structural location in a multifaceted region between South, Central and West Asia forced it to chart a path toward diversified approaches to its relations.¹⁸ A different register of hedging vocabulary can be seen in Russia: While Connolly's analysis of post-2014 Russian political economy shows how western sanctions hastened Russia's pursuit of associations and partnerships in the steppe belt of Eurasia and Asia as a calculated move to diversify away from European markets and finance.¹⁹ Trenin has consistently maintained that the Russian pivot to the East should be interpreted not as a complete strategy shift but instead as a hedge against the closing down of the West.²⁰ Otherwise, Pakistan and Russia come from different beginnings but with similar motives.

▪ *Selective Partnership and Network Diplomacy*

Wilkins introduces the idea of alignment without alliance because it seeks to encapsulate sustained, but limited, cooperative relations, not necessarily tied to a lasting alliance; structured, but nonbinding, cooperative relations; and cooperative relations that are built around specific issue areas and do not necessarily span the whole range of foreign policy.²¹ In this sense, selective partnership is not an

¹⁶Jürgen Haacke, "The Concept of Hedging and Its Application to Southeast Asia: A Critique and a Proposal for a Modified Conceptual and Methodological Framework," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 19, no. 3 (2019): 375–417.

¹⁷Abdul Saghir, Adnan Karim, and Muhammad Sheharyar Saleem, "Pakistan's Multidirectional Balancing: A Realist Analysis of Strategic Autonomy in an Era of Great Power Competition," *Social Sciences & Humanity Research Review* 5, no. 1 (2025): 118–24.

¹⁸Maleeha Lodhi, ed., *Pakistan: Beyond the Crisis State* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 3–17.

¹⁹Richard Connolly, *Russia's Response to Sanctions: How Western Economic Statecraft Is Reshaping Political Economy in Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 175–210.

²⁰Dmitri Trenin, *Russia* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 88–112.

²¹Thomas S. Wilkins, "Alignment', Not 'Alliance': The Shifting Paradigm of International Security Cooperation: Toward a Conceptual Taxonomy of Alignment," *Review of International Studies* 38, no. 1 (2012): 53–76.

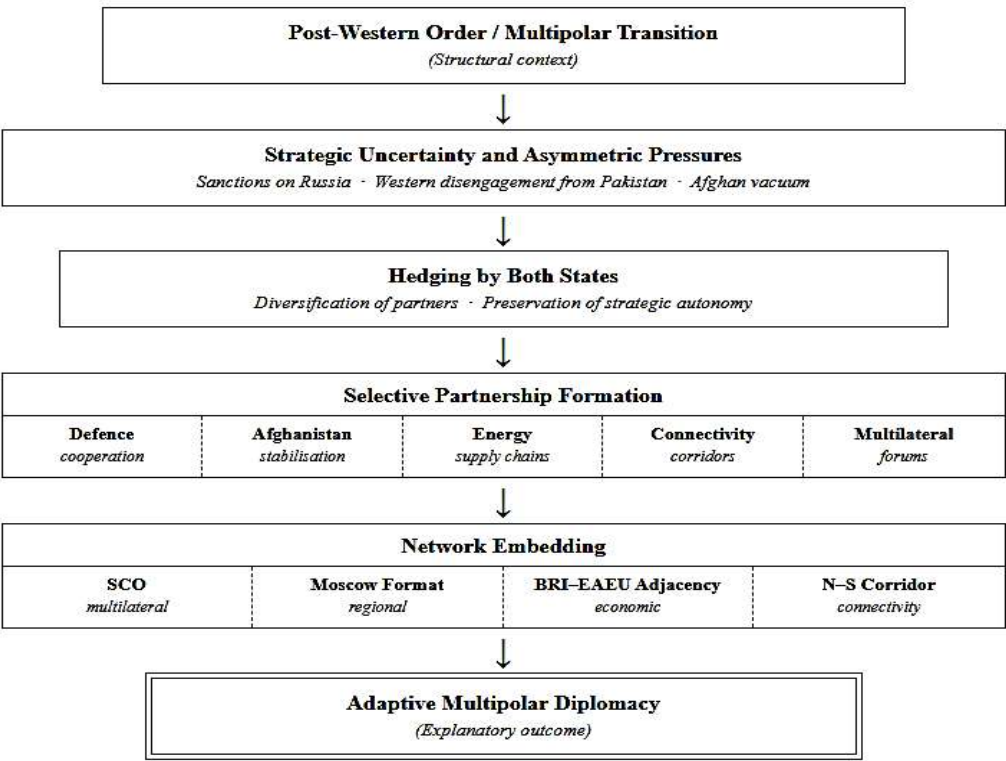
inadequate type of partnership, but rather a unique organisational logic, appropriate to circumstances where states prefer flexibility over commitment. A complementary point which Slaughter makes in his analysis of networked statecraft is that today's diplomacy is all about multiple, interlaced and bilateral webs of relations, regional and multilateral alike, and that state power is manifested by occupying a beneficial position in a net of relations as opposed to dominating a hierarchical alliance.²²

