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# Thru' the Desk of the Editor

## **Editorial: West Asia in Flux – De-escalation, Dialogue and Diplomacy Can End Conflict, Not War**

### **Background**

In 2015, under Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), six countries lifted sanctions on Iran, which froze its nuclear programme. In 2018, United States (US) President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from JCPOA, re-imposing sanctions. Iran began stockpiling enriched uranium and suspended International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) monitoring. In 2019, President Trump announced his intention to designate Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as foreign terrorist organisation. Revolutionaries in Iran, particularly leader Ali Khamenei and IRGC were not predisposed to reconciliation. Iran attacked Saudi, Emirati, Japanese and Norwegian oil tankers; conducted drone strikes on Saudi Arabian oil facilities and shot down a US drone. These actions confirmed to United States that until there is evolution in nature of regime, Iranian leaders will not abandon their proxy wars. Regime's, "Death to Israel", "Death to America" language is not mere bluster. Hostility towards US, Israel and West is foundational to Iran's revolutionary ideology. Iran's leaders deeply resent colonial and foreign powers who are seen in cause of Persian empires collapse. Iran's proxy wars have grown more dangerous as they have expanded geographically. In 2019, Israel increased strikes in Lebanon, Gaza to disrupt Hezbollah and Hamas capabilities and leadership, while Iran continued to support them. Between 2015 and 2020, Iranian proxies in Yemen launched over 250 missiles into Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE) and attempted attacks on ships in Bab-el-Mandeb. On 1st April 2023, Israel bombed Iranian consulate complex in Damascus, killing senior Iranian officials. In response, Iran and its Axis-of-Resistance allies seized Israeli-linked ship MSC Aries and launched strikes in Israel on 13th April. Israel retaliated with attacks in Iran and Syria on 19th April. On 1st October, Iran launched missiles at Israel. Israel retaliated on 26th October. Israel and US launched airstrikes against Iran in Twelve-Day War in June 2025, from 13th June to 24th June. Israel bombed military and nuclear facilities in Iran, assassinating prominent military leaders, nuclear scientists and politicians, killing civilians and destroying air defences. Iran retaliated with 550 ballistic missiles and over 1000 suicide drones, hitting civilian population centres, and twelve military, energy and government sites. War followed decades-long proxy conflict where Iran supported an Axis-of-Resistance. Iran's development of nuclear enrichment capabilities has been an international controversy for decades. US intercepted Iranian attacks and bombed three Iranian Nuclear sites on 22nd June. Iran retaliated by firing missiles at US base in Qatar. Ceasefire was on 24th June.

### **Iran Protests and Massacres in January 2026**

In January 2026, Iran perpetrated widespread massacres of thousands of protestors, deploying security forces and foreign militias to suppress dissent and imposed internet shutdown as crackdown on protests. Khamenei acknowledged that "thousands of people" had been killed during protests, blaming Trump for massacre and calling protestors "rioters and terrorists" affiliated with US and Israel. Khamenei gave specific orders on 9th January 2026 to crush protests by any means necessary.

### **US, Israel, Iran War 2026**

On 27th February 2026, Trump gave order to proceed with Operation Epic Fury. US missiles, drones, and Israeli fighter jets began striking Iran next day. On 28th February, US and Israel launched strikes against Iran, targeting key officials, military commanders and facilities. Israel codenamed operation as Operation Roaring Lion. Israeli Air Force struck 500 military targets in western and central Iran, including air defences, missile launchers and Iranian naval vessels, using 200 fighter jets. US strikes were carried out by planes based around Middle East and from aircraft carriers. Thousands of IRGC personnel were killed or wounded, as several military bases were attacked. Several strikes hit Tehran's Pasteur Street district, where Ali Khamenei's presidential palace is.

Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei and other officials, including Minister of Defence Aziz Nasirzadeh, and head of Iran's Revolutionary Guard, Mohammad Pakpour were killed in strikes. Subsequent attacks damaged military bases, government facilities, and cultural heritage sites. Strikes were coupled with cyberattacks on Iranian infrastructure, media and phone apps, with messages calling on Iranians to rise against their government. Cyberattacks resulted in near-total internet blackout in Iran, with 60 hours of connectivity dropping to 1% of normal levels, disrupting government communications, state media and public services. At 2.30 a.m. EST, on 28th February 2026, Trump released an eight-minute video statement on Truth Social, saying that purpose of US strikes on Iran was regime change. He said that Iran's activities endangered US and its allies, citing Iran hostage crises, support for proxies like Hamas and Hezbollah, killings of protestors, Iran calling "Death to America", and its history of attacking US civilians and soldiers as evidence of Iran's intent against US. UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres and some countries condemned US-Israeli strikes. United Nations Security Council passed resolution condemning Iran's retaliatory strikes at Gulf states. Critics of war have described attacks as illegal under US law and violation of Iran's sovereignty under international law. Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu, both warned of potential threat of nuclear weapons in Iran and called on Iranians to overthrow their government. Israel's Defence Minister Israel Katz labelled strikes as "pre-emptive attack" intended to remove threats to Israel. Iran codenamed its military response Operation True Promise IV, launching hundreds of drones and ballistic missiles at targets in Tel Aviv and Haifa as well as multiple countries in Persian Gulf region. Major targets included Manama, Kuwait International Airport, Abu Dhabi, Riyadh and Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, and Erbil International Airport and US Consulate General in Erbil, Iraq. Iran reported striking US bases - Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, Ali Al Salem Air Base in Kuwait and Al Dhafra Air Base in UAE and US Navy Fifth Fleet headquarters in Bahrain. On 1st / 2nd March, Iran struck radar bases for US THAAD missile defence systems in Jordan, UAE and Saudi Arabia. Iran's top security official, Ali Larijani, announced interim leadership council on 1st March and accused US and Israel of trying to dismantle Iran. Israel launched strikes against Iranian targets. Iran launched missiles and drones on Bahrain, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and UAE. Two oil tankers were targeted off coast of Oman. Shipping through Strait of Hormuz slowed down to standstill with around 150 freight ships, including many tankers stalled. On 1st March, Trump announced US had accepted Iranian proposal for further negotiations. However, Ali Larijani ruled out talks. On 2nd March, US embassy in Kuwait was struck. Two more tankers were struck. Senior IRGC official said he would set fire onto any ship coming through Strait of Hormuz, preventing oil leaving. Ras Laffan Industrial City and Mesaieed Industrial Areas, Qatar were struck by Iranian drones; Qatar shooting two Iranian SU-24 bombers. US and Israel attacked Natanz Nuclear Facility and damage to Khatam al-Anbia and Gandhi hospitals was reported. On 3rd March, US and Israeli strikes destroyed Supreme National Security Council headquarters in Tehran and Min Zaida underground nuclear weapon facility.

### **Fast Forward to third week of war**

US conducted bombing raid on 13th March on Kharg Island, oil export hub off Persian Gulf coast of Iran, strikes targeted more than 90 Iranian military sites but spared oil and gas infrastructure. On 16th March, China and US-aligned NATO nations in Europe rejected Trump's call to provide military support to reopen Strait of Hormuz. Trump rebuked NATO allies, calling their decision "very foolish mistake". On 17th March, Trump stated on Truth Social renouncing NATO's assistance, and US allies in Indo-Pacific - Japan, South Korea and Australia for refusing to join US-led attacks on Iran during war. Trump declared that US "does need help of anyone" regarding the war. On 13th March, to help deal with economic costs of war, US temporarily lifted restrictions on sale of Russian oil. Iran announced coordinated offensive by IRGC Navy, Iranian Army and Hezbollah against Israel and US bases. Iran targeted Gulf countries with missiles and drones, causing oil prices to rise. Bahrain reported attacks on fuel tanks. Kuwait authorities stated that defence equipment and Kuwait's main international airport were attacked. Container ship was attacked 35 nautical miles north of Jebel Ali in UAE. On 17th March some senior Iranian officials, including Ali Larijani and Basij chief Ghomreza Soleimani were targeted by Israeli airstrikes. Iran responded with missile barrage in Ramat Gan. On 18th March, Israel struck South Pars natural gas field in Persian Gulf and neighbouring refineries in Iran with US coordination. Iran attacked world's largest LNG production facility in Qatar.

## **Closure of Strait of Hormuz**

On 2nd March, IRGC confirmed that Strait of Hormuz was closed and that any ship that entered the Strait was to be set on fire. On 3rd March, Donald Trump stated that US Navy may escort oil tankers through Strait of Hormuz. On 12th March, three cargo vessels were hit in Strait of Hormuz where Iran had deployed about dozen mines, halting exports of oil and LNG. On 15th March, President Trump asked several nations – China, France, Japan, South Korea, United Kingdom, Canada and Australia to send warships and assist in securing Strait of Hormuz. Trump, noting that these nations are beneficiaries of shipping route, pressured NATO and allies to help secure it. Most nations refused to assist as they want diplomatic de-escalation not war. Trump warned that planned summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping may be at risk if China does not assist US in securing Strait of Hormuz. Trump emphasised that China which relies on Strait for 90% of its energy imports, should share responsibility of keeping it open, than leaving it solely to US to secure. Iran remained determined to assert control over Strait of Hormuz. Houthi movement in Yemen warned that it would respond to any escalation against Iran, including efforts to reopen Strait of Hormuz. Trump issued ultimatum to Iran, threatening to strike its power plants unless it opened Strait of Hormuz within 48 hours. Iran threatened to “completely” close Strait of Hormuz and strike vital infrastructure like energy and desalination facilities. Halfway through deadline, Trump announced that he was postponing strikes against Iranian power plants for five days and said US was negotiating with Iran to end war. Iran denied talks were taking place rejecting 15-point peace plan.

## **Fast forward to Fourth week of War**

On 27th March, Iranian missile and drone strike on Prince Sultan Air Base damaged several US refuelling aircraft and injured 29 US soldiers. Iran showed no signs of ceding its control over Strait of Hormuz. Iran blocked two Chinese ships from entering the strait and sought to formalise fees for ships passing through it. Israeli Defence Minister Israel Katz publicly vowed to “intensify and expand” Israeli attacks in Iran. Shahid Khondab Heavy Water Complex in Arak, used to test uranium enrichment was damaged in Israeli airstrikes. 2500 US marines arrived in Middle East, to be part of effort to open Strait of Hormuz. On 28th March, joint US-Israeli airstrikes damaged residential and civilian facilities, including Iran University of Science and Technology. Iran responded, threatening to attack Israeli and American colleges across Middle East. On 29th March, Joint US – Israeli strikes bombed Bandar Khamir in south Iran. Iranian missile struck chemical plant in Ne’ot Hovav, causing fears of hazardous leak. On 30th March, Trump said on Truth Social that if a deal was not reached soon and Strait of Hormuz not reopened, US would destroy Iran’s power plants, oil wells, Kharg Island, and its desalination plants to conclude the war. Trump laid out objectives for US such as, stop Iran’s nuclear program, destroy Iran’s offensive missiles, destroy Iran’s navy and other security infrastructure, stop Tehran’s support for proxy forces, and regime change in Tehran. To achieve this US and Israel killed Iranian leaders and bombed Iran’s military forces and infrastructure. Israel’s objective was regime change. Iran’s objective was regime survival. To increase pressure on US, Iran attacked US allies in Gulf and shut down traffic through Strait of Hormuz. Effects of these strikes are real but fall short of achieving US goal of regime change. Iran’s attacks on US Gulf allies have killed people, damaged major industrial and energy sites and hurt their image as oasis of calm in turbulent region. Iran choked off traffic in Strait of Hormuz, leading to dramatic increases in oil, gas prices as well as fertilizers impacting whole world, devastating economies, impacting global food security and pushing world economy into recession.

## **Two-week Cease-fire agreement**

US President Trump on 7th April 2026 announced two-week suspension of planned military strikes on Iran, linking move to Iran’s willingness to reopen Strait of Hormuz and engage in negotiations. Temporary halt to missile strikes and drone attacks between US and Iran, has offered narrow window for diplomacy, but there is little indication yet that conflict has fully subsided. The decision came after serious escalation in rhetoric earlier in the day by Trump, threatening to destroy entire civilization vis-à-vis Iran. Israel is part of cease-fire agreement and will halt bombing targets in Iran as negotiations take place over next 14 days. Diplomatic breakthrough was achieved after Trump administration agreed to negotiate on 10-point proposal put forward by Tehran : Non-aggression pact between US and Iran, Continuation of Iran’s control over Strait of Hormuz, Recognition of Iran’s nuclear enrichment rights, Lifting of all primary US sanctions, Lifting of all secondary sanctions affecting third-party countries, Termination of all UN Security Council resolutions against Iran,

Termination of all International Atomic Energy Agency Board resolution, Payment of compensation to Iran for damages, Withdrawal of US forces from the region, Cessation of war everywhere, Ceasefire linked to Hormuz reopening. Trump said that US had achieved its military objectives and that both sides were close to broader agreement. Iranian leadership agreed to temporary ceasefire window and proposed comprehensive framework for ending conflict, stating that any halt in military operations depends on cessation of attacks against it. Arrangements announced by US is limited to two-week period and is designed as pause, rather than resolution. Trump described it as “double-sided ceasefire”. Iran’s supreme national security council also clarified that move does not signify termination of war, reinforcing that this is tactical halt aimed at enabling negotiations rather than ending hostilities altogether. Trump has made its “complete, immediate and safe” reopening of Strait of Hormuz pre-condition for suspending strikes. Iran has agreed in principle but with caveats, stating that safe passage will be allowed only through coordination with its armed forces. Iran has agreed to open Strait during ceasefire for commercial shipping. Iran has not declared unconditional halt to military operations. Formal talks are expected during two-week window. Iranian authorities have confirmed their participation, signalling their willingness to engage diplomatically after weeks of military escalation. Iran’s 10-point peace framework proposal goes beyond temporary truce and calls for comprehensive end to conflict. Trump described Iran’s proposal as “workable basis” for final agreement. Israel supports US-led ceasefire, though clarified that it does not apply to conflict in Lebanon.

Ceasefire leaves intact critical concerns such as Iran’s nuclear stockpile, long-standing geopolitical tensions and broader balance of power in Middle East. US Iran ceasefire represents significant de-escalation, but not end to conflict. Next two weeks of negotiations will be crucial in determining whether this pause can evolve into durable agreement or whether it remains brief interruption in ongoing war. Coming fortnight is expected to test whether diplomacy can succeed where military pressure failed.

The evolving confrontation in West Asia represents one of the most intricate and consequential theatres in contemporary international relations. Deeply rooted in ideological divergences, sectarian complexities and enduring security dilemmas, the conflict has transcended bilateral rivalries to emerge as a multidimensional strategic contest involving regional coalitions, proxy engagements, and calibrated interventions of major global powers. The developments in West Asia over past more than 40 days have not only altered immediate security landscape but have also triggered cascading consequences across global trade system, energy markets and strategic alignments. What initially appeared to be contained escalation has evolved into a multi-layered regional crisis, drawing in state and non-state actors, raising serious concerns about resilience of existing diplomatic frameworks. From economic standpoint implications are already visible. Critical maritime corridors – particularly those linked to Red Sea and Strait of Hormuz, have experienced heightened risk perceptions, such as, increased insurance premiums and freight costs, disruptions in energy supply chains and volatility in global oil and gas markets. At geopolitical level, crisis has underscored fragility of emerging multipolar order. Traditional alliances are being tested, while new alignments are forming in real-time. The role of external powers – whether in deterrence, mediation or strategic signalling has become central to trajectory of conflict. We need not only to analyse events but interrogate their broader implications:

- How will instability in West Asia reshape global trade routes and economic corridors?
- Effects on energy markets and emerging economies
- Are we witnessing structural shift in regional geopolitics?
- What role can middle powers like India play in stabilisation, mediation and strategic balancing?

Beyond immediate crisis management, with forward-looking approach, we must consider:

- Future of multilateral diplomacy in conflict resolution
- Resilience of global supply chains in conflict prone regions.
- Recalibration of national security strategies in era of hybrid and noncarbonated threats.

Recent meeting in Islamabad between US and Iran reflects an attempt to create diplomatic pathway towards these collections. Effectiveness of such initiatives will depend upon:

- Inclusivity of stakeholders
- Credibility of guarantees offered
- Willingness of key actors to move beyond maximalist positions.

The apparent failure or at best, inconclusive outcome of recent Islamabad talks between US and Iran marks critical inflection point in ongoing West Asia crisis. It reflects limits of ad-hoc diplomacy in conflict that is no longer bilateral or even regional. It signals deeper structural factors in current geopolitical order. Breakdown of talks is likely to accelerate strategic hardening among key actors.

- Prolonged uncertainty in fragile trade systems.
- Continuing insecurity around Red Sea and Strait of Hormuz will keep shipping costs and insurance premiums elevated.
- Energy markets may remain structurally volatile.
- Shift conflict into less visible but equally disruptive domains.

Islamabad process has demonstrated that episodic diplomacy is insufficient. What is required is institutionalised dialogue framework and clearly defined confidence building measures, and engagement of both state and non-state stakeholders. Failure of Islamabad talks is not merely missed diplomatic opportunity. It is signal that conflict is entering more protracted and complex phase. The key question before us is not whether escalation risks exist – they clearly do – but whether international community and regional stakeholders can adapt quickly enough to manage crisis that is evolving faster than mechanisms designed to contain it. The complexity of situation demands not just analysis, but clarity of thought, and appropriate actions.

For India, a nation with historically balanced and multidimensional engagements across West Asia, these developments carry far reaching implications that extend beyond diplomacy into domains of energy security, economic resilience, national security and strategic autonomy. As India has continuously advocated earlier, de-escalation, dialogue and diplomacy are essential to bring early end to ongoing conflict.

Articles in this edition of the Journal examine various dimensions of Diplomacy and Security related issues. All authors have presented their views on topics ranging from Joint Warfare to Indus Water Treaty, Yemeni Civil War to India's Digital Diplomacy, with well-planned research on the topic. Their views will surely help in instilling the subjects and topics under discussion in minds of readers.

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# **Winds of Conflict: Houthi-Iran Drone Strikes and the Ripple Effect on India-Iran Relations**

## **Abstract**

The Houthi-Iran drone attacks have become a serious problem for regional stability and international maritime security and have had a profound impact on India-Iran relations. This paper examines the facets of these attacks, beginning with an exploration of the geopolitical context shaped by the Israel-Palestine conflict and Iran's involvement in supporting the Houthi rebels. Iran's strategic backing for the Houthis, coupled with its larger regional ambitions, exacerbates tensions and complicates the security environment in West Asia.

The targeted drone strikes on commercial vessels such as MV Chem Pluto, MV Genco Picardy and MV Sai Baba, which took place in the high seas, highlight the expanding reach of Houthi capabilities and their potential to disrupt global trade routes. These incidents not only pose economic risks, such as increased shipping costs and insurance premiums, but also raise critical legal issues under international maritime law, particularly in terms of piracy.

From a political point of view, these attacks threaten India's diplomatic relations with Iran and require a delicate balance between addressing security concerns and maintaining economic and strategic partnerships. The Chabahar Port project, a key component of India-Iran cooperation, is particularly vulnerable, underlining the need to strengthen measures maritime security to maintain good order and conduct at sea.

In conclusion, the paper critically analyses the implications of these attacks, emphasising the need for India to adopt a multifaceted approach that includes strengthening maritime security, engaging in proactive diplomacy with Iran, and fostering regional cooperation. In order to safeguard India's strategic interests and ensure regional stability, it is essential to address these challenges. The paper advocates for a concerted effort to mitigate the risks posed by asymmetric threats, promoting a secure and sustainable future for India-Iran relations.

## **Introduction**

West Asia has long been a theatre of conflict, where actors from different states and non-states are fighting for influence. In recent years, the geopolitical landscape of West Asia has been characterised by alliances and conflict landscapes, and the Houthi-Iran partnership has become a decisive player. Drone attacks on commercial ships carried out by the Houthi rebels, allegedly supported by Iran, not only intensify regional tensions but also have a global effect on the maritime and economic sphere of influence<sup>1</sup>. The choke points of Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, critical trade routes, have experienced a growing increase in attacks on commercial shipping. These instances raise concerns about the safety and security of the International Shipping Lines (ISL) and the Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC), which has prompted a reassessment of the maritime security protocols of the affected countries. Among the vessels targeted were the MV Chem Pluto and MV Sai Baba, both having connections though not directly to India (Indian crews)<sup>2</sup>. The attacks on these vessels showcase the susceptibility of commercial shipping to asymmetric threats posed by non-state actors<sup>3</sup>.

India, with its significant economic and strategic interests in West Asia, particularly in the maritime domain, is in a risky spot. These attacks have stressed the need for India to respond vigorously to protect its maritime interests. The Indian Maritime Security Strategy (2015) points out that the Western Indian Ocean is recognised as India's primary area of interest and so she strives to be the 'first responder' to humanitarian disasters and a 'preferred security partner' for maritime capacity building for littorals in the region<sup>4</sup>. More importantly, the wider effects of these attacks on India's relations with Iran cannot be understated. With deep-rooted historical connections and cultural associations, both countries, have developed strategic partnerships in areas such as energy, trade, and maritime cooperation<sup>5</sup>. The evolution and transformation of the Iranian Chabahar Port, a key component of India's regional connectivity initiatives, testifies to the strategic importance of these bilateral relations.

The Houthi-Iran drone attacks have further complicated India-Iran relations. On one hand, India in order to safeguard its national interests, must traverse through the region diplomatically, thereby stabilising its strategic alliance with Iran. On the other hand, (India) must elevate its security strategies and make its presence felt in the region. This can be achieved through focusing its naval capabilities to monitor the region and collaborating with regional and global partners to ensure good order and conduct in the region.

In this context, this paper seeks to explore the multifaceted implications of the Houthi-Iran drone attacks on India-Iran relations. The discussion will encompass various dimensions, including the Israel-Palestine conflict and Iran's involvement, the legal nuances of classifying drone attacks as piracy, and the specific cases of the MV Chem Pluto and MV Sai Baba attacks. Furthermore, the paper will analyse the economic, legal, and political ramifications of these attacks, and their impact on India-Iran naval relations, with a particular focus on the strategic importance of Chabahar Port. Finally, a critical analysis will be provided, outlining potential strategies for mitigating the risks and fostering a stable and cooperative regional security environment.

### **Israel-Palestine Conflict and Involvement of Iran and Houthi Rebels**

The Israel-Palestine dispute has been an enduring and deeply rooted problem in West Asia, distinctively marked by violent breakouts and a deliberately delayed scuffle for sovereignty and rights. The conflict's origin can be ascertained to the early 20th century, with competing nationalist ambitions and territorial disputes between Jewish and Arab populations in the region<sup>6</sup>. Over time, the conflict has grown, with various regional and international actors becoming involved, each with their own strategic interests and agendas.

Iran is a major competitor in the Israeli-Palestine conflict, mainly because of its support for Palestine armed groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad<sup>7</sup>. This support is supported not only by Iran's broader ideological commitment to the Palestinian cause but also by its aim to counteract the influence of Israel and the United States (US) in the region. Iran's involvement in the conflict has a wide range of aspects including encompassing financial, military, and political support for the Palestinian factions, and a wider narrative of resistance against Israeli occupation<sup>8</sup>.

The Yemeni Houthi rebels who are linked to Iran, have also articulated confederacy to the Palestinian cause. The Houthis, who belong to the Shia sects of Shiite Islam, regard their scuffle in Yemen as part of a broader resistance against perceived Western and Israeli imperialism<sup>9</sup>. This ideological alignment led Houthis to publicly condemn Israeli actions against Palestinians and express their solidarity with Palestinian groups supported by Iran. Although the Houthis' direct participation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is limited, their integration into Iran's regional strategies highlights the interconnected nature of West Asian conflicts.

The Houthi-Iran alliance is a significant factor in the geopolitical landscape of West Asia. Iran's support for the Houthis serves multiple strategic purposes, including countering Saudi influence in Yemen, projecting power in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, and maintaining a network of allied non-state actors across the region. The Houthis, in turn, benefit from Iranian military expertise, financial support, intelligence and advanced weaponry, including drones, which they have used to target both Yemeni and Saudi assets.

The use of drones by the Houthis represents a significant escalation in their capabilities and a new dimension of asymmetric warfare. These drones, often supplied or designed with Iranian assistance, have been used to target key infrastructure, including oil facilities, airports, and commercial vessels. The attacks on Saudi oil facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais in 2019, attributed to Houthi drones, were particularly significant, demonstrating the group's ability to strike deep within Saudi territory and disrupt global oil supplies<sup>10</sup>.

The involvement of Iran and the Houthis in the Israel-Palestine conflict, though indirect, underscores the wider regional dynamics at play. Iran, through its cultivated network of ideological allies like the Houthis, Hamas, and Hezbollah, strategically employs these non-state actors as instruments of influence in the West Asian region.

This fosters a web of interconnected pressures on its adversaries, further complicating the path toward regional peace. This calculated strategy, while undeniably artful, casts a long shadow, not only hindering the resolution of individual conflicts but also exacerbating the simmering cauldron of instability that defines the region.

For India, the entanglement of Iran and the Houthis in the Israel-Palestine conflict and overarching regional dynamics poses a complex challenge. India has historically maintained a balanced approach to the Israel-Palestine conflict, advocating for a two-state solution and maintaining diplomatic relations with both Israel and Palestine. However, the deepening involvement of Iran and its allies in regional conflicts necessitates a nuanced and strategic response from India, particularly in the context of its relations with Iran.

India's strategic interests in West Asia, including its energy security, security of maritime trade and the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), and the development of Chabahar Port, require a stable and cooperative regional environment. The destabilising actions of the Houthis, supported by Iran, threaten these interests and necessitate a recalibration of India's regional strategy. Balancing its longstanding relationship with Iran against the need to safeguard its maritime and strategic interests is a delicate task that requires careful diplomatic manoeuvring and enhanced regional cooperation.

### **Attack on MV Chem Pluto, MV Genco Picardy and MV Sai Baba**

In December 2023, two Merchant Vessels, MV Chem Pluto and MV Sai Baba were subjected to have been attacked by drone strikes or aerial Platform(s). A similar attack was carried out on MV Genco Picardy in January 2024<sup>11</sup>. These attacks highlight the increase in the sophistication capacities and capabilities of Houthi rebels who with the help of Iranian support have expanded their technological and operational reach.

MV Chem Pluto was transiting en route Jubail, Saudi Arabia, to New Mangalore, India and was attacked 200 miles Southwest of Veraval<sup>12</sup>. The attacks caused an explosion on the poop deck and fire on board the Liberian Flag Chemical/Oil Tanker, MV Chem Pluto with a crew of 21 Indians and 01 Vietnamese<sup>13</sup>. This resulted in a complete power failure aboard and the drifting of the vessel until restored by the crew<sup>14</sup>.

The Information Fusion Centre Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) immediately relayed this information to the Indian Navy (IN) and the Indian Coast Guard. Swiftly responding to the crisis, the IN and the ICG pressed into action immediately and deployed P8I Maritime Reconnaissance aircraft and a warship, ICGS Vikram and a Dornier to render assistance to MV Chem Pluto. Escorted back to safety to Mumbai, MV Chem Pluto was docked there for further repairs. The Indian Navy's Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) team inspected the vessel and made a preliminary assessment of the type and nature of the attack; thereby confirming a drone attack<sup>15</sup>. Further, a forensic and technical investigation was also conducted to determine the vector of attack: including the type and amount of explosive used.

Similarly, a Gabon Flagged Oil tanker MV Sai Baba, with a crew of 25 Indian members was targeted by a one-way attack drone while traversing the Southern Red Sea Region<sup>16</sup>. The vessel was headed towards India. The US Central Command (CENCOM) confirmed that the attack was by the Houthis<sup>17</sup>.

Likewise, on 18 Jan 2024, Mission Based Deployed (MBD) INS Visakhapatnam swiftly responded within an hour to a distress call by MV Genco Picardy, a Marshall Island flagged vessel<sup>18</sup>. MV Genco Picardy, a bulk carrier, departed Port of Safaga in Egypt on 11 Jan and was scheduled to arrive at Thoothukudi in Tamil Nadu in India on 24 Jan<sup>19</sup>. With 22 crew (09 Indian) she came under drone attacks while transiting through the Gulf of Aden. Indian Naval EOD specialists from INS Visakhapatnam boarded the vessel carried out a thorough inspection and later rendered the area safe for further transit<sup>20</sup>.

Taking these attacks very seriously, the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh promised to punish the perpetrators. Stressing the safety and security of the region, the Indian PM initiated talks with the Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu and Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince to preserve maritime security and unfettered navigation<sup>21</sup>. Given the current unstable geopolitics of the region and attacks on India-bound ships, the IN has stepped up its surveillance and deployed its Western Fleet ships and aircraft in different areas of the Arabian Sea for deterrence. Moreover, the Western Naval Command's (WNC) Maritime Operations Centre (MOC) in close coordination with the ICG and other agencies closely monitors the developments in the region<sup>22</sup>.

### **Piracy or Not Piracy**

The ability of the Houthis to carry out such precise attacks proves the evolving nature of maritime threats and the need for enhanced security measures in the region. Non-traditional threats like piracy have over the years proven to be a major threat to international shipping. Piracy is regarded as the first universal crime, and pirates are therefore considered to be 'hostis humani generis' (enemy of all humanity)<sup>23</sup>.

Legally, regarding aerial attacks, using drones as a medium of attack by non-state actors on merchant shipping as acts of Piracy presents a legal conundrum. However, the US while condemning such heinous attacks has termed them as piracy<sup>24</sup>.

Nonetheless, Article 101, of the United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea (UNCLOS)<sup>25</sup> 1982 has defined maritime piracy as follows:-

“Piracy consists of the following acts

- (a) any illegal acts of violence or detention, or any act of depredation, committed for private ends by the crew or the passengers of a private ship or a private aircraft, and directed:
  - (i) on the high seas, against another ship or aircraft, or against persons or property on board such ship or aircraft;
  - (ii) against a ship, aircraft, persons, or property in a place outside the jurisdiction of any State;
  - (iii) any act of inciting or of intentionally facilitating an act described in subparagraph (a) or (b)."

This definition therefore clearly details those specific conditions need to be met for an act to be termed as Piracy. What specifically distinguishes piracy from armed robbery or any other maritime threat is (a) the two-ship condition – pirate ship and the victim ship (b) (acts) occur in the High Seas, thereby delineating the jurisdictional boundaries for prosecuting piracy and subjecting to universal jurisdiction. The definition of piracy under UNCLOS does not include the usage of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) under its ambit. Moreover, political motivations (political or ideological rather than private gains) further complicate the issue.

Considering the current geopolitics, the increase in the number of such attacks necessitates the need for a re-examination and alterations in the prevailing legal frameworks to effectively address and penalise the offenders. The challenges posed by such non-traditional threats exist both at the ground level, in terms of enforcement, and at the legal level, in terms of prosecution and classification. The international community must collaborate to rework existing definitions, amend relevant legal instruments, and close the legal gaps that allow such acts to go unpunished. India's Maritime Anti-Piracy Act 2022, which aims to provide a legal framework for prosecuting acts of piracy, is a step in the right direction. However, the classification of these drone attacks as piracy remains a grey area, revealing significant legal gaps that must be addressed.

These attacks may more accurately be termed acts of maritime terrorism, a concept though overlapping with piracy is distinct from it. While piracy typically involves acts of violence or theft at sea for private gain, maritime terrorism though not a single specific legal offence is often used as an umbrella term for a range of criminal activity at sea or from the sea.

Often the concept of maritime terrorism is conflated with offences involving violence at sea, but this is not accurate in all situations. The key elements of maritime terrorism<sup>26</sup> are as follows:-

- a. Offence includes acts of violence, or the facilitation of violence, or the transport of terrorists or associated materials;
- b. Offence is committed by private actors;
- c. Offence is committed at sea or using ships;
- d. Intent to create fear in the minds of a group of people forms an explicit or overarching component (“chapeau”) of the offence.

### **Implications**

With the increasing intensity of the Hamas-Israel War and the regional conflicts, it is difficult for India to navigate the complexities of its friendly relations with Israel and Iran. The GOA and the Strait of Hormuz are regarded as some of the most important Choke Points in the IOR, and hence the subsequent political and economic impacts of these drone attacks on global trade are noteworthy.

According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), the average oil flow through the Strait of Hormuz in the first ten months of 2023 was 20 mb/d. Since almost 30 per cent of the world's maritime oil trade passes through it, any disruption of the flow through the Strait will have a major impact on the world oil markets. About 70 per cent of the oil flowing through the Strait is directed towards Asia. However, if the shipping lanes are disturbed, only 4.2 mb/d of pipeline capacity is available to divert crude flows to avoid the Strait. This is highly insufficient to meet the current demand. All Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) exports to Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) travel through the Strait, accounting for 20% of global LNG trade. This indicates that there is no other way to bring these volumes to the market. Although a long-lasting disruption is unlikely, even a short-term disruption will have a significant impact on oil markets. The US IEA estimates that in 2022, 82% of crude oil and condensate sailed through the Gulf of Hormuz was transported to the Asian markets. China, India, Japan, and South Korea are the main destinations for crude oil moving through the Hormuz Strait to Asia, accounting for 67 per cent of the flow of crude oil and condensates through the Hormuz Strait in 2022 and early 2023<sup>27</sup>.

India's dependence on energy in the region coupled with its threat to energy imports being affected, even a slight interruption in the transit of goods will not only result in supply delays, a rise in shipping costs, and an increase in world energy prices but also a rise in insurance costs and their premiums. The drone attacks have thrown the economy in disarray and spiked inflation thereby forcing the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to keep the interest rates high<sup>28</sup>. With a heightened risk of maritime operations in the region, for a major trading country like India whose economic interests and energy needs lie in West Asia, it is necessary for her to effectively implement its 'Look West' policy and prioritise the security of its maritime assets traversing the region. For this, it is necessary that India adopts a multi-faceted approach by enhancing its naval capabilities and capacities and strengthening regional and international cooperation to maintain a stable and secure maritime environment.

The attack on the Houthi-Iran drones has introduced a new dimension of complexity into the relations between India and Iran, requiring a balance of India's regional strategy. While all fingers point towards Iran for supporting the Houthis it is necessary that India sits up and takes notice. The attacks not only impact the bilateral relations between India and Iran but also have a catastrophic impact on the regional geopolitical dynamics. This requires India to formulate an informed and nuanced strategic response. Both countries share deep historical and cultural which have over the years transformed into a strategic partnership in areas of energy, trade, and maritime cooperation. The development of Iran's Chabahar port is an important component of India's regional connectivity initiatives and shows the strategic importance of bilateral relations. Chabahar Port, situated in southeastern Iran, is a vital element of India's regional connectivity initiatives and plays a decisive part in improving trade and economic cooperation between India and Iran. As a solution to the existing issues, India engaged in diplomatic efforts to address the root causes of regional conflicts and contribute to a stable and secure maritime environment. Our External Affairs Minister (EAM) S Jaishanker visited Iran for a series of high-level diplomatic meetings in January 2024.

Engaging in dialogue with Iranian counterpart, the EAM stressed expressed his strong displeasure over the “perceptible increase in threats to the safety of maritime commercial traffic”<sup>29</sup>. While India must follow a collaborative approach to secure its primary areas of interest, it is often argued that India always plays the role of a mediator through strategic silence and neutrality.

### **Critical Analysis and Way Forward**

To effectively combat these threats, it is imperative that international legal frameworks evolve to address the realities of modern maritime security. Legal instruments must be reinterpreted and amended to include new forms of aggression, such as drone strikes, within the ambit of maritime crimes. This may involve expanding the definition of piracy or establishing a new category for acts of maritime terrorism. Such legal clarity is crucial to ensure that perpetrators can be prosecuted and that states have the necessary legal tools to take preventive and punitive measures.

Enforcement actions at sea must also adapt to these new challenges. As maritime threats evolve, so too must the strategies and technologies employed to counter them. The development of robust enforcement mechanisms, capable of addressing both conventional and unconventional threats, is essential to maintaining the security of international shipping lanes.

Diplomacy plays a critical role in this context. As an influential power in the region, India must navigate these challenges with a careful balance of assertiveness and caution. Strengthening diplomatic ties with key regional players is vital to de-escalating tensions and fostering cooperation in maintaining maritime security. At the same time, India must also leverage its relationships with global powers to build a united front against these threats. Diplomatic engagement should be aimed at fostering mutual understanding and establishing clear norms for behaviour at sea, thereby reducing the risk of conflict escalation.

Collaborations with developed powers are essential to addressing the challenges posed by Houthi-Iran drone strikes. No single nation can effectively counter these threats alone; therefore, a coordinated international response is necessary. This could involve joint naval exercises, intelligence-sharing agreements, and the co-development of technologies designed to detect and neutralize UAV threats. By aligning its efforts with those of other major powers, India can ensure that its maritime interests are protected and that the broader region remains stable.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Houthi-Iran drone strikes highlight the need for a comprehensive and evolving approach to maritime security. Legal frameworks must be amended to keep pace with new forms of aggression, and enforcement strategies must be continually updated to address the dynamic threat landscape. These challenges are exacerbated by the legal ambiguities surrounding such attacks, which do not neatly fit into existing definitions of piracy. Diplomacy, particularly in a region as complex as the West Asia, is crucial for managing these threats, and India, given its strategic importance, must play a leading role in these efforts. Finally, collaborations with developed powers will be indispensable in ensuring that India and its allies are well-equipped to address the growing challenges of maritime security in the 21st century.

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# From Surveillance to Smuggling and Striking: Role of Drones in the India–Pakistan Scenario

## Abstract

This article traces the evolving roles of drones between India and Pakistan. It briefly analyses the military drone programmes and capabilities of India and Pakistan, and provides the trajectory of the evolution of drones from being primarily used for surveillance purposes to now cross-border smuggling of drugs and weapons and precision strikes during military operations. It also highlights the deployment of drones during Operation Sindoor in the May 2025 conflict between India and Pakistan, and how this has underscored the necessity of drone capabilities as an essential requirement on the battlefield.

**Keywords:** Drones, India, Pakistan, Operation Sindoor, Surveillance, UAV

## Introduction

Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), commonly known as drones, have come to acquire a significant place in modern warfare. Their proven efficiency, low cost, and reduced risk to the pilot make them a highly desirable technology among various state and non-state actors across the world. It would not be an exaggeration to say that no battle in contemporary times can be effectively fought without the application of drones in one way or another. Be it for surveillance or strike purposes, drones come in handy in various multidomain operations. Most importantly, drones are no longer concentrated in just a few regions or countries, such as the US and Israel. At present, more than 50 countries have acquired MALE-class armed drones. This number had not crossed even double digits around 2010, which explains the exponential rise in the military application of drones across the world. Furthermore, the speed of drone proliferation among Violent Non-State Actors (VNSAs) has surpassed its diffusion and proliferation among states. From the launch of the US-led “War on Terror” in 2001 to the Armenia–Azerbaijan war, the Russia–Ukraine conflict, and the India–Pakistan conflict, among others, drones have proven to be a frontline necessity in modern warfare. Against this backdrop, this article highlights the evolving role of drones in the India–Pakistan scenario, from being primarily used for surveillance to their use in smuggling and strikes, thereby marking a significant shift and advancement in the way this technology is being deployed.

## Drone Programmes in India and Pakistan

The history of the development of drone programmes for military purposes in India and Pakistan began around the 1980s and 1990s. India’s drone programme was initially started by the DRDO with the development of drones such as Lakshya and Nishant. Indigenously built suicide drone, such as Nagastra-1 and Archer-NG armed tactical drones, have demonstrated their capabilities. This capacity is further buttressed by the development of various swarm drones. It made significant strides in developing the first combat drone, called Rustom-II (TAPAS BH-2021), and DRDO Ghatak; however, they remain in the prototype stage and have yet to meet the operational requirements of the Indian Armed Forces. India imported Searcher and Heron drones from Israel, providing a significant push to its ISR capabilities. The deal worth US\$4 billion signed with the United States to acquire 31 Predator MQ-9B drones shall further strengthen its drone capability. In addition to its public sector, India has a vibrant private sector that has been manufacturing military-grade drones. Companies such as ideaForge, Zen Technologies, Adani Defence, and Garuda Aerospace, among others, are taking the lead in this direction. Furthermore, the Drone Rules, 2021, the ban on imported items except for defence and security purposes, and initiatives such as Drone Shakti Mission, Innovations for Defence Excellence (iDEX) and the Production Linked Incentive (PLI) have further incentivised manufacturers toward indigenous production. However, it is pertinent to note that, despite these measures, India continues to remain dependent on foreign countries, mainly China and Taiwan, for key components such as sensors, motors, cameras, batteries, and chips used in drone manufacturing. Nearly 39 per cent of flight controllers used in India’s smaller drones originate from Chinese manufacturers<sup>1</sup>.