■ ***Analytical Framework***

In synthesising the literature, this article draws on three different spheres of analysis for Russia–Pakistan cooperation. The systemic logic comes from a condition of uncertainty regarding the distribution of power in the future: in such an environment, both states diversify their sets of partners to maintain freedom of action. Organisational form: selective partnership: cooperation is focused on specific issue areas, and is organised through temporary but stable institutional arrangements and with clear boundaries so as not to encompass any of the partners' other commitments. Diplomacy on systems/positions: The value of each state for another state not only stems from its strategic situation but also from the wider network in which it takes part and from multilateral platforms and bilateral channels of network cooperation. The three concepts are at different levels of abstraction, covering various aspects of the same phenomenon: hedging accounts for the phenomenon of states' cooperation; selective partnership for the organisation of such cooperation; and network diplomacy for the location of such cooperation in the larger international landscape.

²²Anne-Marie Slaughter, *The Chessboard and the Web: Strategies of Connection in a Networked World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 5–17.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Adaptive Multipolar Diplomacy



Source: developed by the author from the literature reviewed during Conceptual Foundation.

Research Design and Methodology

The study is based on a qualitative and single case research using Russia–Pakistan cooperation between 2014 and 2026 as a case study. The case-study approach is appropriate for the research question since it allows the examination of the process of decisions, agreements, and diplomatic exchanges that have led to the construction of the relationship, and makes it possible to move beyond the partnership as a final product. This design incorporates and integrates two approaches: process tracing and discourse analysis.

- **Process Tracing:** Process tracing works backward from the actions in the five domains that lead to bilateral cooperation, back to the systemic conditions. The typology is based on Beach and Pedersen’s theory testing approach, which categorizes the implications that are expected to be observed from a theory and the record is then evaluated for consistency.
- **Discourse Analysis:** Joint and government statements, communiques and ministerial briefings are analysed to reveal the strategic narrative that each government uses to explain why

cooperation is beneficial and what they are setting out to tell their audiences. The analysis follows the discursive-institutionalist vein, where foreign-policy discourse is seen as descriptive and at the same time as constitutive of choices for foreign-policy action that can open or close possibilities for further action.

- **Data Sources:** Five sources of primary material are used. First, bilateral agreements are being formulated, such as the pact for defence cooperation signed in November 2014, and a different agreement on North–South Gas Pipeline in October 2015, and another amended intergovernmental agreement on a renamed Pakistan Stream Gas Pipeline in May 2021. Second, official statements released by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan (MOFA), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) of Pakistan and the Russian Ministry of Defence. Third, multilateral communiqués, in particular the statements of the Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan (the last conference was on 4 October 2024), and In the Heart of Asia declarations at the annual meetings of the SCO since Pakistan’s accession in June 2017. Fourth, trade and economic data statistics from the Ministry of Commerce Pakistan, State Bank of Pakistan and customs statistics of Russia were also used for triangulation of claims about the course of bilateral trade. Fifth, secondary sources refer to the policy report released by SIPRI, Carnegie Endowment, Chatham House and the Institute of South Asian Studies which record the information not available elsewhere.
- **Analytical Procedure:** Source material was organized in a time bound order, across the 5 domains. To reduce the risk of relying on a single source, key episodes were triangulated between at least two different sources. The divergence in the characterisation of an episode between Moscow and Islamabad was itself analytically interesting. The empirical record was then translated into the three analytical concepts, which is formalised in table 2.
- **Scope and limitations:** The study does not make any inferences beyond the time it covers. It is a one-case study and thus cannot claim to draw general conclusions on the overall prevalence of the Russia–Pakistan pattern. No classified or backchannel communications are included, because they are not apparent in the documents. No consideration is given to the “depth” of cooperation; only the apparent architecture is examined.

Empirical Analysis: Russia–Pakistan Cooperation across Five Domains

Table 1: Domains of Russia-Pakistan Cooperation, 2014-2026

Domain	Key Evidence	Period
Defence cooperation pact	Pakistan and Russia signed a bilateral defence cooperation agreement in Moscow during the November 2014 visit of Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, described in joint Pakistani and Russian statements as a 'milestone' in restoring military-to-military ties.	2014
Joint military exercises (Druzhba series)	Counterterrorism exercises launched in 2016 and held annually with limited interruptions. Druzhba-VII was conducted in 2024 and Druzhba-VIII was held between 15 and 27 September 2025, focused on counterterrorism, drone warfare, urban combat and counter-IED operations.	2016–2025
Arms and military equipment	Russia approved the sale of four Mi-35M attack helicopters in 2014; deliveries were completed in subsequent years. Talks on additional defence procurement have continued, although Russia has consistently calibrated transfers to limit damage to its strategic partnership with India.	2014–2026
Counterterrorism coordination	Repeated framing of the Druzhba series around counterterrorism, regular bilateral consultations and convergent positions in the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) processes targeting groups based in Afghanistan and Central Asia.	2014–2026
Afghanistan diplomacy	Pakistan participated in successive rounds of the Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan. The sixth meeting on 4 October 2024 included Pakistan among ten regional participants; Russia subsequently signalled that the seventh meeting would convene in autumn 2025.	2017–2026
Energy infrastructure	Original October 2015 intergovernmental agreement on the Karachi–Lahore North–South Gas Pipeline; renamed Pakistan Stream Gas Pipeline (PSGP) under the amended intergovernmental agreement signed in May 2021. Implementation has been repeatedly affected by sanctions exposure and financing constraints.	2015–2026
Russian crude-oil trade	Pakistan's first government-arranged Russian crude cargo arrived at Karachi in June 2023, paid for through a renminbi-denominated mechanism; the first private-sector Russian crude cargo followed in October 2023. Cargoes have continued on an irregular commercial basis.	2023–2026
Bilateral trade and transport	Bilateral trade turnover reportedly exceeded US\$1 billion for the first time in 2023 and reached approximately US\$1.8 billion in FY 2023–24 before contracting slightly in FY 2024–25. Discussion of preferential trade agreements with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) is ongoing as of 2026.	2023–2026
Industrial cooperation	July 2025 agreement at the Innoprom forum in Yekaterinburg to revive and modernise Pakistan Steel Mills, originally built in 1973 with Soviet technical assistance and dormant in industrial operations since 2015; barter-trade memoranda concluded in October 2024 cover chickpeas, rice, mandarins, potatoes and red lentils.	2024–2026
Multilateral engagement	Pakistan became a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in June 2017 alongside India; sustained participation in SCO heads-of-state and prime-ministerial summits; Russia and Pakistan have coordinated on connectivity, counterterrorism and Afghanistan within SCO working groups.	2017–2026

Sources: Press releases of Inter-Services Public Relations Pakistan (2016-2025), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, joint statements of the Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan (2017-2024), Pakistan Ministry of Commerce trade statistics (FY 2023-24), Pakistan-Russia Trade and Investment Forum Communiqué, Moscow, 2-3 October 2024, Innoprom Yekaterinburg forum 2025 reporting.

■ ***Defence and Counterterrorism Cooperation***

The most visible and specific area of partnership is defence cooperation, and it is also the most tightly cordoned-off. The first bilateral defence cooperation pact was signed in November 2014 in Islamabad following a Russian defence minister's visit there led by Sergei Shoigu, and marked the beginning of a long absence of formal military contacts between the two states.²³ In 2016, the Druzhba (Friendship) joint exercise series was started, putting this opening into practice at the operational level. The latest version of Druzhba-VIII took place between 15 and 27 September 2025 on Russian soil and while "drone warfare, fighting in built-up areas and counter improvised explosive devices" were the themes of the latest edition, according to ISPR.²⁴ Both states have focused on operational missions that have consistently been counterterrorism-focused, and given that their interests overlap, they can work toward further interoperability, while sidestepping the political trade-offs involved in training for inter-state warfare.