Reliance on external players for the supply chain during times of conflict could become an obstacle due to disruptions of the supply chains and their potential weaponisation by the adversary. The large-scale indigenous final stage production of drones should not be the only priority. Therefore, as Anuj Budhiraja, Vice President, Phillips Additive argues that India has a brief but crucial window of opportunity to take the lead in the global drone economy. The nation must prioritize three enablers in order to take advantage of this opportunity: expanding precise manufacturing capabilities, bolstering domestic supply chains for essential components, and funding workforce development through focused skilling programs and technical education<sup>2</sup>. Because developing a strong and competitive domestic drone ecosystem is a strategic vision rather than just a technological objective<sup>3</sup>. This is particularly imperative, as drones are vulnerable to security breaches through embedded malware.

Drone strikes in Pakistan are not a new phenomenon. Post 9/11, the US launched various drone strikes in Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) along Pakistan’s northern border with Afghanistan to kill the terrorist hideouts belonging to Osama Bin Laden<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, the Pakistan army has been using drone strikes to kill and neutralise the insurgents operating inside Pakistan, particularly the Pakistani Taliban groups in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province bordering Afghanistan. Likewise, militant groups have carried out drone strikes to target the security personnel in the region<sup>5</sup>. The first drone strike by the Pakistani army was announced in the year 2015 when it claimed to have neutralised militants in North Waziristan<sup>6</sup>.

Pakistan developed its first Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicle (UCAV) or combat drone in 2009, named ‘Burraq’. It is named after a mythical character in Islam that is said to have transported the Prophet Muhammad to heaven. Pakistan has also developed indigenous drones of the Shahpar series. As shown in Table 1, Pakistan’s drone capability is greatly backed by support from Turkey and China. From Turkey, Pakistan has acquired the Bayraktar TB2 MALE UCAV and Akinci, a HALE UCAV. Both Turkey and Pakistan are in an advanced stage of finalising a deal related to the co-production of Turkish drones in Pakistan. This will, on the one hand, help Ankara expand its market and, on the other hand, strengthen Pakistan’s drone capability. Likewise, Pakistan has acquired the Rainbow series and Wing Loong series of drones from China. Thus, China has become not only the largest overall arms supplier to Pakistan but also its largest drone supplier.

**Table 1: Drone Suppliers to Pakistan**

S. N	UAV	Country	Manufactured by	Year Ordered	Year(s) of delivery	Quantity Ordered	Category	Notes
1	Luna / Luna NG	Germany	EMT	2006 / 2012	2007, 2008/ 2019	30 + 8	Tactical UAV	Short-range ISR system
2	Falco	Italy	Leonardo (formerly Selex ES)	2006 / 2009	2008, 2009/ 2010, 2011	25 + 25	Tactical UAV (medium-range)	Pakistan coproduced and assembled several units at its Kamra facility in Punjab province.; used for ISR
3	ScanEagle	USA	Insitu	2013	2015	15	Mini / Small Tactical UAV	ISR; FMF fund
4	RQ-11 Raven	USA	AeroVironment	2011	-	-	Small tactical UAV	Light weight, hand launched UAV

5	CH-3	China	CASC	2011	2013-2019	50	UCA V	Capable of AR-1 missiles; licensed assembly produced Burraq/Shahpar variants
6	CH-4A	China	CASC	2018	2021; 2022	10	MAL E / UCA V	Common missile carrier in MENA; used for ISR+strike
7	Wing Loong-1	China	CAIG	2015	2015	5	MAL E / UCA V	Similar to MQ-1 Predator
8	Wing Loong-2	China	CAIG	2018	2021; 2022; 2023	48	MAL E / UCA V	Delivered 13
9	Bayraktar TB2	Türkiye	Baykar	2021	2022; 2023; 2024	9	MAL E / UCA V	Combat-proven; used for precision strikes
10	Akinci	Türkiye	Baykar	2022	2023; 2024	NA	HALE /UCA V	3 Delivered
11	Anka	Türkiye	TAI	N/A	N/A	NA	MAL E/UC AV	Joint Coproduction announced by Turkey and Pakistan in 2021
12	Songar	Türkiye	Asisguard	N/A	N/A	NA	UCA V (Low Altitude)	Quadcopter drone,

Source: SIPRI Datasheet 2025 and Online Sources Compiled by Authors

Note:

CASC= China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation

CAIG= Chengdu Aircraft Industry Group. CAIG is a division of the Aviation Industry Corporation of China (AVIC).

TAI= Turkish Aerospace Industries (TAI)

### Drones in India-Pak Rivalry

For a long time, drones have been used for surveillance and reconnaissance purposes across the India–Pakistan border by both countries. The Kargil Review Committee highlighted the importance of UAVs in preventing unwanted incursions from Pakistan. It was observed that, had better surveillance systems been in place, illegal Pakistani incursions into Indian territory could have been detected at an early stage. Since then, drones have come to be recognised as an important tool in the arsenal of the modern military. Neither country has a specific “drone doctrine” in existence yet, but drones are becoming an important aspect of their overall military doctrines. Drones were initially limited to surveillance purposes; however, their rapid proliferation among terrorist organisations has made them an instrument for smuggling weapons and drugs. This has been further enabled by the easy availability of civilian drones, which are customised to achieve specific objectives. The attack on the Indian Air Force station in Jammu in 2021 by explosive-laden drones was the first drone attack of its kind on Indian territory<sup>7</sup>. Although no casualties were reported, it caused serious rethinking around the real threat the drone had come to posed to India’s security.

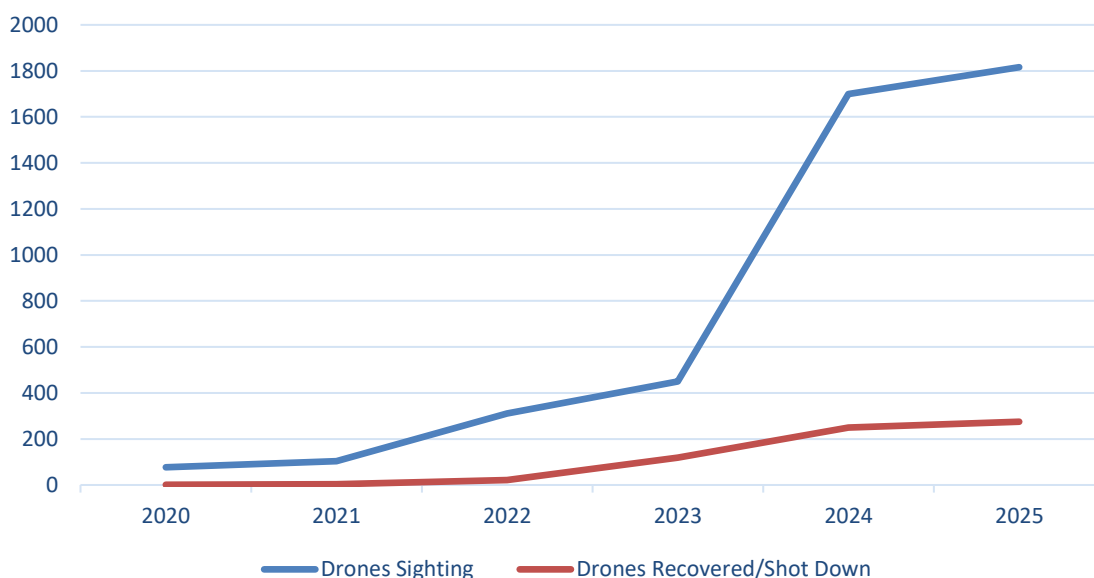
The Border Security Force (BSF), as evident from the figures in Table 2, has neutralised hundreds of drones over the past six years. The exponential rise in drone activity across the border highlights the rapid proliferation of drones, as well as their acquisition and integration by both state and non-state actors into their offensive strategies. According to BSF officials, the size of drones and consignments has decreased, while the number of cheaper drones operating across the India–Pakistan border has increased<sup>8</sup>. While Lahore in Pakistan has been the epicentre of the origin of these drones, Punjab in India has been the recipient of most of them. Bordering districts such as Amritsar, Tarn Taran, Ferozepur, and Gurdaspur have emerged as hotspots for drone-driven drug drops<sup>9</sup>. In Rajasthan, the Ganganagar district is the major hotspot of drone-driven drug activities.

**Table 2: Drone activity along the India-Pak Border**

Year	Number of Drones Sighting (Approx.)	Number of Drones Shot Down/Recovered (Approx.)
2025	1816	255-275
2024	1500-2000	250
2023	400-500	119
2022	311	22
2021	104	3
2020	77	1

Source: Border Security Force (BSF)

### Drone Activity Along India-Pak Border



Considering the increasing cases of smuggling through drones, the Punjab government launched the ‘Baaj Akh’ Anti-Drone System to curb cross-border smuggling<sup>10</sup>. BSF has launched the Central Drone Forensic Lab (CDFL) for analysing, tracing, and deconstructing drones coming from Pakistan. This will help the forces to understand the route, strength and limitations of the UAVs flying across the border. BSF has also opened a Drone Warfare School at its training institute in Tekanpur, Madhya Pradesh, to equip the security personnel with the skills to operate and fly the drones for various defensive and offensive purposes<sup>11</sup>. These developments indicate that, with increasing sophistication in drone technology, smugglers have also brought changes to their strategies.

They have minimised the size of drones to evade detection and have diversified, if not diverted, routes from Punjab to Rajasthan to overcome counter-drone systems. Furthermore, the waterlogged regions and rugged terrain along the border make monitoring cumbersome, which smugglers appear to be exploiting to their advantage. The preparedness of the state government and the BSF indicates a growing realisation of the gravity of the security threat these activities could pose.

### Operation Sindoor and Drones

Operation Sindoor, launched by India on 7th May 2025 against Pakistan in response to the dastardly terrorist attack in the Pahalgam district of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, marked an inflexion point in the deployment of drones between India and Pakistan. India launched missile strikes on 9 terrorist bases in Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), drawing a new strategic red line<sup>12</sup>. Drones played a primary role in surveillance and a major supporting role in carrying out strikes. It was for the first time that both India and Pakistan used drones against each other for both surveillance and precision strikes in a direct conflict. Both countries used a mix of indigenous and foreign unmanned systems to gain an advantage over one another. India used Israeli systems such as Searcher and Heron, along with indigenous systems, as shown in Table 3. The usage of the Harop drone, a loitering munition, to target Pakistan’s terrorist sites and bases was widely reported. According to an analysis by India Today, Indian drones either hit, crashed or were shot down in at least 13 places, as shown in image 1, in Punjab and Sindh provinces<sup>13</sup>.

**Image 1: Indian Drone Impact Sites in Pakistan**



Source: India Today

The special briefings issued by India’s Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) on 8, 9, and 10 May 2025 confirmed the employment of UAVs and UCAVs by Pakistan, alongside other long-range weapon systems, including loitering munitions and fighter aircraft. According to the MEA, these systems were used to target both civilian areas and military infrastructure in India<sup>14</sup>. Pakistan deployed both indigenous UAVs as well as Turkish- and Chinese-made foreign unmanned systems. These likely included Bayraktar TB2s, YIHA and Songar drones of Turkey; rainbow and Wing Loong series drones from China and indigenous platforms such as Burraq and Shahper. As per Indian officials, on May 08-09, Pakistan sent around 300-400 drones to 36 locations.

On May 09-10, Pakistani drones were sighted at 26 locations along the International Border and LoC with Pakistan in Jammu & Kashmir, Punjab, Rajasthan and Gujarat, as shown in image 2<sup>15</sup>. These were neutralised by India’s multi-layered air defence system such as S-400 and indigenous Akashteer system. Loitering munitions were used to find and destroy high-value targets, including radar and missile systems of Pakistan<sup>16</sup>.

**Image 2: Major locations of Pakistani drone sightings in India during Operation Sindoor**



Source: Government of India

Note: Locations have been marked with the help of ‘Google My Maps’ by authors

The deployment of drones in Operation Sindoor during this conflict demonstrated that drones are not only the future but also the present of warfare. Although the scale of their deployment and engagement was not at par with the Russia-Ukraine war, it brought to the fore the necessity of having a strong drone capability and ecosystem. It provided both countries about each other’s drone capability suitable for an active battlefield environment. This is evident from various reports regarding the potential acquisition of more drones in the times to come. Post Operation Sindoor, the Indian Army has equipped 380 infantry battalions with drone platoons comprising ISR, kamikaze, and armed drones<sup>17</sup>. The Indian Army is also reported to be in the advanced stage of acquiring 850 indigenous kamikaze drones worth 2000 crores<sup>18</sup>. This shall empower the infantry by strengthening their capability to see, sense, and strike beyond the line of sight.

**Table 3: Indigenous Drones used by India during Operation Sindoor**

<b>Drone name</b>	<b>Type/Size/Category</b>	<b>Developer(s)</b>	<b>Key features</b>
Hawk, Scout, Eagle	Surveillance Drones, Mini/Fixed Wing	Zuppa Geo Navigation Technologies Pvt. Ltd. (India)	Cyber Secure
Nagastra-1	Loitering Munition, Mini/Fixed Wing	Solar Industries (Nagpur) & ZMotion (Bengaluru)	GPS-enabled, Low acoustic signature; Reusable if mission aborted—a rare global capability.
ALS-50	Loitering Munition Mini/Hybrid	Tata Advanced Systems Limited (TASL)	Anti-jamming technology
JM-1	Compact Loitering Munition	Johnnette Technologies	Best for mountainous regions due to compact size.

Source: Manish, & Dyarakoti, A. S. (2025). Drones in India–Pakistan conflict: a comparative study with special focus on Operation Sindoor. *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2025.2587738>

The proliferation of drones and their increasing usage by both states and non-state actors also have implications for the regional stability and escalation dynamics. Drones are known as easy-to-deploy instruments, causing no collateral damage and risk to the pilot, unlike a conventional manned aircraft. They lower the political and operational threshold, but at the same time, they also create uncertainty and ambiguity, blurring the lines between “surveillance” and “strike”<sup>19</sup>. Therefore, their deployment also runs the risk of increasing escalation dynamics in the region, where mistrust is deeply entrenched, and clear communication is hampered due to historical rivalry and acrimony<sup>20</sup>.

### **Conclusion**

The evolution of drones in the India–Pakistan rivalry marks a significant shift over the past few years. From their initial use for surveillance purposes, drones are now also being used for the smuggling of drugs and ammunition, as well as for carrying out precision strikes across the border. Operation Sindoor witnessed both India and Pakistan employing their drone and counter-drone capabilities. The conflict brought to the fore the significance of drones in conflicts between India and Pakistan. Given India’s continued dependence on imports for critical drone components, it is important to develop and strengthen domestic supply chain capabilities to ensure that India becomes self-reliant in drone manufacturing and free from any security vulnerabilities arising from the use of imported systems. As drones emerge as an important weapon on the battlefield, both India and Pakistan are likely to witness a greater arms race in drones in the future.

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# **Pakistan's strategic geography and US-Pakistan relations in the 21st century: a rimland perspective**

## **Introduction**

Pakistan, after independence in 1947, joined the US-led Western bloc and collective defence partnerships such as the South-East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO). As a part of the American containment strategy in South Asia, it subsequently received billions in economic, military and developmental assistance from the US and the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, along with multiple bailouts. US-Pakistan military cooperation rose exponentially, such as multiple defence exports or providing airbases for launching U-2 surveillance flights against the Soviet Union. US-Pakistan cooperation rose exponentially post-1979, following the anti-US Islamic Revolution in Iran, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Since then, Pakistan became an important strategic outpost for its observations and interventions in West Asia, and a crucial logistical base for the US to counter Soviet forces, using 'mujahid' tribal fighters launched from Pakistan to fight a guerilla war against Soviet regulars, who, following Soviet withdrawal in 1989, regrouped to form the Taliban. (Rubin, 2002; Dawn, 2012; Hussain, 2016; Javaid & Mushtaq, 2025)

Historically, US-Pakistan relations have been checkered, with religious extremism, terrorism, and a praetorian political system jeopardizing US support. However, containment pursuits led to deliberate oversight, with the regimes of military dictators being legitimised, human rights violations being condoned, and the destabilization of Jammu and Kashmir and Pakistan-Occupied Jammu Kashmir being slighted at its behest. Pakistan's religious solidarity with the Arab-Muslim world, and staunch criticism of Israel, a steadfast ally of the US, was also sidelined for geopolitical pursuits. Therefore, while Pakistan facilitated the Sino-US rapprochement under President Nixon, it was not so cordial during Raegan's tenure- until 1979. This relationship may be characterised as one based on strategic interests and realism, rather than a deep bilateral synergy and belief in common global values and a rules-based order.

## **Pakistan's geographical and political features**

Pakistan is situated between the geographical subregions of South and West Asia, bordering three countries- India to the east, and Afghanistan and Iran to the west. It shares a 2,430 km land boundary with Afghanistan and a 909-km long boundary with Iran. Additionally, it has a 1,046 km long coastline to the Arabian sea, with ports such as Karachi and Gwadar. Dominated by the Punjabi and Sindhi ethno-linguistic groups, it constitutes two of the four administrative regions- Punjab and Sindh. The other two, namely Balochistan and FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas) are constituted of predominantly Baloch and Pashto tribal societies, sharing ethnic contiguity with Iran and Afghanistan, respectively. The latter two regions also share the same dry, arid terrain with low rainfall and therefore a nomadic tribe and clan-centric lifestyle is pursued by the communities in sparsely-populated terrain. (Dawn, 2009; Burki & Ziring, 2019)

The above factors have contributed to a heavy political imbalance between the eastern and western parts, due to most military and political ranks rising from the east. This has led to rising separatist tendencies in Balochistan and FATA. Compounded by mineral exploitation, administrative neglect, military high-handedness, and "ethnic superiority" of the Punjabi Muslims has led to constant political movements and armed resistance since Pakistan's creation in 1947 (Deodhar, 2025). Therefore, the Western regions have heavy military presence in close proximity to both Iran and Afghanistan, states Pakistan alleges to stir up turmoil in its borders. The importance of these facilities shall be studied in the subsequent parts.

## **US-Pakistan cooperation post-2001**

Following the devastating September attacks in the US, and the subsequent launch of the US-led 'Global War on Terror', allied forces launched a massive attack against Taliban-held Afghanistan in order to eliminate the attacks' mastermind, Al Qaeda's Osama bin Laden, and to oust the Taliban in favour of a democratic government. However, it was an uphill battle for a non-regional military force to fight against a guerilla army entrenched in Afghanistan's inhospitable mountain terrain.

Therefore, the US required a strong regional ally, which would act as a launching pad for the initial invasion, and a logistical partner to supply the offensive. This led to the return of the US-Pakistan strategic partnership, enduring beyond the US's hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021.

Between 1947 and 2024, the US has granted Pakistan over \$144 billion (adjusted for inflation), the details of which have been represented in the table below.

Type	1947-2000* (current)	1947-2000* (constant)	2001-2024* (current)	2001-2024* (constant)
Appropriated and planned	NA	NA	14.95	19.05
Obligations	11.67	54.99	19	25.48
Disbursements	NA	NA	17.97	23.83
President's Budget Requests	NA	NA	16.65	20.79
Total	11.67	54.99	51.92	89.15
*figures in billion USD	Total (current) amount from 1947 to 2024 (inclusive)*			63.59
	Total (constant) amount from 1947 to 2024 (inclusive)*			144.14

Images 1 and 2: US financial assistance to Pakistan from 1947 to 2024, accounting for original values and value adjusted for inflation.

Source: (Department of State, 2025. Data compiled by author.)