The same goes for arms transfers. The four Mi-35M helicopters sold in 2014 marked the symbolic end of Moscow's hesitation to sell large platforms to Pakistan, although the volume has been relatively small, compared with its bigger procurement deals with the other side.²⁵ Russia has taken care in doing these transfers so that its strategic partnership with India is not undermined. Cooperation has now been brought to a levelled-off but conscious low baseline, and both are avoiding a full-fledged defence arrangement such as those between Russia and Belarus, or Pakistan and China.

■ ***The Afghanistan Factor***

Afghanistan has proved to be an incentive to Russia–Pakistan cooperation and a stress test for it. Since the withdrawal of US forces and the return of the Taliban to power in Kabul in August 2021, both countries have been experiencing serious concerns with overlapping consequences: one for Russia is the spread of militancy in Central Asia, and another for Pakistan is the influx of cross-border attacks from Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and its associated groups from Afghan-controlled territory.²⁶ The main and primary channel of these concerns has been through the Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan, which have started as a 6-party mechanism in 2017 and expanded to 10 parties by

²³Pieter D. Wezeman and Siemon T. Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2018," SIPRI Fact Sheet (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 2019), 5–7.

²⁴Inter-Services Public Relations, Press Release No. PR-301/2025-ISPR, "Pakistan–Russia Joint Exercise Druzhba-VIII," Rawalpindi, 26 September 2025.

²⁵Wezeman and Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2018," 6.

²⁶Mark N. Katz, "Russia and the Taliban: Common Ground or Strange Bedfellows?" *Russia in Global Affairs* 20, no. 3 (2022): 138–55.

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2024 and are under the leadership of the Russian side. During the sixth meeting on 4 October 2024, Pakistan was among the other countries in the region, which also comprised China, India, Iran and the Central Asian states; the joint communiqué made special mention of cooperation in counterterrorism and urged the Afghan authorities to prevent the use of Afghan land for neutralizing any act aimed at the neighbouring countries.²⁷ Russia's Supreme Court in April 2025 lifted the legal ban on the Taliban, paving the way for a more institutionalised Russian collaboration with the Taliban-led government in Kabul,²⁸ a move that Islamabad closely monitored, as it grapples with relations with the same government.

■ *Energy and Oil Trade*

The most ambitious aspect of design of energy cooperation has been the most limited in implementation as well. In October 2015, there was an original intergovernmental deal on the gas pipeline between Karachi and Lahore (later North-South) to provide finance and technical assistance by Russia to the initiative to bring LNG import terminals to Karachi and supply them to the consumption centres further North.²⁹ The original contract was delayed for a long period and was substituted in May 2021 with an amended intergovernmental agreement on the re-named PSGP that has new funding splits and a longer construction period. Financing constraints, pressures of sanctions after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and volatile commercial outlook in gas market of Pakistan have adversely affected the implementation.

The more significant short-term development has been the opening up of the trade in oil. The first Russian crude cargo paid under a discount agreement, through a mechanism not in dollars, arrived in Pakistan at its port of Karachi in June 2023, followed by the first under private-sector in October 2023.³⁰ Although it has been small by Pakistan's standards for Gulf imports and the volume of oil brought in has never been that high, it is significant: every such shipment is a sign that the logistical, financial and political mechanisms for continued trading have been in place.

²⁷Joint Statement of the Sixth Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan, Moscow, 4 October 2024.

²⁸Tatiana Stanovaya, "Moscow's Taliban Recognition: Strategic Calculation or Improvisation?" Carnegie Politika commentary, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 2025.

²⁹James Henderson and Tatiana Mitrova, *Energy Relations between Russia and Asia*, OIES Paper NG 152 (Oxford: Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, 2020), 19–28.

³⁰Andrej Krickovic, "Imperial Nostalgia or Prudent Geopolitics? Russia's Efforts to Reintegrate the Post-Soviet Space in Geopolitical Perspective," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33, no. 2 (2017): 140–58.