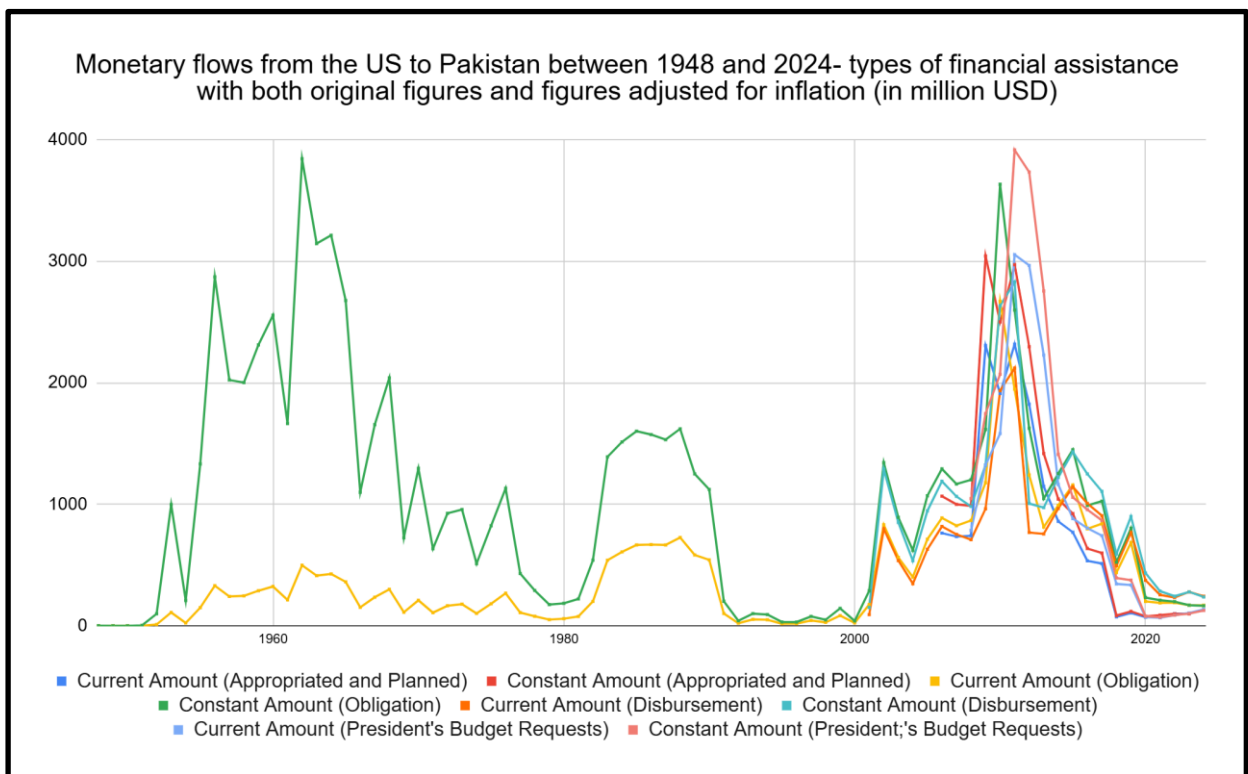


Image 2: Time-value representation of US financial assistance to Pakistan, showing a sharp rise post 2000

While regular financial aid has been disbursed to Pakistan, there is a sharp uptick of funds after 2001 as represented above, pouring into Pakistan after 2001, suggesting that the USA intended to consolidate the US-Pakistan relationship to sustain its campaign in Afghanistan.

Despite reservations of the diversion of funds to terrorist activities and the discovery of bin Laden next to an army garrison in central Pakistan, the relation has been one of the most robust ties in the 21st century. China's pursuit of the Belt and Road Initiative, the \$63 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the massive Pakistani imports of Chinese weaponry has challenged the US' hegemony as the dominant external actor in Pakistani politics and economy. It is, however, interesting to note, that while Pakistan's strategic relationship with China has long surpassed that with the US, the US is doubling down on Pakistani partnership to avoid losing a concrete ally in the region. Therefore, while the Chinese relationship is strategic, the US alliance is purely a tactical maneuver to secure short-term interests (Sharma, 2025).

Pakistan remains one of the closest military allies of the US in the Western Indian Ocean Region (IOR), recently leading anti-piracy and ship-lane defence operations under the multinational Combined Maritime Force 151, running anti-piracy and ship-lane defence operations since the Houthi attacks on shipping in the Red Sea (CMF, 2025). Additionally, as tensions with Iran and West Asia rise and China becomes increasingly ambitious in the IOR, the US seeks to insure its force projection in the region by attaching a potent land, maritime, air and nuclear power in a volatile South Asian region to its long list of US allies in the region. Pakistan's unique position- which land access to Central and West Asia, and , East Asia (through Pakistan-occupied Jammu Kashmir and the Shaksgam Corridor) alongside a long coastline to patrol the Western Arabian Sea and the Strait of Hormuz, makes it as important a relation as a US ally in the 21st century, as it was in the post-WW2 containment era of Cold War ideo-military confrontation.

### **Rimland Theory: facets and relevance**

Halford Mackinder in his 1919 book 'Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction' propounds the heartland theory- a predominantly interior, Central Eurasian territory surrounded from all sides by mountain ranges, river basins and northern ice floes. This region was surrounded by the coastal regions of Eurasia and Africa (termed the inner crescent), beyond which came the insular seas (Mackinder, 1904; 1919/1942). Nicholas Spykman expanded upon his works in the 'The Geography of the Peace', propounding the rimland theory- the geographical buffer with equal access to the heartland and the surrounding insular seas, therefore heaving a blend of land and sea power. This region, which Mackinder describes as the 'inner crescent', is of paramount importance to any power that seeks to control the heartland by denying it access to the sea- a vital aspect of boosting comprehensive national power.

The heartland is forced to assume an autarkic economic model. To gain more economic and territorial power, it must gain access to warm water ports, maritime trade routes and by extension, an offensive naval capability- by conquering the nations between itself and the sea. Conversely, should a regional or external actor seek to limit the expansion of the heartland, maritime states of the rimland are the first line of defence to check the otherwise-self-sufficient heartland (Spykman, 1944/1969). While this theory was propounded to check the expansion of the USSR (located within the Central Eurasian heartland as designated by Mackinder) and Communist ideology into the rimland states during the Cold War, it is equally applicable to any maritime or rimland power controlling or intending to control any proximate continental state which lacks it.

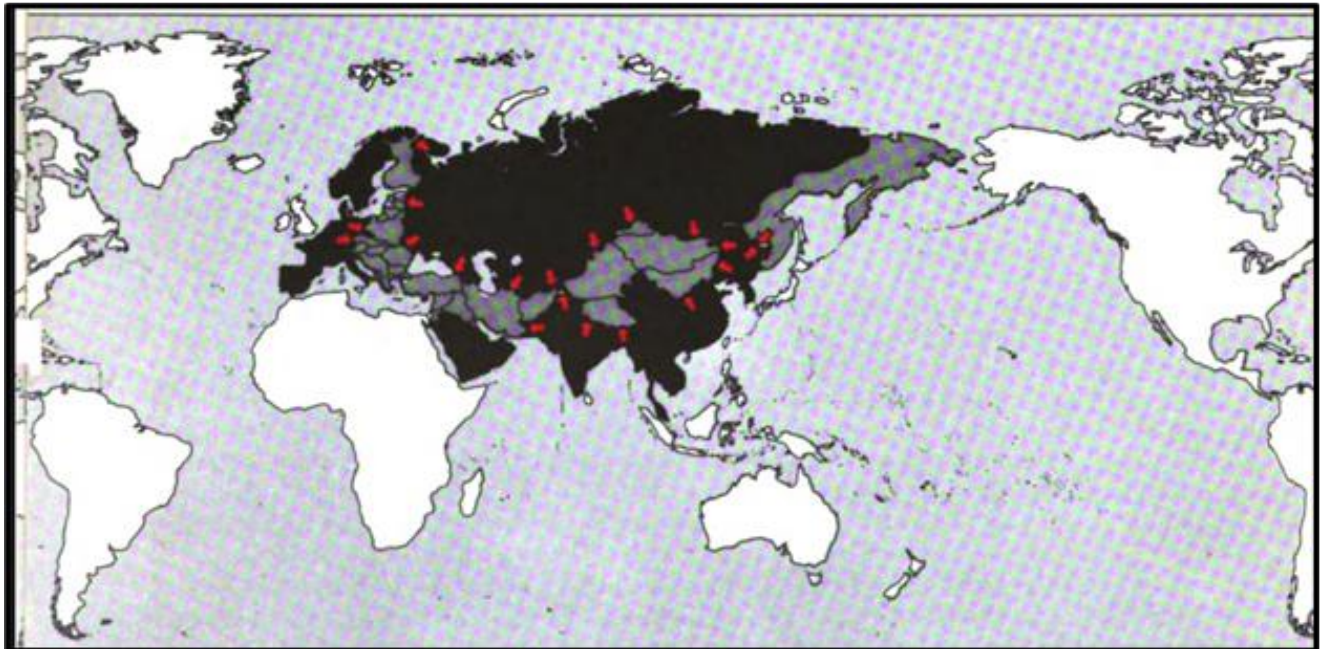


Image 3: The rimland and heartland, in their desire to expand territory and control its resources, clash in a 'bufferzone' of countries. The rimland is crucial in denying both this buffer and the heartland access to the sea.

(Source: Spykman, 1944/1969. *The Geography of the Peace*. p.52)

In the 21st century, the growth of sea power ensures that rimland states both encourage and deter economic growth and power by regulating sea access to their continental neighbours. Therefore, rimland states are all the more important to launch attacks on continental states in order to control belligerent entities. As such states lack access to open oceans, they are strictly dependent on land routes for trade, supplies and survival, which may be blockaded for strategic gains. Afghanistan also shares boundaries with Central Asian states- Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan- which although Muslim states, do not share the extremist tendencies of the Taliban. However, they chose to stay out of providing logistical support to the US to avoid becoming dependents or opening a fresh conflict with the Taliban and its transborder networks. An US-Iran alliance was challenged by decades of hostilities and sanctions, while the US lacked the military alliance, and a long, contiguous border as required with India. Therefore, Pakistan remained the only possible- and the most probable- state from which to launch its offensive against the Taliban.

### **Analysis**

Pakistan remained the largest logistical partner to the US war effort in Afghanistan (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021). The initial days of the Kandahar and Tora Bora campaigns were marked by intense combat for the US to gain a foothold in the rugged Afghan terrain. At this juncture, former US Secretary of State Richard Armitage demanded complete permission for overflight and landing operations, apart from on-demand territorial access for troops and logistics. (Chandio & Khuhro, 2019). Following Pakistan's acceptance, (verifiable) US military bases emerged in the following locations.

Facility	Location	Region	Use by US forces
PAF Shahbaz	Jacobabad	Sindh, bordering Balochistan	CIA operations, Armed drone operations
PAF Samungli	Quetta	Balochistan	Logistics and situational use
Dalbandin	Dalbandin	Balochistan	Rough airstrip, for situational multipurpose use
Al-Shamsi	Wachuk	Balochistan	Private airfield leased for US drone operations
PNS Makran	Pasni	Balochistan	Logistical operations and supply convoys
PAF Pasni	Pasni	Balochistan	Rough airstrip, for situational multipurpose use
Tarbela	Tarbela	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	Logistics and transit base
PAF Peshawar	Peshawar	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	Logistics and transit base
PAF Chaklala	Rawalpindi	Panjab	Logistics and troop movements
Key	PAF	Pakistan Air Force base	
	PNS	Pakistan Naval Ship	

Image 4: A List of Pakistan Air Force and Pakistan Navy bases used by the US Armed Forces for various purposes as part of its offensive against the Taliban

(Source: The News, 2002; Woods, 2011; Pike, 2025a, 2025b. Table compiled by author.)



Image 5: A representation of US bases with respect to the Pakistan-Afghanistan border

(Source: Google Earth, 2025. Map generated by author with inputs from The News, 2002; Woods, 2011; Pike, 2025a, 2025b.)

It is evident from the above image how all operational bases have been established in close proximity to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, with logistical assistance from central and Eastern Pakistan, This helps validate Spykman’s World-War 2 ers theory in the 21st century fraught with varied non-state actors and national military capabilities. The advantage of Pakistan’s naval frontier, as part of the Asian rimland, benefits the US, a naval power without match, to ensure a steady supply of men and material to Afghanistan without violating Afghanistan's or other states’ national airspaces. As Spykman writes,

“The location of a state may be described from the point of view of world-location, that is, with reference to the land masses and oceans of the world as a whole, or from the point of view of regional location, that is, with reference to the territory of other states and immediate surroundings.” (Spykman, 1938. p. 40)

Therefore, it was Pakistan’s regional location in close proximity to Afghanistan, and its world-location as a maritime state of the rimland, that facilitated close US-Pakistan coordination in the 21st century. On the other hand, a Pakistani military leadership which dominated decision-making ensured strong returns for itself- from misappropriated financial inflows, becoming the fulcrum of a relationship which was forced by military necessities. Therefore, Pakistan’s ‘strategic decision’ to join hands with the US was matched by the US’ own interests in Pakistan’s geographic advantage and its own interests and objectives in Afghanistan.

The Red Sea and the Western IOR is one of the hotspots for global piracy, arms and narcotics smuggling, and is also the site of several attacks against commercial shiplanes due to the value of goods travelling through the Suez Canal. A 2022 dossier highlights a range of pressing issues- from a belligerent Iran, a volatile Iraq and Syria, violent non-state actors such as ISIS, al-Qaeda and the Houthis, as well as the strategic threat of a growing Chinese presence in the IOR- all of which compound to pose a direct, allied or indirect threat to US interests in the region as well as its broader economic and foreign policy goals in Asia and the Indo-Pacific. (US Senate, 2022). Therefore, for a global power like the US, a defensive naval presence is essential in such chokepoints of global trade. To that end, Bahrain hosts the US Central Command (CENTCOM) and the US Fifth Fleet Carrier Strike Group (US NHHHC, 2025). It also works with partner navies in the region to secure the region by means of joint patrols. In such scenarios of uncertainty that the US-Pakistan relationship has evolved into a robust security cooperation. Pakistan has since become a key regional contributor to the Combined Maritime Force- a 47-nation partnership involved in patrolling operations in West Asia, with 5 combined task forces.

	Domain
CTF 150	Maritime Security
CTF 151	Anti-piracy operations
CTF 152	Gulf Maritime Security
CTF 153	Red Sea Maritime Security
CTF 154	Maritime Security Training
Additional	Joint Maritime Information Centre

Image 6: Constituent task forces of the Combined Maritime Force

Source: (CMF, 2024. Table compiled by author)

Such permeation into every aspect of West Asian maritime security makes Pakistan a credible deterrent against both Iran, considered the US' only long-term adversary in the region, and violent terrorist entities, with Pakistan interdicting huge quantities of arms and narcotics on the high seas in collaboration with the US. Therefore, Pakistan's decision to depend on the US has deepened regional cooperation, as a possible stepping stone between military purchases and joint training exercises, and naval berthing agreements and direct or indirect assistance in times of war. Therefore, it can be theorized that current US-Pakistan cooperation in the naval domain is a shoring-up of allies and military powers in West Asia, should a pan-region or a US-China conflict erupt. Additionally, a deep relationship would also help reduce the comprehensive Sino-Pakistan cooperation in the IOR, a policy of appeasement to deny the Chinese access to the Indian Ocean and to reduce the efficacy of its 'String of Pearls' initiative. This ensures some degree of US control over the Central Asian and Chinese interiors, which find their own sea access through Iran and Pakistan.

### **Examining the permanence of the relationship**

The US-Pakistan relationship in the 21st century continues to weather the peaks and troughs of terrorism, coups, ideological divergences and foundational distrust as well as during the Cold War period. Despite the bin Laden debacle, aid cuts during the first Trump administration, the US-Indian strategic partnership, rising Chinese prominence in Pakistan and a shift in American focus to European and Indo-Pacific theatres, both nations synchronize in a multitude of economic and security issues, bypassing socio-political clashes. Pakistan's propensity to run with the hare and hunt with the hound has allowed it to maintain a largely flexible foreign policy by balancing competing American and Chinese interests of accommodating tactical American demands while seeking long-term strategic benefits from its 'iron brother' China.

This leads us to ask the question, if it was the US which cultivated Pakistan as a dependent ally or vice versa. Mahan's sea power theory requires nations to establish secure bases in locations wherein a maritime power seeks to establish commercial and military supremacy (Mahan, 1890, pp. 82–83). On the other hand, Spykman's rimland theory suggested that the rimland nation holds the power to influence the heartland, and therefore the external power is dependent upon its support to control the interior. Stephen Walt, writing on the process of alliance formation, uses Nixon's Israel policy to suggest that providing assistance to a dependent state empowers it, sometimes making it too strong to require the support of the benefactor (Walt, 1985, pp. 29-30). Therefore, it may not be outlandish to suggest it is the latter proposition which may hold true.

There is an evident inequality between the military and economic prowess and global influence of the US and Pakistan. However, Spykman, his predecessors and his successors all hold true the first dictum of geopolitics- that geography dictates foreign policy and strategy. Therefore, we may analyse this relationship as Pakistan not supporting the US invasion of Afghanistan, but being the fulcrum and facilitator of US foreign policy in South Asia. This might hold the realist explanation to US support to dictatorial regimes, humanitarian abuses, religious separatism and terrorism and at times support to terror outfits fighting US and coalition forces in Afghanistan and the Western IOR- it was but a small sacrifice to ensure US military presence in the region, and therefore to fulfill the core interest of US foreign policy to maintain a credible presence through a network of dependable allied states occupying the rimland of South Asia and the Persian Gulf.

### **Conclusion**

US-Pakistan cooperation is an evident convergence of mutually beneficial interests pushed together by Pakistan's optimal geography, which Pakistan was strategic enough to market as its universal selling point, and the US was pragmatic enough to utilise to its advantage. This helps justify the relationship, for it is antithetical to the US' proclaimed global pursuits of liberal democracy and peace and stability to engage so comprehensively with a nation rocked by political instability, religious extremism, an overbearing military and a justified commitment to supporting terror and subversive networks in other countries. US-Pakistan relations in the 21st century, as in the period before, stand in testimony to Spykman's predictions, that the rimland is the first defence against the expansion of the heartland, but the first line of offence for the conquest of the heartland. Therefore, the nation which controls the heartland controls both the heartlandic states that seek expansion, and the extra-regional allies which intend to establish a foothold.

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# Revisiting the Baloch Insurgency: connecting dots between Internal Politics and Regional Dynamics

## Abstract

The demand for the independence of Baluchistan is rooted in their past struggle during colonial period and even after independence. This struggle has led to the emergence of several Baloch nationalist organizations fighting for justice for Baluchistan. Their idea of justice spans from their concerns about the neglect of their development, absence of due representation in the governance, tactics of suppression used by the government of Pakistan, exploitation of the resources of Baluchistan, opposition to the involvement of China through CPEC and demand for separate state of Baluchistan. This struggle is more or less violent much closer to terror. Due to the label of terrorism they naturally lose legitimacy, are considered as internal security threats and invite military and punitive action against them.

However the Baloch threat to Pakistan's security has different shades. The finance, training, arms and ammunition and the logistic support received by Baloch insurgent groups cannot be without the outside support to the movement and also support from within Pakistan. The roots of the Baluch nationalist movement can be traced back to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and its aftermath. The links can be found between the cross-border threats from Afghanistan, the terrorist organizations operating within Pakistan and Baloch insurgent groups nationalist struggle. These threats are interwoven with several similarities in their objectives and operational strategies. This article tries to connect the dots between these factors against the canvas of the larger regional politics and internal politics of Pakistan.

**Key words:** Baluchistan, Baluch insurgency, Afghanistan, Tehrik-i-Taliban, Durand Line, Terrorism

## Introduction

The demand for the independence of Balochistan has its roots in the colonial period and their struggle has continued after the creation of Pakistan in 1947. Several Baloch nationalist organisations have emerged fighting for justice and rights for the people of Baluchistan. Baluchistan faces multiple issues such as the neglect of economic development, inadequate political representation in the governance structure of Pakistan, the use of coercive measures by the Pakistani state, and the exploitation of Balochistan's natural resources without proportional benefits to the local population. In recent years, opposition to China's involvement in the region through the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has raised concern. All these problems have culminated into the demand for independence of Baluchistan.

The Baluch separatist movement have often turned violent resorting to armed insurgency, attacks on Government institutions and leaders. Because of these strategies these movements are often equated with terrorism by the Government of Pakistan undermining their legitimacy. The Baluch separatist movements are framed as internal security threats that could be handled only through the military means.

The Baloch insurgency is a complex and multidimensional challenge to Pakistan's security. The capacity of insurgent groups to acquire finance, training, weapons, and logistical support has been sustained because of assistance from both internal networks and external actors. This makes the Baloch movement not only a domestic political conflict but also an international conflict. The Baluchistan issue also has to be understood with reference to the regional dynamics. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the subsequent militarisation of the Afghanistan–Pakistan border, the development of cross border militant networks, the armed groups and fundamentalist forces within Pakistan are the overlapping developments. It is interesting to trace connections between cross-border militant networks operating in Afghanistan, various armed groups within Pakistan, and Baloch insurgent organisations in terms of their operational methods and strategic objectives. This article attempts to connect these different dimensions and situate the Baloch insurgency within the broader framework of regional geopolitics and Pakistan's internal political dynamics.

## **Pakistan–Afghanistan Conflict and the Rise of TTP**

Pakistan today faces a complex and multidimensional security crisis. Two major challenges operate simultaneously: an external security threat emerging from Afghanistan and an internal insurgency in Balochistan. The situation is further complicated by the presence of a third actor—Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)—a militant organization operating along the Afghanistan–Pakistan border with connections to both the Afghan Taliban and militant networks within Baluchistan. These three powerful and interrelated forces significantly influence and destabilize Pakistan’s internal and external security equilibrium (Times of India, 2025).

The current tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan intensified after Pakistan launched airstrikes in Afghanistan in October 2025 targeting the leadership of the TTP, including its emir Noor Wali Mehsud. The TTP—often referred to as the Pakistani Taliban—was founded in 2007 by Baitullah Mehsud as an umbrella organization of militant groups operating in Pakistan’s tribal areas. The group emerged largely in response to Pakistan’s military operations against militants associated with Al-Qaeda in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Since its formation, the TTP has carried out numerous suicide bombings and attacks targeting Pakistan’s military personnel, law-enforcement agencies, and civilians. The organization has been designated as a terrorist group by Pakistan as well as the United Nations.

Following the withdrawal of US and NATO forces from Afghanistan in 2021, large stockpiles of military equipment were left behind. Many of these weapons entered regional black markets through the porous Afghanistan–Pakistan border and became accessible to militant organizations including the TTP.

After the Taliban regained power in Afghanistan in 2021, Pakistan initially welcomed the new government in Kabul. Former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan described the Taliban’s return as Afghans having “broken the shackles of slavery” (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023). Pakistan expected the Afghan Taliban government to dismantle TTP networks operating from Afghan territory. The Taliban leadership refused to take decisive action against the group, which eventually contributed to growing tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Finally the operation of October 2025 triggered retaliation by Afghan forces and led to a serious deterioration in relations between the two neighbouring countries.

### **Historical Roots of Pakistan–Afghanistan Strategic Relations**

The origins of the Pakistan–Afghanistan security relationship can be traced back to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. During the Cold War, the United States supported Afghan resistance fighters—known as the Mujahideen—through Pakistan’s intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). This cooperation created a strategic alliance between the United States, Pakistan and Afghan resistance groups.

After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, direct US involvement in Afghanistan declined, but Pakistan continued to play a major role in Afghan politics. During the 1990s, Pakistan’s intelligence establishment supported the emergence of the Afghan Taliban by providing logistical assistance, training and strategic guidance.

Pakistan’s support for the Taliban continued until the September 11 attacks, after which Pakistan joined the US-led Global War on Terror. Although Pakistan was officially allied with the United States and NATO forces, the Pakistani establishment continued to maintain covert links with Taliban networks.

During the period of US military presence in Afghanistan, US focused on dismantling Taliban networks operating along the Durand Line, particularly in the Pashtun-dominated areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and FATA. As an ally of the US Pakistan also carried out military operations in these regions. US and Pakistani actions contributed to the radicalization of local militant groups and eventually led to the emergence of the TTP.

## **The Role of Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)**

The regional landscape was more complicated with the emergence of Islamic State – Khorasan Province (ISKP). ISKP emerged in 2015 in the background of instability created by the Syrian Civil War and the power vacuum in Iraq.

ISKP attracted defectors from the TTP, Al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban who were dissatisfied with the Taliban's nationalist orientation and its willingness to engage in diplomatic negotiations. Unlike the Taliban's relatively localized agenda, ISKP promotes a transnational jihadist ideology and has been responsible for several sectarian attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

After the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan in 2021, they launched operations against ISKP militants. As a result, many ISKP fighters got relocated across the Durand Line into Pakistan's Balochistan, where ongoing political instability and insurgency created opportunities for militant networks to operate.

However, the ideological divide between ISKP and Baloch nationalist groups prevented deep cooperation. While Baloch insurgent organizations pursue a secular ethno-nationalist agenda seeking autonomy or independence, ISKP follows a radical Islamist ideology. As both Baluchistan and Afghanistan do not support ISKP, Pakistan being unhappy with both Afghanistan and Baluchistan started using ISKP against Baloch insurgents as well as Taliban.

### **Balochistan as a Strategic Militant Hub**

During the US-led war in Afghanistan, Baluchistan became a hub for militants when several Taliban leaders took refuge in the provincial capital Quetta with Pakistani government's covert support. The Taliban leadership council—commonly referred to as the Quetta Shura—coordinated insurgent operations in southern Afghanistan from this location. However, Baloch nationalist movements strongly opposed Pakistan's policy of sheltering Afghan Taliban networks in the province. Baloch leaders feared that the presence of religious militant groups would overshadow their secular nationalist struggle and the Pakistani government would use these networks to fight against Baluch insurgents.

### **Emerging Nexus Between TTP and Baloch Militancy**

The Baloch insurgency is rooted in their ethno-nationalist demands whereas TTP believes in militancy and religious extremism. Despite significant ideological differences, tactical cooperation between the TTP and certain Baloch militant groups has gradually emerged in recent years. The shared hostility and pragmatism probably made them realise that their cooperation would enhance their operational capabilities.

In 2014, Pakistan's military launched two major operations targeting militant bases of TTP. This weakened the organization and many militants fled to Afghanistan supporting the Afghan Taliban's struggle against the US forces. To strengthen its base TTP planned to expand its influence beyond the Pashtun Belt and started reaching out to Baluch leaders. Initially ideological differences prevented the collaboration. But After 2018 TTP under the leadership of Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, began to rebuild the alliance and the efforts were intensified after Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan in 2021. In 2022, several Baloch military commanders who had fought alongside Afghan Taliban got aligned with TTP which helped it with transportation routes and support network across Baluchistan. A number of Baloch groups led by figures such as Aslam Baloch, Mazar Baloch, Akram Baloch and Asim Baloch have reportedly joined the organization. The TTP has also started expanding its base in Baluchistan. It has established organizational structures in Baloch majority areas along the southern coast and Pashtun dominated areas near the Afghan border. It tries to integrate local militants into the broader insurgency campaign against Pakistan. For Baloch insurgent groups, extensive experience of TTP in guerrilla warfare, suicide bombings and use of explosives devices is of great advantage. They can now get trained and receive logistical support and resort to more sophisticated modern techniques in their operations. (Patro, 2023; Sayed, 2023).

## **Weapons Proliferation and Militant Networks After 2021**

The withdrawal of US and NATO forces from Afghanistan in 2021 created a large-scale proliferation of weapons across the region. Arms left behind during the withdrawal quickly entered black markets controlled by organized criminal networks operating across the Afghanistan–Pakistan borderlands.

These networks facilitate arms trade and provide logistical support to militant organizations in exchange for financial benefits and protection. For many communities in border regions, participation in these illicit networks has become a source of livelihood.

Consequently, militant organizations such as the TTP and Baloch insurgent groups have gained access to modern weaponry and improved operational capabilities.

### **Strategic Importance of Balochistan and the CPEC Factor**

Balochistan holds immense strategic importance for both Pakistan and China. Several major infrastructure projects associated with the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) pass through the province, including highways, energy pipelines and the port of Gwadar. CPEC forms a central component of China’s broader Belt and Road Initiative and is considered crucial for Pakistan’s economic development strategy.

However, many Baloch separatist groups view these projects as symbols of external exploitation of local resources. Consequently, CPEC infrastructure and Chinese personnel have increasingly become targets of militant attacks. For the TTP, attacking these projects also serves the strategic objective of weakening Pakistan’s economic and political stability.

### **Conclusion**

The convergence of the Afghan Taliban, the TTP and Baloch insurgent groups has created an increasingly complex and dangerous security environment in Pakistan. The interaction of local grievances, cross-border militant networks and regional geopolitical competition has produced an interconnected insurgent landscape.

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## US interests in West Asia: Security Architecture and Diplomatic Measures

### Abstract:

West Asia in its entirety is undergoing a transformation. These times have been well defined and reiterated by various scholars. West Asia's fundamental architecture is passing through defining times. The pace of these changing geopolitical structures is triggered by domestic transformations and the extra-regional alliances. The United States (US) vision for the region was essentially defined by security structure, which is manifesting itself in security engagements and wider presence in the region through military bases across the area. Though oil driven, the American association with the region has been an interplay of dynamic factors that underlined security of its sphere of influence. Another major US policy in the region includes US aid and support to its various allies like Israel in the region. Particularly, in the last decade, bold steps were taken by the US Administration to release the deadlock. Some of the initiatives such as the JCPOA or the Abraham Accords, were tough decisions and would cause disruption in an already fragmented regional sectarian profile. The article argues that the US's policy towards the region is changing and is apparently failing in many facets. In this article, historical facts and evidence of the US policy in the region has been put across, where at times it has created a space for dialogue between the region and itself, and at times show signs of departure.

The positioning of modern-day West Asia was prime as it connected the West with the British colonies in Asia. With cultural diversities, West Asia stands apart. The region has five major languages-Arabic, Persian, Hebrew, Kurdish, and Turkish; which is diverse and many other languages. Apart from the sectarian dimension of Shia – Sunni, lingering crisis in Yemen and Libya, the Israeli – Palestinian issue, and oil politics; West Asia also faces the Kurdish movement, where Kurds are present across Turkiye Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Since the onset of Arab Spring protests in 2011, the region has witnessed increased foreign interventions as well as rising conflicts, regime change and refugee crisis. These issues have hampered the regional growth and compromised the West's interests in the region. The region being at the center point of US and European interests, the geopolitical storm has put the latter's vital interests in risk. Apparently, the security and engagement of the region was an important aspect of the British and later the United States.

### Obama, Trump, and Biden and their policies in West Asia

The practical and military equations led the decisions at the White House. However, the leadership personality did impact some decisions. The US forces were withdrawn from Iraq in 2011 under the Obama Administration, which injured the Iraqi social spirit, fragmenting it politically. The US occupation has already altered the political-sectarian equations in Iraq, thus indirectly empowering Shia parties and thus indirectly aided expanding Iranian influence in Iraq. The sanctions which marginalised Iran put it through tougher situations. Furthermore, the sanctions have been reimposed from time to time, due to Iranian stance. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in July 2015 was created by President Obama along with a few European countries<sup>1</sup>. It restricted the expansion of the nuclear programme and gave Iran some relief over sanctions. It was clear that the overall personality of Obama helped in projecting leniency towards Iran. Iran's sovereignty and open prospects of business for Iran, apart from disfiguring its nuclear ambitions were major considerations. These tough initiatives distorted the Saudi – US relations, which had the potential to destabilise the regional balance.

President Trump came from a different setup of bureaucracy. A business mind that deployed finance and deals as a frontliner. It was made purposefully clear that the rationale behind the U-turn over JCPOA was indicative of America's closeness to the Kingdom. The Trump administration was instrumental in dismantling the agreement, while selling arms to the region particularly Saudi Arabia worth billions of dollars<sup>2</sup>. Trump's attitude towards Iran also depended on Israeli antipathy to the Iranian regime which aided a network of Anti-Israeli proxy groups across the region. The US elections and the coming of Joe Biden to power was an indication of leadership that would follow the footsteps of its predecessor President Obama, who had a reasonable approach towards Iran and someone who would not like the US military presence in the region. The relationship is fractured as the Biden administration pulled out its troops from Yemen, a Saudi led war. Followed by the Khashoggi killings and Washington's reaction has created a trust deficit between the alliance.

Followed by the events in the last decade, the American influence is on a decline. Various observers of regional politics as well as the global energy market point to another important factor which denotes reduced US interest in the region, it was a changing energy mix. Since world wars, US economic recovery was dependent on cheap and stable oil supply which was ensured by a network of Pro-US countries in the region. Since 2015, the advancements in Shale Gas fracking<sup>3</sup> in the US began challenging oil dominance and indirectly influenced US interests in the wider region. While the threat was realised by oil producers and they interfered in pricing to discourage the massive production of Shale gas, it shows how the energy dynamics in influencing the policy of a great power towards the region.

Trump's policy oscillated from his predecessor's. While predicting the equation and fault – lines that underline the region's geopolitical framework. The end of Iran's nuclear deal made a clear shift from the earlier channel of dialogue between Tehran and Washington. The agreement that was supposed to facilitate and spin the wheels of growth for Iran, had hit a fundamentally strong rock-bottom that was difficult to revamp. The US administration had made its stand clear, aligning with Saudi Arabia and other GCC; and, basically avoiding any nuclear ambitions in the region, particularly Iran. This distinction between liked and disliked was very apparent for President Trump and his Administration, as people from select West Asian countries were banned from entering the US. One of the iconic pictures during his term was of his presidential visit to Saudi Arabia which offered Trump an experience of best welcome and warmth from the Royal family. This also pronounced a greater political engineering that mirrored its impact on the economic ties between the two. The bilateral ties between the two have focussed on trade especially defence deals, which has been mutually beneficial. In great power politics during retreat or vacuum of major powers other willing powers would try to fill this lacuna, this trend was observed when China mediated an agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran in 2023<sup>4</sup>. Unlike the history of costly military intervention of the US, Chinese presence is moreover ensured by robust economic and technological agreements with various countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran.

President Trump's agenda for West Asia was not new, but he went a step ahead in showing his friendly stance with Israel-shifting of the US embassy to Jerusalem<sup>5</sup> being one of them. Shared economic prosperity between GCC and the US, strategic support for Israel, and a continued hostility for Iran continued to be the one liners for the US administration under the leadership of President Trump. Thus, normalization of relations with Israel by Bahrain, UAE, and Sudan was an important move during Trump's presidency<sup>6</sup>. As others continued to privilege, the relationship with Iran was irreversible. Its support for proxies – Hezbollah and Houthi's proved to be fatal and further restrictions were slapped on Tehran. The war in Yemen proved to be disastrous for the Saudi economy and had a negative Saudi reputation as there was a humanitarian crisis and massive destruction in Yemen. Trump had been supportive of MBS all along. Relations only worsened with General Qassem Soleimani's assassination in Baghdad and attack on Saudi oil facilities in 2019 that corresponded into a fatal geopolitical environment, where any kind of reconciliation was remotely impossible. President Trump realised that Qatar hosted the US Al Udeid naval base and was strategically important for the US, thus Washington began to bring the two GCC members Saudi Arabia and Qatar under reconciliation. Qatar being a small state in the region which punches its influence higher by various means like its media Al-Jazeera as well as its closeness with Muslim Brotherhood. Like Saudi Arabia, Qatar also engaged in various high stake economic deals<sup>7</sup> with the US to keep its influence in the US. While recently there are moves in US domestic politics to ban organisations like Muslim Brotherhood<sup>8</sup> and most of the GCC regimes also share a view of Muslim Brotherhood as a threat to regime stability and social harmony. Once patronised by various GCC monarchies, now the Brotherhood is viewed as a threat by major countries like UAE.

### **Role of Oil in regional economies and importance of Connectivity Projects**

The regional countries have historically been dependent on oil revenues, thus the turmoil in the region is also linked with energy apart from other issues like sectarianism or interventions by domestic or foreign actors. West Asia contracted global interests due to its economic relevance-the pearl industry, and date farming. However, oil became an important commodity and was responsible for the West for having a strategic design in the region. The formation of regional organizations like the Arab League or the GCC addresses the idea of security, though these have not been able to provide any kind of sustainable security in the region.

Conflict ridden West Asia and its inability to ensure its own protection, which communicates the relations between the region and the Western allies. The hostility between the regional actors continues. Thus the region continues to look for an alternative security provider, that is the US. There are common areas of economic convergence between the region and the West. Commerce and investment is enhanced by connectivity. The region lies between various rich and resource rich regions like the EU, Asia and Africa. Thus many planned corridors criss-cross the region. One of the major corridors which is also supported by the US include IMEEEC<sup>9</sup> (India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor) which came under intense discussion in recent years. There are other planned corridors and connectivity projects like Grand Faw Project<sup>10</sup> and the Middle corridor<sup>11</sup>. The struggle for supremacy between Riyadh and Tehran has further created a rift between the countries in the region. In the last decades, namely post 2010's witnessed the deleterious impacts of Saudi-Iran proxy war in the region, which resulted in conflicts across the region from Syria to Yemen often destroying local communities and affecting the entire region. Far from a Saudi-Iran bipolarity, the region has competing influence from other middle powers with their own aspirations and zones of influence across the region. This includes countries like the United Arab Emirates and Turkiye which have carved their zone of influence over a wide region like Syria, Libya, Sudan, Yemen and Horn of Africa. Such actions of these countries often have indirect US and Western support when it aligns with their strategic objectives.

The Saudi – US relations were built on the dynamics of oil for security agreement. From 1945 with Franklin D. Roosevelt to the Trump administration over 76 years of relations; the two have been in close quarters and stood by each other as a traditional alliance, is undergoing rapid change as major thaws have emerged in this bonhomie. Biden's approach towards West Asia was to impose Human Rights in the region. Since, beginning US's interference in the region was to promote democracy and human rights. The US administration looked into the undemocratic and totalitarian regimes in West Asia. President Biden who took office in January 2021 in addition to the Secretary of State Antony Blinken, took the idea further especially in the case of Saudi Arabia due to the Khashoggi killings. As West Asia dealt with other challenges, the US also brought Israel into the West Asian fold through I2U2<sup>12</sup>. The US during the Biden administration had been focussing on West Asian people and its rights, which can be seen by the withdrawal cases of US troops in 2011 (from Iraq) and 2021 (from Afghanistan).

The policy framework under the Biden regime is also struggling to keep up with the health issues within the US after the COVID Pandemic. Conflict in Yemen which was initiated by Saudi Arabia also exhibits the US involvement although it has tried to exit the Yemen crisis and bring tangible results to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). In 2018, the US exited from the JCPOA imposing new sanctions on Iran using pressure tactics to make Iran comply. West Asia is also home to the power dynamics of extra-regional powers-notably the US, Russia, and China. The withdrawal of US forces from Iraq in 2011 leverages Russia and China for its enduring stance in the region. The perceived US inaction during the 2019 Houthi attack<sup>13</sup> in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates disrupting their oil supplies showed the limits of US power in the region during a crisis. This also demonstrates how with the proliferation of modern weapons like drones and Ballistic Missiles with Non-State Actors like Houthis has imposed more costs on powers like the US in their intervention in the region. In terms of trade and investment, countries like China are now more deeply engaged in the region. This is strengthened by Chinese advancements in various technologies like Artificial Intelligence and 5G, so that regional countries compete for Chinese investment and technology. Conceptually the world has moved away from the traditional factors of geopolitics. The geopolitically pertinent factors such as the fall of regimes, popular protests and small states dilemma have been pitched. The autonomy is forfeited by the interplay of power and identifying regions for promotion of influence.

### **How the regional politics altered post 2023 October 07**

The region witnessed a big turn in 2023 October 07 with the Hamas attack on Israel<sup>14</sup> which shocked the entire region. In the preceding years, Israel was being mainstreamed to the region and integrated into the political-security network of the wider region on the behest of the US.