■ *Eurasian Connectivity and Geo-Economics*

Russia-Pakistan cooperation is put into the widest geo-economic perspective in the context of connectivity cooperation. Being a hub of South, Central and West Asia and CPEC being the flagship corridor of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has made it a strategic crossroads in the broader Eurasian connectivity network of corridors and tenders.³¹ Russia's interest in this architecture is double; on one hand, Moscow would like to assure that evolving Eurasian connectivity does not leave out any Russian-led institutions like the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and on the other, the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC) has been a long-held interest of Russia and Pakistan is a possible southern endpoint or a nearby gateway for it.³² Pakistan has been having intensified consultations for a possible preferential trade deal with EAEU since 2024 and signed MOUs during the 1–3 October 2024 Pakistan–Russia Trade and Investment Forum in Moscow. The July 2025 Innoprom agreement regarding the revival of Pakistan Steel Mills, which was built in 1974 with Soviet assistance and has been inactive since 2015, is a case in point for the geo-economic nature of this event: a practical initiative and a symbolic gesture of the present cooperation between Pakistan and Russia connecting back to the technical support provided in the past.³³

■ *Multilateral Engagement and the SCO*

Pakistan's full membership of the SCO in June 2017 along with India created the most significant institutional framework for future collaboration of the two countries with Russia. The SCO has served as the platform for coordinated comments on counterterrorism measures; regional connectivity and post-Western multilateralism and its working mechanisms; in particular the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure in Tashkent; have offered a practicum forum for regular cooperation.³⁴ The SCO is not a security alliance, hence the coordination between the two countries is not binding; however, through the platform, at the same time the ministerial-level contact, joint declaration and operational mechanisms are also produced, which could not be maintained by bilateral diplomacy on the same scale.

³¹Siegfried O. Wolf, *The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor of the Belt and Road Initiative: Concept, Context and Assessment* (Cham: Springer, 2020), 230–58.

³²Nargis Kassenova, "China's Silk Road and Russia's Eurasian Economic Union: Toward Compatibility?" *Asian Politics & Policy* 10, no. 1 (2018): 92–100.

³³Alexander Gabuev, *Russia's Eastern Pivot: Beyond a Tactical Retreat* (Berlin: German Council on Foreign Relations Report, 2019), 21–28.

³⁴Thomas Ambrosio, *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Sustainable Counterweight to the West?* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 115–34.

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Table 2: Analytical Mapping of Russia–Pakistan Cooperation onto the Three-Part Framework

Domain	Hedging Logic (why)	Selective Partnership (how)	Network Diplomacy (where)
Defence and counterterrorism	Russia diversifies away from over-reliance on Indian defence custom; Pakistan diversifies away from over-reliance on US security cooperation, especially post-2021.	Cooperation confined to counterterrorism training and modest equipment transfers; explicitly bounded to avoid disrupting Russia–India or Pakistan–China relationships.	Druzhba exercises operate alongside Pakistan's parallel exercises with China and historic ties with the Gulf, embedding bilateral cooperation in a wider network of training partners.
Afghanistan diplomacy	Both states hedge against the indeterminacy of Taliban consolidation and against the absence of a Western-led stabilisation framework after 2021.	Engagement channelled through the Moscow Format rather than a bilateral coordination mechanism, preserving each side's autonomy in dealing with Kabul.	Moscow Format ties Russia–Pakistan exchange into a ten-party regional configuration including China, Iran, India and the Central Asian states.
Energy and oil trade	Russia hedges against the closure of European energy markets; Pakistan hedges against supplier concentration and dollar-system vulnerability.	Pipeline cooperation deliberately limited by sanctions exposure; oil trade conducted on a cargo-by-cargo commercial basis with non-dollar settlement.	Trade conducted through renminbi-denominated settlement embeds the relationship in the Sino-Russian financial network and the wider de-dollarisation discourse.
Eurasian connectivity	Russia hedges against Chinese dominance of the BRI; Pakistan hedges against connectivity dependence on a single corridor.	Engagement through trade and investment fora and MoUs rather than binding agreements; PSM revival kept at the level of industrial cooperation.	Pakistan–EAEU consultations and INSTC adjacency link Russia–Pakistan engagement to wider Eurasian institutional architectures.
Multilateral engagement (SCO)	Both states hedge against the perceived limits of Western-led multilateralism by investing in non-Western platforms.	SCO functions as a coordination venue, not an alliance; commitments remain consultative and non-binding.	SCO embeds Russia–Pakistan engagement within an eight-member regional organisation that includes their other key partners (China) and rivals (India).

Source: author's analysis based on the empirical material reconstructed in Empirical Analysis and the analytical framework developed in Conceptual Foundation.

▪ *Hedging as Systemic Logic*

The same hedging logic is present in each row of Table 2. Russia's strategy of diversifying its partners comes on top of the post-2014 scenario of partial economic and diplomatic isolation from the West.