A web of alliances and groupings was in formation including various GCC countries and Israel. Various countries in the region were making little overt and more covert dealings with Israel. Palestinian issue was sidelined in this wider transformation. This trend witnessed a sudden challenge post October 07, since the Israel-Palestine issue was again in debate and at least in public discourse in the wider region. While various regimes ban public protests fearing Arab spring like results, they still can't totally avoid any public reaction against open embrace of Israel amidst the ongoing war in Gaza which has turned disproportionate considering the huge loss of lives in Palestinian side. There were various reports of rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Israel and possibilities of open relations between them, but the issues after October 07 stymied such diplomatic arrangements and Saudi Arabia was on backfoot. Thus an unexpected crisis from the actions of Hamas, a Non-State Actor in the region prevented grand plans of US and its allies in the wider region. The war had wider ramifications which did not stay strictly in the region of West Asia. The region which borders West Asia and Horn of Africa, namely Red Sea, began feeling the impacts of this ongoing conflict. Houthis aka Ansar Allah, the Shia rebel group which controls a vast region in Yemen entered the conflict in solidarity with Palestine. Armed with missiles and drones, Houthis imposed an Area Denial /Anti Access in the Red sea, often targeting merchant shipping<sup>15</sup> which is linked with Israel. This created a logistics bottleneck in the region through which billions worth of trade traversed. This created a shipping crisis in the Red Sea akin to disruption during the Suez War many decades ago. The security issues around the Red Sea effectively challenged the western led security order which dominated the region since the construction of Suez Canal. The US responded by security missions aimed at targeting and degrading Houthi offensive capabilities but it was having limited participation considering the smaller number of regional countries involved in the "Operation Prosperity Guardian<sup>16</sup>".

While the October 07 incident started a new war which showed limits of US power, the war in its progression witnessed degradation of capabilities of long discussed "Axis of Resistance" of Iran. The various groups in the axis including Hamas and Hezbollah experienced terrible losses. The destruction of the huge command chain of Hezbollah is commendable considering the Mossad penetration to their supply chain and subsequent operation of explosion of pagers which imposed a huge cost on Hezbollah leadership<sup>17</sup>. Prominent members including once Charismatic Hassan Nassarallah is a casualty<sup>18</sup> shows the deeper losses taken by Hezbollah. The position of Hezbollah in Lebanese politics has also taken a hit with its dismal performance in this conflict. Hamas has also taken huge losses considering the loss of its leadership including Sinwar etc. Gaza, far from a highly armed enclave during Hamas rule, has taken huge losses from the war with millions of Palestinians losing lives and livelihood. Gaza now remains almost depopulated due to the huge destruction and awaits international assistance for reconstruction. Surprisingly this moment also demonstrated the influence of US and its various allies in the region as it was US spearheaded efforts including organisations like Gaza Humanitarian Foundation<sup>19</sup> (GHF) which was involved in humanitarian relief in the strip and any post war reconstruction plans of Gaza expects generous donations from wealthy GCC member countries.

Syria which remained in deep sectarian conflict and foreign intervention almost since the 2011 onset of Arab spring protests witnessed sea change during the last few years. For almost a decade the Assad regime was sustained by the intervention of Russia and Iran. Syria remained a critical node of Iran's "Axis of Resistance" and Syria hosted important Russian bases in the region. While the US and its various allies were assisting various efforts for a regime change in the country, it remained stalled due to the Russian and Iranian role in Syria. This witnessed a change in 2024, where in the months of December a blitskrieg move by once proscribed group HTS led by Ahmed Al Sharaa captured power in Damascus<sup>20</sup>. Regime change finally occurred in Syria and it was aided by various regional powers like Turkiye and Assad fled to Russia. Post regime change and its confusion, Israel conducted air operations in Syria to degrade Syrian Anti Aircraft defence capabilities<sup>21</sup> in order to make the new regime harmless in its strategic perspective. This finally exposed the limits of Russian and Iranian intervention in a region where they enjoy limited support among the wider population considering the sectarian and other demography. This event again demonstrated the robustness of US and allies to calibrate their relations, as the US under Trump tries to maintain good relations with the Julani regime in Syria<sup>22</sup>. Israel, the major ally of the US, is believed to enjoy covert ties with the Julani regime as well as sending feelers to various groups like Druze in Syria in order to create its own security buffer in the region.

Israel, one of the major US allies in the region has emerged bruised but resilient since the war in Gaza in 2023. It has faced high losses including loss of lives and economic loss. It has eliminated top leadership of militant groups like Hamas and Hezbollah and has degraded the capacity of Iranian “Axis of resistance”. The regime change in Syria has also acted in favour of Israel. While it faces many domestic issues including rising political protests as well as other domestic issues like Haredim hesitation to expansion of compulsory military service. Israel has long created technological wonders in various fields including military and it is again manifested with Israeli testing of Laser weapons which can destroy drones and aircrafts<sup>23</sup>. It represents a technological leap and it will be a disruption in emerging drone warfare in the region. The US remained a firm supporter of Israel during the ongoing war despite the various protests in the US. The US is also poised to play a major role in future reconstruction of Gaza along with its various regional partners. The domestic politics of Israel is highly opinionated to prevent the creation of a Palestinian state after this war. While many Arab countries including Saudi Arabia maintain a stand of recognition of Israel after the creation of Palestinian state and this shows potential roadblock to long term regional peace. While the US under Trump remains a firm supporter of Israel and Zionist cause, recent surveys in the US denote a changing attitude towards Israel among the youth. The opposition to war in Gaza could be gauged in domestic politics of the US by the recent election of Anti-war stand politician Mamdani in the New York mayoral race. In the age of live telecasting of war and its huge human cost, this shows the changing public perception on long term military engagements<sup>24</sup>. Various actions of Israel sometimes create issues for the US in the region and it could be observed after the Israeli strike in Qatar in 2025 which challenged the US security umbrella in the wider region.

Turkiye, a major middle power in the region which is also a NATO member, figures in US security and other calculations in the wider region and its connection to other regions. In terms of connectivity, Turkiye has a major role in the much discussed “Middle Corridor” which skips highly sanctioned countries such as Iran and Russia, both adversaries of the US. Turkiye is also an important transit country for Azerbaijani gas to Europe<sup>25</sup> thus potentially reducing Russian leverage. There are also various reports of Turkish-US-Western collaboration in central Asia to challenge current Russian-Chinese duopoly in the region. The role of Turkiye is important in case of talks in the Russia-Ukraine crisis and other aspects of Black Sea. While Trump and Erdogan share special bonhomie and other areas of US-Turkiye collaboration is Syria which witnessed a successful regime change a year ago. While the US courts the Julani regime despite its worst human rights record, Turkiye is poised to keep high influence in Syria by various means.

### **Relationship and Security Premise**

Since the end of the second world war, this region has featured in the minds of US strategic planners as a region which ensures regular supply of oil. This demands US presence to secure key oil fields as well as US naval presence to ensure smooth trade and maritime traffic in the important Sea Lanes of Communication. US presence is well assisted by a set of allies in the region which are in turn supported by the US. As per US strategic mapping, this region is included in US Central Command<sup>26</sup> which also includes Central Asia. US presence in this region is bolstered by a number of military bases including Army, Naval and Air bases which host thousands of soldiers and US military hardware wired for immediate deployment across the region. Any security presence and role is ensured by political will to interfere and compared to other powers, the US has well demonstrated it across various time periods across various regions with different end results. While the US faces increasing threats from countries like Iran which use its proxies to create threats to the long held western security system as seen from issues like the Red Sea crisis. While Russia once posed a threat when it was strong in Syria, this changed since the regime change in Syria last year. Thus Russia lost its presence in the region. While China is stepping up its presence by way of security cooperation, it is less inclined to interventions as carried out by the US in the region.

### **How India and Pakistan feature in US grand strategy in the region**

In view of US strategists, Af-Pak region encompassing wider Afghanistan and Pakistan is included in Central command which include the west asian region. Since the cold war, Pakistan as a US ally has factored in the US calculations in the region. Pakistan has historically offered its security services in the service of various GCC countries.

The recent Saudi Arabia-Pakistan defence deal<sup>27</sup> remains a manifestation of the relations. Asim Munir the military chief of Pakistan is close to President Trump and with other countries like Saudi Arabia. The Saudi-Pakistan security deal in such a perspective fit well with the larger US security objective in the region and Pakistan under Asim Munir is playing its cards to keep Trump satisfied. While this has created discomfort in Indian policy makers, it reminds India about the need for strategic autonomy. Pakistan also factors as one of the potential countries in the planned International Stabilization Force (ISF) planned to be deployed in Gaza<sup>28</sup>. This demonstrates that Pakistan will factor positively in US strategies in the west Asian region for the coming period.

India-US relations have deepened in the last decade. Due to its favourable geographical location India factors in US strategic calculations in various regions such as West Asia as well as the Indo Pacific region. Under previous governments such as Biden, the US tried to integrate India into the wider regional trade, connectivity and security settings. This was demonstrated in US led groupings such as I2U2 (India-Israel-US-UAE) which aimed cooperation across wider fields like economy, technology etc. The attempts to regional integration with India is seen in the IMEEEC (India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor) which could boost economic growth and create jobs in India. This can create connectivity among South Asia, GCC and EU which are large economic blocs. India's growing closeness with Israel also suits India's relation with the US in the wider region. Still there are certain issues which also prevent forever close cooperation and which creates mutual suspicion. US unilateral interventions and sanctions are not always endorsed by India which maintains its own strategic autonomy. This could be seen by how US sanctions affected Indian planned investments in countries like Iran. Another factor is US closeness to Pakistan which plays a subsidiary role in the region.

## **Conclusion**

The US still plays a major role in the west Asian region. It uses various instruments of power such as political relations, economic investments as well as military interventions to maintain its core interests in the region. While it is supported by a set of regional partners which include NATO and Non-NATO allies. Various economic arrangements maintained the influence of the US dollar as a powerful currency in the world. While US interventions have sometimes played out positively as we saw in Kuwait, it also has destroyed social fabric in countries as we saw in Iraq which was a costly military intervention. While in recent years many other powers like China have increased their engagement in the region. The US has felt a fatigue owing to its military adventures and domestic debates around the futility of such interventions. Still by virtue of its high influence and hard power, the US remains the foremost power in the region. Many of the regional regimes and its ruling elites have deep economic stakes in the US and West and thus share many common interests. Its influence in the region in the larger future depends on its domestic political discourse and how it manages its relation with its regional partners.

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# The Yemeni civil war: History, consequences and future trajectory

## Abstract:

The civil war in Yemen, raging for more than a decade now, is widely considered one of the most ferocious conflicts in recent history. The unprecedented scale of casualties, resulting from fierce battles amongst the leading powers of the region has ravaged the nation. With the recent developments on this front, it becomes paramount to analyse the origins of these clashes, document the progress of this war and what it portends for the future. This paper delves into these aspects while also exploring how the history of the Gulf state, its fractured polity, tribal loyalties and terrorist movements have influenced this fractious infighting. It briefly touches upon the history of the nation, how it acquired its current form, the evolution that it underwent and the armed conflict which has engulfed it. It also depicts the impact that proxy conflicts between various powers have had on the nation. The research shows the debilitating effects that this catastrophe has had on the populace and the exploitation of this situation by non-state actors like terror organisations in the fulfilment of their objectives. It also attempts to review the existing situation and chart a possible path towards the future.

## Introduction:

Yemeni history dates back millennia, with certain accounts delineating a past going back to about 2000 BCE, when the nation's Hamitic population was vanquished by the south moving Semites, which displays the rudimentary development of agriculture, irrigation and domestication of animals like the camel (MEI, 1963). Despite a brief period of Egyptian conquest, Yemen largely remained under local rule. Notwithstanding this, a genetic mapping of Yemenis reveals the presence of Arabic and Levantine genomes in them, making a case for an Arabic migration into the country far preceding that of the African one (Henschel et al., 2024). This history reveals also the fact that Yemen has scarcely ever been a united state in the strict sense of the term though this lack of unity never impeded it from achieving prosperity (Megalomattis, 2008). The pre-independence history of Yemen and the despotic rule of Imam Yahiya and Ahmed in the north till 1962 depict a country in churn and desperate to emerge from the darkness of oppression (al Subari, 2017). The country is ethnically diverse with the Zaydi Shias and Shafi Sunnis present largely in the north and the south of the nation respectively (Burrowes, 1991). Another major divide was between the Zaydi Imamate in the North, formerly influenced by the Ottomans and the British administered Aden protectorate in the South established in 1839 (Stookey, 1978 & UN foundation, n.d.). So intense was the Shia-Sunni divide in the region that the Saudis came perilously close to an open conflict with the Zaydi Imamate under Imam Yahiya (al Rasheed, 2002). However, the Mutawakkilite Kingdom under Yahiya, his son Ahmed and grandson Mansur Muhammad al-Badr sustained only till 1962 when the revolutionary fervour that had arisen in West Asia swept away this regime, notorious for its divisive and stringent policies (Rabi, 2015).

## The 1962 revolution and the Cold War:

On the 26th of September 1962, Imam Badr and the decades old theocratic regime were both toppled in a military coup similar to the Free Officers' Movement of Egypt led by Nasser (Clark, 2010). Thus arose the Yemen Arab Republic, more commonly referred to as North Yemen, a state whose early years were occupied with the efforts to create a consolidated state in the tribal lands of the region (Burrowes, 1991). By late 1967, the British left Aden and thus was born the People's Republic of South Yemen, run by a Communist government (Clark, 2010). The Communist NLF, which governed South Yemen, aligned itself with the Soviets, with its rule being marked by large scale purges and repression (Peterson, 1981). This period reveals the fertile soil that Yemen provided for the conduct of proxy warfare on its lands. A paragon of this would be the North Yemeni civil war. As stated above, the revolutionary military regime displaced the theocratic monarchy. However, it is necessary to take into account that the military officials were backed by the Egyptians to the hilt while the royalist forces were supported by the Saudis, turning the civil war into a proxy combat between the two nations are perhaps more importantly a battle between two systems of governance in the region - religious monarchies and secular dictatorships (Association for Diplomatic Studies & Training, n.d.). This phenomenon of covert conflict was exacerbated upon the intrusion of Cold War politics in this struggle for power.

The Egyptian backed revolutionaries were backed by the Soviet Union while the Saudi funded royalists were assisted by the Americans and the British (Association for Diplomatic Studies & Training, n.d.). The British in fact signed off on the mercenaries which were to aid the Royalist war effort (Clark, 2010). The interventions by major powers in the Gulf nation persisted throughout the rest of the Cold War as well.

With the advent of the Communist state of South Yemen, strengthened in its socialist leanings by 1969, the two superpowers engaged in a strategic realignment in their Yemeni calculus. Thus, in the 1970s, the Soviets pivoted towards the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen), while the Saudis and the Americans, recognising that the royalists were a lost cause and that North Yemen was the only bulwark against Marxism- Leninism in the Gulf, switched their support and backed the North Yemeni government (Gause, 1990). This divide symbolises the quintessential Cold War bloc politics and fluidity of alliances due to changing strategic calculations and priorities. It also establishes that Yemen, with its complex socio - religious structure, tribal society, and fragile national fabric has a proclivity for falling prey to the machinations of global powers. This historic vulnerability has been exploited even in the modern era by regional powers to expand their influence as shall be seen in the paper further.

### **President Saleh and the unification:**

Ali Abdullah Saleh, the President of North Yemen, came to power in 1978 and continued his tenure even after the reunification of both countries in 1990, only to demit office in 2012 (Ahmed, 2019). His regime witnessed the gradual rise of political Islam as espoused by certain offshoots of the Muslim Brotherhood in Yemen (Rabi, 2015). This rise of Islamism, antithetical to the atheist communism of the PDRY, was encouraged by the Saudis. With their paths moving ever away from each other, it was unlikely that the much-vaunted reunification would transpire into reality any time soon. Therefore, the announcement of unification on 22nd May, 1990, took the whole world by surprise (Clark, 2010). The Sanaa Agreement reached between the two parties as a compromise at the leadership level between General Secretary al-Bidh and President Saleh was touted as historic, delivering justice to the fractured land. However, the accord having been reached as a result of significant concessions to the South, was rather hasty, ill- thought out and did not account for certain irreconcilable societal differences between the two peoples. The Saudis too, were unhappy with the Arab nationalists controlling the whole of Yemen and bankrolled an uprising against them, which failed miserably, prompting them to shelve their plans to overthrow the Saleh regime (Riedel, 2019).

Despite this overt show of unity, the fractures within the polity of the nation ran deep and resurfaced within a decade of this incident in the form of a brutal civil war in 1994. The merger of the tribal dominated North with the socialist South only created greater problems notwithstanding the veneer of stability. The civil war of the 1990s was thus more a result of competition over resources than a conflict precipitated by ideological differences (Dostal, 2021). It was also, in equal measure, a function of the internecine power conflict that had plagued the incipient government. The southerners again declared independence in a bid to blackmail the government, but failed in face of northern fire (Clark, 2010). This unsuccessful attempt at achieving autonomy only served to further strengthen Salih's control over the nation and he continued consolidating power over the further decades by manipulating the electoral system.

Stagnation under the Saleh regime: The regression of democracy and the increased authoritarianism heralded an era of economic woes compounded by institutional corruption and corrosion. The burgeoning population and rising unemployment coupled with a drying up of oil revenues ended up debilitating the state coffers. Another concern, resulting from the decline of oil profits, was that they being a means to appease competing interests, pacifying these diverse groups became more difficult. These troubles eventually culminated in a number of movements which strove to cleave the country apart. Among them were the secessionists in the erstwhile South Yemen who yearned to regain independence, the Shia rebellion which arose in the province of Sa'da, named the 'Houthi rebellion' after their leaders- the al-Houthi family and finally the rise of radical Islamist terrorism in the form of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, led by Anwar al-Awlaki (Rabi, 2015 & Shane, 2015).

The undeclared prejudice against the south in terms of resource allocation, economic development, property disputes, land rights, employment etc. reflected in the deep discontent towards the government (Rabi, 2015). The overtly Islamic character of the regime ran afoul of the secular, atheist past of the region. The dismissal of southern military officers and bureaucrats only worked to retrench this feeling. The sectarian policies of Saleh, favouring members of his own Sanhan tribe and the clientelistic systems of patronage perpetrated by his regime, in a bid to obtain support from diverse societal sections, combined to exacerbate the resentment against him (Hill, 2008). The final nail in the coffin was the preparation to crown Saleh's son - Ahmed as his successor, with massive anti-government demonstrations occurring in January 2011 (Rabi, 2011).

### **Protests and the beginning of the civil war:**

These protests, part of the Arab Spring and led by the Islamist Al Islah party, aimed at deposing Saleh. The tribes, terrorists and protestors targeted critical infrastructure in a bid to coerce the government (Albasoos & al Hinai, 2020). The civil disobedience by the protestors culminated in violence and bloodshed in March 2011, with the demonstrators demanding an end to the problems of unemployment, corruption and nepotism reflected in the dire state of public infrastructure and the concentration of oil revenues with the government (Orkaby, 2019). They finally succeeded in late February 2012 when Saleh handed power to Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, his Vice President (BBC, 2012). The three-decade long Saleh rule had left the country impoverished and vulnerable, riven by conflicts and rival insurgencies. With separatist movements and terrorist elements running riot, the state was on the verge of descending into civil war. The divisions in the military did not help matters as well. Similarly concerning was the economic turmoil wrought by the IMF imposed conditions for economic recovery (Ahmed, 2019). The proverbial spark that lit the fire was the fall of the capital Sana'a in 2015 to the Houthi insurgents and the ouster of the Hadi regime (Ahmed, 2019). It was alleged that this victory was also contributed to by the cooperation of the remnants of the Saleh tribal-military nexus (Salisbury, 2016). This was the logical culmination of the waves of Houthi rebellions which had taken place since 2004. Multiple initiatives like the 'National Dialogue Conference' led by the Gulf Cooperation Council from March 2013 to January 2014, the appointment of a special envoy by the UN in 2015 and the passage of UNSC Resolution 2216 were all attempts to remedy the situation which failed miserably (Feirstein, 2019 & Ahmed, 2019). Even when the Houthi-Saleh axis showed no signs of stopping, the groups which rose in opposition to it were localised and devoid of a central platform to coordinate their actions. They primarily considered this as an incursion by the 'highlanders' into their strongholds and did not attempt to stand united behind the Hadi regime. This resulted in the country being ruled de facto by the Houthis by September 2014 with the Sana'a government reduced to being a rubberstamp especially after Hadi was placed under house arrest in early 2015 (Salisbury, 2016). This was followed shortly after by a coup with the Houthis framing a new 'constitutional declaration', dissolving Parliament and appointing a new Presidential Council which prompted Hadi to flee to Aden, declare it as a temporary capital and request GCC intervention by characterising the takeover as a ploy by Iran (Salisbury, 2016).

### **Saudi led coalition intervenes:**

Hadi, forcibly banished from the capital, resisted the coup for some weeks from his palace in Aden but was coerced into leaving the country by Houthi offensives and took refuge in Saudi Arabia, rescinded his resignation and preferred to govern as a President in exile with Riyadh's support (Centre for Preventive Action, 2026). This was shortly followed by a full-fledged military intervention by the Saudi-led coalition in March 2015, named Operation Decisive Storm, which aimed to restore the Hadi government by expelling the Houthis from Sana'a. This sparked a new phase in the civil war characterized by a barrage of economic sanctions and airstrikes with support from western powers, especially the USA (Centre for Preventive Action, 2026). These operations have included a painful naval blockade of Iranian vessels attempting to reach the Houthis with support and thousands of airstrikes, which have killed both combatants as well as civilians. The Americans too have taken part in this conflict by intercepting weapons delivery by the Iranians to the Houthis through the naval route (Centre for Preventive Action, 2026). This offensive neutralised numerous early Houthi gains in Marib and Aden and pushed them back towards their strongholds around Sana'a (Baron, 2019). The Houthis too have begun striking back with them sending waves of drones at the Saudis and the Emiratis (Wassef, 2021 & Al Jazeera, 2022).

The crisis was compounded by the rapid rise of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in the southern and eastern parts of the nation which projected the Houthi advances as a Shia takeover of Yemen, thereby igniting sectarian conflict in a bid to rally support amongst the majority Sunnis of the nation (Centre for Preventive Action, 2026). By April 2016, the UN brokered talks between the government in exile and the Houthis broke down (Al Jazeera, 2016). Eventually this prompted the formation of a new political council by the Houthi-Saleh combine to govern the areas controlled by them (Reuters, 2016).

### **Heightened conflicts ensue:**

This arrangement descended into chaos within a year and by the end of 2017, Saleh's faction had broken off from the regime, calling for an armed struggle against it (Edroos, 2017). This conflict ended quickly with Saleh killed and his forces comprehensively defeated (Alley, 2017). Saleh's forces did not surrender and instead joined hands with the Saudi coalition in the offensive which led to the fall of the crucial port of Hodeidah (BBC, 2023). The Stockholm Agreement sponsored by the UN in 2018 failed to resolve the conflict as well (Dashela, 2024). In 2021, the Houthis launched offensives to take Marib, a government stronghold and this led to deadly clashes between the two forces (Centre for Preventive Action, 2026). In 2022, Hadi resigned after a decade in power, paving the way for a seven-member Presidential Council with Rashad al Alimi as chair (Centre for Preventive Action, 2026). The 2022 UN mandated ceasefire lapsed in October that year without any extensions (Alghobari and Mokashef, 2022). Peace talks resumed again in 2023, mediated by Oman and have provided hope especially with the normalisation of relations between the Saudis and the Iranians, the two major players in the proxy civil war. The Houthis, who had been designated as a terrorist organisation under Trump, had this characterization removed under Biden in 2021, only to be reinstated by 2024, following their participation in the Israel-Hamas war and attacks on ships in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea (Centre for Preventive Action, 2026). The Houthis had joined the war in late October 2023 blockading the Bab el Mandeb Strait for nearly 2 years with 'solidarity strikes' in favour of the Palestinians and the Iranians (Motamedi, 2023). Joint US-UK strikes on the Houthis in late January 2024 only resulted in them reaffirming their resolve to persist with their campaign in the Red Sea (Kasulis C.K. et al, 2024). Similar strikes by US forces were carried out in early 2025 in a bid to deter Houthi aggression in crucial maritime shipping lanes though the group did again carry out attacks during the 12-day Iran- Israel war later that year (Salhani, 2025). The multiple weeks long bombing campaigns undertaken by the Americans and their western allies seem to have failed miserably in destroying Houthi capabilities and they thus remain the most potent Iranian proxy in the aftermath of the decimation of Hezbollah and Hamas by the Israelis. The organisation continues to wield significant capacities to disrupt global trade and harm western and Israeli interests in the region. While they have been vocal about the stoppage of their attacks being contingent on the Gaza ceasefire, it is possible that escalations in West Asia may encourage them to engage actively in the conflagration, thus bringing the Yemeni civil war back into focus in the global consciousness (Jalal, 2026).

### **The major actors in the Yemeni civil war:**

#### **The Southern Transitional Council (STC):**

This organisation was formed in 2017 as a logical conclusion of the decades long separatist movement simmering in the southwest of the country, especially around the port of Aden (Centre for Preventive Action, 2026). Long supported by the UAE, it seeks to achieve the independence of South Yemen, under the leadership of Aidarous al-Zubaidi (Anna, 2026). Though ostensibly a part of the Saudi led coalition and the Presidential Leadership Council, it had declared its intentions to achieve autonomy in 2020 itself (Saba, 2026). It was also a part of the cabinet formed by President Hadi under the Riyadh Agreement (Jalal, 2021). Since the group aims to achieve its goals through military means, it has come into conflict with southern governorates like Hadramout, leading to challenges surrounding governance, standard of living, stability etc. (Dashela, 2024). The internecine conflict in the Presidential Leadership Council and the internal battles among the STC and other groups in the South have caused serious issues for the region as a whole. The sectarianism of the Houthis coupled with the separatism of the STC has caused severe issues for the nation. Though the UAE withdrew its troops officially from Yemen in 2020, it continues to maintain its influence through the operations of the STC (Saba, 2026).

It has expanded its presence in the Hadramout and al Mahra provinces with its offensives late in 2025 and has pushed towards the Saudi border (Saba, 2026). However, the counter attacks by the Saudi led coalition has ensured the dissolution of the group with Riyadh taking indirect control of its territories (Alasarar, 2026). With recent tensions between the Gulf allies Abu Dhabi and Riyadh, the latter seems to have been bent on annihilating the STC. The December operations were perceived as inimical to Saudi interests and thus, the Kingdom descended upon the STC with a vengeance, expelling Zubaidi from the PLC, coercing the delegation sent by him for talks to announce a dissolution of the group unilaterally and charging him with high treason (Alasarar, 2026). With the STC relegated to history and its leader effectively exiled, Riyadh will have to tackle southern aspirations.

### **The Presidential Leadership Council (PLC):**

It was formed in the aftermath of the resignation of former President Hadi in April 2022 and is an eight-member committee led by Rashad al-Alimi (Saba, 2026). The group is largely perceived to be a big tent coalition with representation provided to most factions in the conflict except the Houthis. The STC had been given 3 seats on the Council too though with its disintegration, they have been reassigned to other representatives. The PLC which is widely viewed as the internationally recognised, legitimate government of the country is a broad coalition of groups opposed to the Houthi control over Sanaa and surrounding areas. The PLC has received substantial aid from Gulf nations like Riyadh and Abu Dhabi (Khoury, 2025). However, this had not materialised into any substantive gains on the battlefield since its formation in 2022 for the frontlines had remained frozen for the further three years. President al-Alimi, who governs from Aden, has overseen the functioning of a government riddled with corruption, inefficiency, lack of basic amenities and poor economic conditions. The worsening of the economy and the lack of autonomy resulted in the resignation of the PM Ahmad bin Mubarak (Agence France Presse, 2025). The newly appointed PM Salem Bin Breik has done little to alleviate these issues (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, 2025). Tareq Saleh, the nephew of slain former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who commands the National Resistance Forces, is also a member of the PLC and controls areas south of Hodeida and the port city of Mokha (Ali, 2025). Saleh's forces are strategically important despite their control over limited territory as they overlook the critical Bab el Mandab Strait and are aligned with the anti-Houthi coalition. This variety of forces has frequently created crises in the PLC's functioning.

### **The Houthis:**

This movement, frequently called Ansar Allah, triggered the civil war when it captured Sanaa in 2014. While geographically it controls lesser territory than the STC previously and the Saudi coalition currently, the areas it holds are among the most populated with about 60-65% of the Yemeni population concentrated in these areas (Saba, 2026). They are often viewed as part of the Iranian "Axis of resistance" and accused of being Iranian proxies, a claim which they refute vehemently. They control about 33% of the territory including the capital Sanaa, Ibb, Dhamar, some parts of al Hodeidah, etc. (Ali, 2025). The Houthis which had emerged in the late 1970s in Saada, were a Shia Zaydi movement which came into conflict with the Yemeni forces multiple times in the first decade of the millennium (Dashela, 2024). Their advances in the Saada governorate in 2011 ensured that they took control of swathes of territory as they moved on Sanaa (Dashela, 2024). Thus, the Houthis had already founded a state within a state in Yemen, influencing educational institutions, foisting their ideology on the masses, taking control of the administration, etc. The arms shipments provided to them by the Iranians further complicated matters with this fuelling a sanguinary war in the country, fragmented into variegated armed groups who vied for power in the Gulf nation. The Houthis aim, for instance, to create a religious state which professes Shia Islam and is ideologically opposed to the West and Israel. This movement, marshaled by the family patriarch Badr al-Din al-Houthi, has grown ever more complex over the years (Orkaby, 2019). The organisation which arose in the 1990s out of a fear of Saudi sponsored Salafism, transformed into a political party under Hussein al-Houthi with little success, eventually establishing a movement alienated from the mainstream Yemeni political circle (Orkaby, 2019). Hussein was slain in the first of the six battles between the Houthis and the al Ahmar led government forces and this lent his name to the movement. Ansar Allah has since come into conflict with the Saudi led coalition which aimed to oust it from power. Repeated drone and missile strikes against the coalition and the killing of Saleh further widened the chasm between the two (Wilson Centre, 2022).

The Iranian military assistance to the group, in violation of a UN sanctioned arms embargo was crucial in this regard (Gladstone, 2018). Despite numerous ceasefire attempts, the conflict continues to rage on more than a decade after it was first ignited (Wilson Centre, 2022). The final UN brokered truce which expired in October 2022 has largely held notwithstanding hostilities occurring post October 7, 2023 which led to heightened Houthi attacks in the light of the Hamas terror attack in Israel (Riedel, 2023). This prompted Israeli and Western retaliation with the former striking in late 2025, resulting in the demise of the Houthi appointed Prime Minister (Associated Press, 2025). Similar strikes were carried out earlier by American administrations under President Biden and President Trump (Khoury, 2025). However, tensions have ameliorated in recent months with the Houthis signing an Omani mediated truce with the Americans and the unilateral stoppage of attacks against Israel in light of the Gaza ceasefire (Khoury, 2025). The hiatus in the fighting has only served to embolden the group as it aims to rebuild the military, logistical and infrastructure capabilities degraded by years of civil war and attacks by the US and Israel (Ardemagni, 2025).

### **Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP):**

The AQAP is a terrorist organisation which was formed as an offshoot of Al Qaeda. It was established in January 2009 following the unification of the organisation's Yemeni and Saudi wings, lending it the name AQAP (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, n.d.). One of its most prominent leaders was Anwar al-Awlaki, killed in an American drone strike in 2011 (Shane, 2015). The group has conducted operations against Western interests not only in Yemen but also in the heart of the West, as demonstrated by the attempted bombing on Flight 253 on Christmas Day 2009 (US Department of Justice, 2012). The group has also claimed responsibility for January 2015 Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris (Counter Extremism Project, n.d.). In early 2010, the State Department designated AQAP as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation while listing al-Awlaki as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) later the same year (Counter Extremism Project, n.d.). The AQAP grew more active with its operations after Saleh was deposed and this only intensified with the beginning of the civil war in 2014. The Salafist Sunni AQAP was harshly opposed to the Shia Zaydi Houthis and carried out multiple strikes against them. With the emergence of the anti-Houthi coalition, the group has escalated its terror attacks targeting both the coalition and the Houthis though there have been reports of the coalition reinforcing its ranks with former fighters of the organisation, all of which have been refuted by American and Gulf officials (Associated Press, 2018). AQAP continues to remain a potent terror threat especially in the southern and central parts of Yemen with it occupying certain pockets of territory and foisting its rule by means of armed militias (Counter Extremism Project, n.d.). The group has seen its founders and later emirs being targeted by the USA with multiple strikes (Carvajal and Kelly, 2020). It remains paramount for the US to continue carrying out strikes against the group while also ensuring that the coalition backed PLC government delivers for the people, providing them with basic amenities and security, which would in turn deter the masses from viewing AQAP as a means to receive these.

### **Humanitarian catastrophe:**

The UN Humanitarian Office has categorised Yemen as the world's 'worst humanitarian crisis' with its report stating that potentially 13.5 million people could be at risk of starvation and about 80% of its population could be in need of aid (Anadolu Agency, 2021). Over 377000 people are believed to have died owing to this conflict till 2021 with the UNDP stating that about 70% of these casualties would be children under 5 (Al Jazeera, 2021). Nearly 5 million people are at risk of famine (Centre for Preventive Action, 2026). The civil war and the ensuing warfare have ruined the country. The casualties have skyrocketed with no plausible end in sight. These problems have been compounded by the economic turmoil which has engulfed the nation. The depreciation of the currency, weakening of the economy and widespread poverty have led to grave consequences for the Gulf state. The fractured polity, internecine conflicts among several power brokers, terror attacks by radical non state actors and the proxy war waged by regional actors have resulted in arguably the most cataclysmic warzone in recent history. The human cost of this war continues to remain astronomical with no end in sight.

## Conclusion:

The Yemeni civil war is a reminder that power competition in an anarchic system is brutal and often ruins the nations involved. What began as skirmishes among groups over tribal and sectarian lines has devolved into perilous decade-long clashes sponsored by regional powers. While the nation was never really united, the forced unification in 1990, the dictatorship of Saleh, disregard for the fundamental rights of people and the flagrant violation of democracy rendered the tethering together of the nation untenable. With the recent disbanding of the STC, Saudi-UAE tensions, the conflict between Israel, USA and Iran, the weakening of the 'Axis of resistance', the activities of the Houthis, the strengthening of the PLC, and the resurgence of terror organisations, the civil war is far from over. Whether the stalled peace process will resume and fruition is unclear too. Therefore, it may be assumed that the Yemeni civil war will continue to rage for the foreseeable future with catastrophic ramifications for the people and the region as a whole. How the war progresses remains to be seen.

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## India's approach to Joint Warfare Post Sindhoor Operation

### Abstract:

As with India's rising military profile after the Operation Sindhoor across the border much interest has gone into how it develop its approach to military strategy and Joint Doctrine which will improve operational aspects and having impact at the strategic level. The concept of Joint Doctrine and Grand Strategy has got more attention after the recent Operation Sindhoor. Further, the focus on Jointness, Integration and Theatrization will be the logical step and in that context the focus on Joint Doctrine will go on a long way as a part of the Joint Operations will be conducted in future by the individual services in India. In terms of applied policy option, the above option of continental and maritime aspects translates into military means to get the political objectives. Further, it's assumed to facilitate shifting India's strategic orientation to have a maritime strategic thought is important as it will give enable the internal force structuring and externally it enables it to balance the existing delicate diplomacy India has to play between Washington and Beijing.

**Key words,** Joint Doctrine, Theatre Command, Limited War, Grand Strategy

As with India's rising military profile after the Operation Sindhoor across the border much interest has gone into how it develop its approach to military strategy and Joint Doctrine which will improve operational aspects and having impact at the strategic interest.<sup>1</sup> To start with, it's understood that Doctrine represents the available thought on the employment of forces that has been adopted by the nation's armed force. In sum, Doctrine is a body of thought, and a knowledge-base which underpins the development of Grand strategy or politico-military strategy.

It's expected that a working definition of strategy for the present purposes needs to keep in three main aspects. First, strategy involves relationships between ends (which are often thought of as policy aims) and means (which in this context are military resources of various sorts. If the military means are not explicated stated, then the government of the day believes are needed (including defense capabilities and the finances required to obtain them), it will not have done its job.<sup>2</sup>

Without a Doctrine, strategists would have to make decisions without a point of reference or guidance. Strategy, on the other hand, is an overall plan to move from the present situation to a desired goal in a given scenario. Its most critical attribute is that, it is set in the context of a given politico-military situation and within the ambit of an overall set of interests and objectives. Doctrine is evolved from government's policies. Strategy is derived from doctrine. If a strategy brings success, it reinforces the doctrine. If on the other hand it leads to failure, the doctrine is modified to achieve the laid down National interests and objectives. Strategy is the bridge between political ends and military means forming the essential link to the Grand Strategy.

As with India is contemplating its Grand Strategic approach the planning for the strategy and Joint Doctrine is carried out by the Service Headquarters of the three-armed forces and Headquarters, Integrated Defense Staff. The above conceptual has got more attention after the recent Operation Sindhoor. In terms of applied policy option, the above option of continental and maritime aspects translates into military means to get the political objectives. Further, it's assumed to facilitated in shifting India's strategic orientation to have a maritime strategic thought is important as it will give enable the internal force structuring and externally it enables it to balance the existing delicate diplomacy India has to play between Washington and Beijing. However, India has not come out explicitly in terms of how it will operationalize its Joint doctrine.<sup>3</sup>

As such one get the conceptual idea of Doctrine and Joint Doctrine from the joint doctrine released by the Integrated Defence Staff (IDS) of the Indian armed forces Indian armed forces (JDIAF-2017) in April 2017. This was not the first such document, a classified version having been circulated in 2006. It was, however, the first such extensive public statement of India's approach to joint warfare.

Unlike some other countries, India does not publish a national security strategy or defence white paper that is made available for public scrutiny. Absent such a document, a public joint doctrine for the armed forces is perhaps the closest to an official articulation of Indian thinking on how various instruments of force combine to meet national security objectives

Though the term ‘military doctrine’ in itself should convey a common doctrine of all the three services of Army, Air Force and Navy together yet the word ‘joint’ has been added to emphasise the importance of attaining the aim of a common military perspective to achieve national and military objectives at the strategic and operational level.<sup>4</sup>

Earlier, The ‘Doctrine and concepts of Indian Army’ published in August 1998, devotes eleven pages to the theme of jointness but disposes of joint doctrine in three lines only. It states “From military strategy and objectives must flow a joint doctrine. This helps in providing unity of effort, and enhances coordination for joint planning, cooperation and mutual trust. The ‘Doctrine of Indian Air Force’ published in October 1995, is more apprehensive about the methodology that may be adopted for development of a joint doctrine rather than the philosophy behind evolving a joint doctrine. The single Service doctrines reflect the unique capabilities of the respective Service and give primacy to their own medium for conduct of warfare.<sup>5</sup>

Joint doctrine envisages an amalgamation of three media of battlespace, that is, land, air and sea and stresses on how best to integrate the three distinct forms of combat force into an effective force. In future the concept of space warfare might also be included. According to the Indian Air Force doctrine the ‘joint doctrine can be developed as a consequence of first having enunciated single service doctrine as a basis. Joint doctrine, therefore should not place limitations or conditions on the interpretation and application of single service doctrine.”

On the other hand, principles of war being followed by the Indian Armed Forces are the one’s which were evolved by the British based on their experience. Major Gen. JFC Fuller had cited seven principles of war during World War I for the training of British Armed Forces. In the light of experience gained during World War II, an additional three principles of war were added.

These principles of war, namely, selection and maintenance of aim, concentration of force, economy of effort, offensive action, security, surprise and deception, maintenance of morale, flexibility, cooperation and administration are universal principles common to all the three fighting services for conduct of warfare. These principles naturally would form the basis for development of a joint doctrine for our armed forces. The development of new technologies may affect the application of these principles of war, yet these principles continue to be truisms.