Now, the Pakistan route is part of the wider portfolio, which also includes Iran, the Gulf countries, India, China, and Türkiye. The post-2018 “geo-economic” reorientation and the post-2021 closing of the Afghan transit route, have made the value of relations that do not involve Pakistan in one great power’s strategic projects.³⁵ It is not about finding a common enemy: neither state says the other’s main partners are a threat to them: but it is about their preference for keeping strategic optionality. This is exactly the kind of hedging that Tessman and Haacke are talking about: it is reacting to uncertainty about the system, not to a threat, and it is not necessarily single-domain, but multi-domains.

▪ *Selective Partnership as Organisational Form*

The form and structure of cooperation is very similar to Wilkins’ notion of “alignment without alliance”: it is durable but limited, structured but non-binding, and is focused on a limited set of issues and areas, rather than on the entirety of foreign policy.³⁶ Five typical characteristics of selective partnership can be seen in the empirical record. Cooperation is limited: cooperation takes place in five distinct areas and is not intended to extend beyond them, both sides do not wish to evolve towards full strategic harmonization. Secondly instruments are calibrated: the main instruments are joint exercises and intergovernmental agreements and ministerial dialogue, not treaty alliances or basing arrangements. Third, commitment is reversible, that is, there are no irreversible costs, either incurred by the partner or by the partner by not entering into a formal alliance obligation. Fourth, a third-party effect is controlled - both the states have put a lot of diplomatic effort into assuring third parties (India, China, the United States, Gulf states) that the partnership is not against them. Fifth, institutionalisation is shallow, the relationship does not have any joint command structure, does not have any permanent secretariat and does not have any binding dispute-resolution mechanism. These features are in fact non-deficiencies but a part of the partnership.

▪ *Network Diplomacy and Systemic Position*

The third column of Table 2 makes the connection to the network dimension. The bilateral track is based within a wider framework with other states, institutions, and informal arrangements in each of the domains. Regarding cooperation in defence, Pakistan is engaged with China, Türkiye, and the United States in exercises; Afghanistan related diplomacy is conducted within the context of participation in the Moscow Format with eight other countries; and energy cooperation is managed through Chinese financial mechanisms, with the EAEU agreement discussed as compatible with the

³⁵Saghir, Karim and Saleem, “Pakistan’s Multidirectional Balancing,” 118–22.

³⁶Wilkins, “Alignment’, Not ‘Alliance’,” 60–68.

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BRI. What Slaughter calls networked statecraft is the practice of state power through the use of advantageous positions within overhanging networks instead of through exclusive ties.³⁷ For Pakistan, this is what Goh, the “omni-enmeshment”, is all about - to gain strategic edges by over-entangling with several overlapping relationships. For Russia, it is the fellow-travelling equivalent of the Sino-Russian rapprochement, a more intense involvement with a wide range of partners, not driven by but sustained by Beijing.³⁸

■ *Implications for International Relations Theory*

There are three implications for IR theory from the case. First, it acknowledges that hedging is a separate concept from balancing and band wagoning, and is not necessarily a Southeast Asian phenomenon. The historical record of Russia-Pakistan relations shows no clear-cut bloc behaviour as expected under the balance of threat theory, nor is there any obvious asymmetric submission in line with the band wagoning theory, but rather a middle-of-the-road pattern that is well covered by hedging theory.³⁹ Secondly, the case further illustrates Wilkins’s framework of aligning without joining allies and demonstrates that this framework could involve a recovering great power—in this instance, Britain—with a middle power, in this case, France. Third, it shows how network-diplomacy analysis can be extended by considering the stable bilateral track that can be made between two states formed in partially overlapping and partially competing networks just because each one knows the other’s wider commitments. The Russia-Pakistan record would thus be a contribution to the existing literature on adaptive state behaviour in the post-Western order.

Regional Implications: South Asian and Eurasian Security Architecture

The extent of the Russia- Pakistan relationship is evident not only bilaterally, but also within the broader context of the South Asian and South Eurasian security architecture. This is a double-edged sword: it undermines the idea of the historical connection between Moscow and New Delhi while simultaneously helping to build a more pluralistic regional security order with the presence of middle powers with meaningful agency.

- **South Asian Implications:** It has been the tradition of South Asian regional security design to balance external powers in a rivalry of two major powers, namely India and Pakistan.

³⁷Slaughter, *The Chessboard and the Web*, 8–17.

³⁸Lukin, China and Russia, 165–72.

³⁹Darren J. Lim and Zack Cooper, “Reassessing Hedging: The Logic of Alignment in East Asia,” *Security Studies* 24, no. 4 (2015): 718–25.

Pakistan's selective engagement with Russia makes for a complex but not a different architecture. New Delhi's strategic partnership with Moscow continues to swallow up the bulk of the Russian defence exports to South Asia and continues to be politically pivotal in Russian thought.⁴⁰ The Russia–Pakistan track is designed to complement, not replace, the Russia–India track, and creates a more three-dimensional South Asian system with its implications for crisis management and South Asian integration that are yet to be fully examined.⁴¹

- **Eurasian Implications:** Russia-Pakistan cooperation is on the rise in terms of building an institutional framework at the Eurasian level, in which the SCO, the Moscow Format, the EAEU and the BRI work together, without merging into one bloc. A potential agreement for Pakistan to move closer towards a preferential agreement with the EAEU (under consultation since early 2026): would bring the country closer to the Russian-led economic space but would not involve it in political alignment with Russia. Likewise, Russia's cooperation with the Taliban-ruled Afghan government, which, after the federal court's decision in April 2025, is now formalised, opens the door for a more institutionalised Russia-Pakistan coordination for the stabilisation work in Afghanistan.⁴² These developments are only the “overlying” of new forms of cooperation on a regionally diverse space, rather than the creation of a “bloc of Eurasian nations.” These are not the creation of a bloc of “Eurasian nations.” These can be seen as the “overlying” of new forms of collaboration onto a regionally pluralistic space.

Conclusion

Russia-Pakistan cooperation in the period 2014-2026 is an example of “adaptive multipolar diplomacy,” defined as a structured pattern of hedging-driven, selective partnership between two actors that engage in multipolar diplomacy through “layered networks” without binding commitments. The empirical reconstruction in five areas—defence, Afghanistan, energy, connectivity, and multilateral engagements: reflects genuine but limited, persistent but noncommittal cooperation and a conscious effort to walk the delicate tightrope of keeping other pledges alive. This pattern is traced back to three reinforcing logics: hedging as the reaction to systemic uncertainty, selective partnership

⁴⁰Angela Stent, *The Limits of Partnership: U.S.–Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century*, updated ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 142–48.

⁴¹Ashley J. Tellis, “India's Great-Power Delusions: How New Delhi's Grand Strategy Thwarts Its Grand Ambitions,” *Foreign Affairs* 102, no. 5 (2023): 58–73.

⁴²Bobo Lo and Lilia Shevtsova, *A 21st Century Myth: Authoritarian Modernization in Russia and China* (Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, 2012), 47–58.

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as the type of organisation for the cooperation on specific issues, and network diplomacy as the systemic position of an organisation in overlapping regional architectures. The contributions of the article are threefold. First, it extends the hedging literature from its original Southeast Asian environment to a South Asian instance of alignment without alliance between a recovering great power and a middle power. Second, it shows that the concepts of alignment without alliance is applicable not just between middle powers, but also between a recovering great power and a middle power. Third, it provides the first systematic and source-traced reconstruction of the cooperation between Russia and Pakistan as a single case across five empirical domains, with analytical mapping that demonstrates how each domain relates to a corresponding strategic logic.

From a theoretical perspective, it supports the thesis that today's world pattern of international relations is dominated by "layered", non-exclusive partnerships of adaptation. The relationship is a path in policy terms for Pakistan to find strategic diversification while for Russia it is a way to get a presence in South Asia without any commitments with regards to India and China. For other middle powers, the case indicates that it is possible and sustainable to choose a partnership with a hedging Great Power as long as scope is kept under control.

The wider implications of the case relate to the enigma of the architecture of the new Eurasian order. Russia–Pakistan cooperation is not, in itself, a game-changer in international politics; however, in this—as in many instances of adaptive partnership—it provides evidence regarding the texture of the world that is superseding the unipolar moment in Western dominated international politics. In that world, there will be no successor-hegemon and no counter-bloc—only partnerships that overlap and are calibrated and coordinated on a case-by-case basis. Cooperation between Russia and Pakistan, therefore, is a miniature version of the diplomatic language of multipolarity.

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