For instance the development of new weapon systems and the era of nuclear weapons has given rise to dispersion in the battlefield yet, when an offensive action has to be carried out the forces have to concentrate to overwhelm the adversary. The precision guided munitions fired from diverse platforms substitute mass for effects, thus continuing to validate the principle of concentration of force.

The common politico-diplomatic and military aim is to deter war. But should the deterrence fail, the armed forces have to prosecute war with a common aim and perspective. Almost all principles of war outlined above would be required to be applied jointly. The principle of economy of effort is not only closely inter-related with the unity of effort, but is also associated with concentrated application of force involving joint doctrine approach.<sup>6</sup>

This, logically, brings in inter-service cooperation, another principle of war, since diverse media and weapon systems would be used for achieving massed effects at the target end. Inter-service cooperation would encompass coordination of all military activities to achieve maximum synergetic effects against the adversary. Inter-Service cooperation is absolutely essential both during the planning and training process in peacetime and it is absolutely inescapable during a conflict. All these principles of war can be inter-woven and enmeshed together into a broad fabric of joint military doctrine that would provide a common direction and guidance to Indian armed forces.

The levels of a military doctrine are related to the levels of warfare that is strategic, operational and tactical levels of war. There is still a higher level of doctrine that is referred to as fundamental doctrine. This level of doctrine defines the nature of war, the purpose of military forces, the relationship of military force to other instruments of power.<sup>7</sup> The Clausewitzian dictums that ‘War is continuation of policy by other means and war is an instrument of policy’, would fall into tenets, beliefs and principles of fundamental doctrine. Largely, such tenets may be insensitive to political ideologies or technological changes.

The three levels of war are doctrinal perspectives that clarify the links between strategic objectives and tactical action. There may not be distinct boundaries or rigid classifications between the three levels. The levels would usually be defined based on their effect or contribution to achieving strategic, operational or tactical objectives.

In India’s case endeavours to promote peace and deter aggression would be the hallmarks of the doctrine and in the event of failure of such attempts the military forces would fight and win. Therefore, conflict termination has to be properly conceptualised so that the military victories achieved do endure and appropriate political benefits are derived from it thus forming synergy between Operational and Strategic Level of Warfare.<sup>8</sup>

The strategic level of joint military doctrine would be principally concerned with common and joint planning processes, a joint vision, joint organisations for coordination and control, joint training, education and publications besides development of joint force structures and logistics to support them.

At the operational level joint military doctrine would deal with harmonising the capabilities of all the components of a joint force to exploit optimally the unique strength, role and mission of the single service components. It would include all doctrinal precepts to synchronise the action of land, air, maritime and Special Forces to achieve desired objectives. The goal of the doctrine would be to increase the total effectiveness of the joint force.<sup>9</sup>

At tactical level, the doctrine would boil down to evolving joint techniques, joint standard operating procedures for guiding the military operations at the tactical level. An example of this could be the procedure of calling for air support to ground operations or calling for naval gunfire support to sustain an amphibious task force. In the absence of a joint military doctrine the deployed forces would always find ways and means to overcome immediate obstacles to make things work. But this does not mean that parochial interests in the system have not been at work to preclude the development of a joint doctrinal guidance. In fact the Kargil experience reinforced the need for development of joint doctrine.<sup>10</sup>

### **Joint Doctrinal Interfaces in Indian Context**

The single service doctrines of Army and Air Force would require to be interfaced to remove any dissonance and divergence on prosecution of war at various levels. Similarly, the maritime doctrine, which is also in an advanced stage of development, though not written down as a publication would also require to be interfaced and dovetailed with Army and Air Force doctrines for evolution of a joint services doctrine for the Indian Armed forces. However, due to different perspectives and differing service legacies, the single service doctrines reflect the respective service prejudices on strategy, operations and tactics. These at times, hinder the application of total force in a synergised manner. The absence of a well-articulated national security strategy and objectives further compound the problem.<sup>11</sup>

Land force’s view is generally constrained by what is happening in their immediate vicinity and is guided by the restricted reach of their surveillance and weapon systems. Although modern battlefield has extended depth to cover deep and rear battles yet it is constrained by terrain, natural and man-made obstacles and the type of mobility possessed by ground forces. The army men, therefore, become more concerned with all the military activities that have immediate impact on ground operations. This, perhaps is one of the major reasons for an unending debate on the merits of close air support and counter air operations.

The naval forces are not, generally, constrained by terrain factors though hydrography does have an impact on their mobility. The forces have to seek out and find the enemy fleet and engage it. Their problems may not be as immediate as that of land forces. The naval forces dominance of important choke points and control of sea lines of communications has its importance in relationship with geo-economics. The Kargil War showed that employment of naval forces does have an indirect impact on ongoing operations even if they are not involved directly in combat operations.

However, even in a joint service environment (more so in single-service environment) an air force's principal objective is to fight the opponent's air force; similarly, naval force would also like to seek out and destroy the opponent's naval forces. The land forces in any case have to get on with the task of capturing and defending territory, requiring contribution from, at times, all the Services. It is widely accepted amongst our military planners and strategists that unless at the apex level there is a joint and integrated approach, the desired joint doctrine and synergy in planning and execution would not come about.<sup>12</sup>

Even in the US armed forces, their air doctrine tends to emphasise the wide-ranging flexibility of power deliverable from air-based platforms as the key ingredient for successful prosecution of war. Land warfare doctrine, on the other hand, usually assumes the ultimate need to exert some degree of control over the ground and tends to see air power as an useful, and at times even necessary supporting force in the performance of this ultimate mission.

In the Gulf War of 1991, Col. John Warden III of the US Air Force, who is considered to be the architect of air plan (code named 'Instant Thunder'—reminiscent of and conceptually distinct from air operation 'Rolling' Thunder of Vietnam days), had designed the air war in classic sense that is, going after the enemy's centres of gravity from the Air Force's point of view.

The initial plan did not include the engagement of enemy's fielded forces like destruction of Iraq's elite force, Republican Guards. Little attention was paid to operations after the first seventy-two hours of the combat, and none to the support of eventual ground operations. Ground forces target other than those associated with command and control were not addressed.

The extensive air support given during Kargil operations contributed greatly in ensuring success of the land forces. The IAF is rightly, apprehensive of exposing costly multi-role aircrafts to the cheap hand held surface to air missiles, dense hostile air defence environment, and problems of acquisition and identification of targets by very fast moving aircrafts.

However, acquisition of precision guided munitions, laser guided designators, weapon systems with stand-off capabilities and better command, control and communication systems with in-built interoperability would, largely be able to overcome some of these problems. Perhaps, a suitable and cheaper aircraft for ground attack instead of a multi-role aircraft would give a better combat effectiveness value in the likely battlefield of future in the subcontinent. Close air support should be positively used to create and exploit opportunities in the battlefield since it can be most effective at the decisive points of the battlefield.

The IAF doctrine does accommodate to a large extent, the army's viewpoint. The differing precepts are more in form rather than in substance. The air doctrine concludes that "In the doctrine of IAF the fight for control of the air or Air superiority gets first priority in every case without implying that it is for its own sake or that it alone would defeat the enemy. The air superiority battle is not done at the expense of support to surface forces since it is the achievement of requisite degree of control of air that makes roles like interdiction, Battlefield Air Interdiction and Close Air Support even more effective. It is, in fact not the attempt to achieve air superiority that causes dispersion of effort away from surface support, but the failure to do so.

A joint doctrine will coalesce, synthesise and harmonise the tenets, beliefs and principles of the different services into one common, officially enunciated and accepted guideline for carrying out joint operations and in Indian context it assumes more significance in context.

## **Air Force-Naval Doctrinal Interface in Indian Context**

The naval doctrine though not enunciated in a separate publication as such does exist in some form or the other. Even the United States Navy does not have a separate doctrinal publication but its naval doctrine and precepts are reflected in a number of other naval publications.

Till the late sixties the development of the Indian Navy was influenced by the British. Lack of the political leadership's assertiveness and difficulties in acquisition of naval systems also contributed to complexities in evolving a coherent Indian naval doctrine. There has been a continuous debate on what kind of maritime role would be desirable for the naval forces. This is indeed intimately connected with the national security doctrine and objectives. In the absence of a clear articulation of the overall doctrine the issues regarding the utility and non-utility of aircraft carriers for the Indian navy comes up. What kind of power projection capability is required commensurate with resources available or likely to be made available, has to be jointly planned and decided. In the absence of adequate resources, the priorities would have to be allotted for acquisition of joint warfare capabilities based on a common vision of the future nature of warfare and common perspective to achieve the war fighting objectives.

It is quite evident that IAF would be employed in close cooperation with Indian Naval forces to achieve optimum combat utility. Joint maritime air operations would exploit the natural synergies between air and naval forces. Though, the reach of shore-based air power would be restricted by its radii of operations yet this limitation can be overcome by aerial refueling capabilities. The tenets of gaining air superiority and carrying out counter air strikes are equally applicable while supporting naval forces. The IAF roles of anti-shipping strikes and maritime strikes are overlapping roles between the Navy and IAF. Even though, in the Indian context, detection and identification of maritime targets are the responsibility of the Navy, in a joint environment the IAF could supplement this effort.

The application of air power for maritime strikes, that is against enemy naval forces which are not in contact and enemy naval facilities on shore including naval platforms in harbour, would have to be jointly planned and coordinated. These maritime strikes would have to be planned with a view to not only further the naval operations but also for the furtherance of the overall objectives of a joint campaign.

Long-range maritime reconnaissance is the exclusive preserve of the Indian Navy but in certain contingencies it would be possible to employ resources available with the IAF for similar tasks. But this would require prior thought, that is, unified thinking, planning and coordination and this would go a long way in reinforcing and complementing joint efforts to attain military objectives. Further, if AWACS/AEW aircrafts become available the effectiveness and complementarity of joint maritime air operations would be greatly enhanced.

## **Tri-Service Doctrinal Interface in Indian Context**

The Gulf War of 1991 is often cited as an example of application of joint doctrine developed by the US Armed Forces consequent to coming into force of Goldwater Nichols Act of 1986; a legislative mandate imposed upon the different Services to enforce jointness.

Amphibious operations are the acid test of jointness. It is the most complex operation of war requiring close cooperation and coordination among the participating forces of all the three services. The precepts of flexibility, mobility, and concentration of forces at the most advantageous point and at the most opportune moment become the essential considerations for successful conclusion of amphibious operations.

The capability and intent to use an amphibian force also serves as a threat in being in the overall context of theatre level joint operations. What should be our capability, is inexorably linked with our national security doctrine and objectives. Besides the defence of our own island territories the question is what kind of out of area or power projection capabilities do we need to have to protect our national interests.

However, there were different interpretations of the Gulf War by different Services and there were doctrinal differentials and disparities. Cooperation does not imply that all Services would have identical views on every issue, nor that they should be combined. Each service optimises its unique strengths.

The increasingly complex nature of warfare and induction of new technologies compels the Indian armed forces to fine-tune their doctrinal precepts in management of weapon systems and role that may be common to all or the two services and enunciation of the Joint Doctrine is the first step towards that when it comes to dealing with dual enmities China and Pakistan.<sup>13</sup>

The air defence weapon systems and air space management would require a detailed coordination and common perspective. The single service proclivities start making an appearance when overlapping areas of responsibility or similar weapon platforms are possessed by or bid for by two or more services.

For instance, induction of Prithvi missiles into the Army and Air Force is viewed differently by each Service. With the likelihood of induction of long range rocket systems like SMERCH into the Army and combined with the existing Prithvi missiles, there would be overlapping in interdiction roles. Needless to say that the emphasis has to be on joint planning, joint targeting and developing of common doctrine for shaping the battlefield. The air space over a modern battlefield with fast tempo and simultaneity would be very dense with flying objects like artillery fire, anti-aircraft fire, movement of own and enemy's air and weapon platforms, various types of missiles and munitions. Thus management of air space would be an inter-services coordinated effort for smooth prosecution of war and for avoidance of fratricide.

In a post-industrial battlefield, it would be an astute combination of the ISR assets of all the three services which would provide a transparent, real time and a shared picture of the battlefield. In fact each single aspect, that is, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance lends itself for best exploitation jointly with common doctrinal guidance.

In the era of knowledge-age, information-based warfare, the single service doctrines are more likely to compound the ever-present Clausewitzian elements of battlefield 'friction, fog and uncertainty'. The development of joint doctrine for the armed forces would be an attempt to attenuate the impact of these elements both during peace and war.

The use of scarce space based assets is another area which needs to be exploited jointly not only by the three services but also by civil agencies. Some planning and coordination appears to have been already done by nominating Army as the nodal agency for development of communications, Navy for space-based navigation and Air Force for carrying out surveillance with space-based assets. However, the optimal utilisation of space-based assets would be best executed by evolving joint tri-service doctrinal precepts.

### **Status of India's Joint Doctrine**

The formulation and process of evolving a military doctrine leave alone a joint military doctrine and introducing any innovation is riddled with many inherent inhibitors and obstacles. Military organisations, as a rule, are reluctant to change. They are used to structured and standard scenarios and standard operating procedures. It is a truism to state that 'it is difficult to get a new idea into a military mind rather than get an old idea out'. The politico-military culture has pronounced proclivities for maintaining the status quo.

As the Kargil Review Committee Report points out, Civilian bureaucrats perceive any move of integration of Services Headquarters with Ministry of Defence as a threat. And status quo is often mistakenly defended as civilian ascendancy over the armed forces, which is not the real issue.

In pluralistic and democratic nation states, it has normally been a difficult task to forge a joint doctrine among the armed forces. In either a military dictatorship or a totalitarian regime such a problem may be resolved without much difficulty. Germany, under Hitler had been able to impart a common perspective to all the three services due to his undisputed authority. Many see Nazi Germany's armed forces, the Wehrmacht, as early pioneers of 'jointness'. The Wehrmacht did understand the value of synchronising its land, sea and airforces and Wehrmacht's efforts in this direction produced the desired result of improved combat effectiveness.<sup>14</sup>

Even in the US Armed Forces, evolving a joint doctrine has not been an easy process. Before the Goldwater Nichols Act of 1986 was thrust on the armed forces, there had been official agreements between the different services to resolve common issues of concern to them. In November 1984, the Joint Attack of the Second Echelon (J-SAK) Joint Service Agreement was signed by the Air Force and Army Chiefs of Staff, and in December 1984, the J-SAK Procedures Manual was published.

These documents put across an early vision of how air and land forces would jointly conduct modern warfare.

The Indian Armed Forces modest attempts for evolving a joint doctrine started in mid-nineties with the establishment of Army Training Command on the lines of a similar organisation established by the US. Even after a number of years of debate, it is not clear as to which agency should be made responsible for writing such a joint doctrine. Though, the appropriate authority for issuing a direction for evolving a joint doctrine would wrest with the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC), the obvious choice for writing and coordinating such a doctrine would be Joint Planning Committee (JPC).<sup>15</sup>

However, JPC is inadequately staffed. The other choices of agencies for writing such a doctrine are Director General Defence Planning Staff (DGDPS) and Army Training Command (ARTRAC). Both Air Force and Navy have officers of the rank of Air Commodore and Commodore posted at ARTRAC and ARTRAC could be earmarked as a nodal agency for development of joint doctrine.

There have been a number of seminars held between the Army and Air Force to resolve issues of concern to the respective services. And there has been considerable convergence on issues of joint planning, joint targeting and tasking. The guiding principles of this convergence are that the Army would not find itself deficient of air power for conduct of its operations.<sup>16</sup>

After Kargil, the media has been very active in reporting joint training exercises being carried out by the armed forces. All these exercises are aimed at honing joint skills. The Indian Navy conducted exercise 'springex' in the Arabian Sea

The exercise involved elements of both Western and Eastern Naval Fleets and was planned to culminate in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands with a tri-services operation. In the final phase, an amphibious landing was carried out by the Army. The experience gained during such exercises would be useful in evolving a joint doctrine.

The scope of this exercise encompassed planning of an offensive of an integrated task force against the backdrop of the prevailing security situation in the subcontinent. Its aim was to integrate air power with ground forces for delivering a decisive punch. The aim of such exercises is not only to test the combat elements of each service, but such exercises become facilities for evolving a common perspective of the battlefield.

Finally, where does the joint doctrinal developmental process stand today? It is believed that such issues are to be tackled as an aftermath of exercise 'Brahmastra' held in May 2025. The main purpose of this effort was to evolve doctrinal precepts to meet the battlefield requirements of the 21st century. The stress was on interservice operations, theme of jointness and efforts to achieve greater cohesion in all facets of functioning of the three Services. As an outcome of the deliberations held during the tri-service exercises (some papers have referred to it as a conference) a number of studies on joint planning processes may be ordered. And one such study could be for evolving a joint doctrine for the Indian Armed Forces.

The establishment of the National Security Council in November 1998 had given an indication that a strategic defence review would be carried out and perhaps a national security doctrine would be formulated in an earlier time frame. The Kargil Review Committee Report released in 1999 has pointed out flaws in the national security decision-making process and the desirability of achieving integration of the Services Headquarters and the Ministry of Defence. However, whatever be the outcome of recommendations of the Kargil Report, there is considerable scope amongst the three Services of the Indian Armed Forces to achieve jointness and integration and as a consequence gain synergies in the defence of the realm.

One such essential element of jointness is evolution of a joint doctrine for the armed forces. The battlefields of the future are becoming increasingly complex. A joint doctrine will glue the joint forces together in the battlespace of the future. Single service doctrines have unique proclivities in practice of warfare. At the beginning, the attempts to move towards a common perspective may appear to be difficult to achieve or the inter-service problems may seem intractable. However, such problems are not insurmountable.

Joint doctrine is intimately connected with principles of war commonly accepted by all the three Services. Unity of effort, economy of effort, common objectives and goals at all levels of war compel them to evolve a common doctrine for warfighting. The uniqueness, strengths, capabilities and limitations of each service have to be appreciated by all members of a joint team. Proficiency in own service is basic to jointness and everything else flows out from this fundamental requirement.

While there are numerous inhibitors for development of a joint doctrine yet there are adequate facilitators for evolving such a doctrine. One can only hope that a national disaster should not become a facilitator for such a purpose. With a number of joint planning and training exercises having been held in the aftermath of Kargil and experience of past wars it is time to put our beliefs, experiences and tenets of warfighting into writing. All the three services have one common aim, that is, to deter war and should the deterrence fail, to fight and win.

### **India's Strategic Doctrine and limited war concept**

The clarification on the politico-military orientation and the Grand Strategy is achieved with the perceived articulation of the Strategic Doctrine. The Strategic Doctrine guides the Grand Strategy and the military doctrine. India's Joint Warfare Doctrine released in April 2017 spelt out the concept of Grand Strategy or the Strategic Doctrine and the higher defense organization required for that.

On that note, The Indian higher defense organization has retained the structure it had shortly after independence in August 1947. After the intelligence failure of the Kargil War in 1999, there were calls for defense reform. This led to the creation of two experimental commands, one functional (Strategic Forces Command), and one theater (Andaman and Nicobar Command).

While the development of further theater commands has stagnated, there have been persistent rumors over the imminent formation of three functional commands: Space, Cyber, and Special Forces. India's joint doctrine refers to these in the section called "Integrated Strategic Structures: Emerging Triad." This perhaps lays the groundwork for the future establishment of these commands. The Doctrine makes the case that integration of these functions is necessary modeling on the United States approach to development of joint doctrine.

There are, however, some differences from the U.S. approach to doctrine development and integration. For example, U.S. joint doctrine normally explains its relationship to service doctrine: joint doctrine supersedes service doctrine. Indian joint doctrine merely aligns with service doctrine. One classic example is that India claims that its Army's military doctrine has moved to a 'proactive' and 'offensive' doctrine from the start of this century.

The Indian Army doctrine released in 2004 has been popularly dubbed 'Cold Start'. The 2004 Indian Army Doctrine is updated every five years. The Indian Army doctrine has two parts. Part I is accessible and unclassified while the Part II is inaccessible and classified. It's the Part II which has been dubious since Pakistan claims that Part II is the so called "Cold Start"<sup>17</sup>

Following the release of the Army Doctrine, a classified Joint Warfare Doctrine, was formulated by the Head Quarters International Defence Staff (HQIDS) in 2006. Joint Warfare Doctrine includes the doctrine of three services of Army, Navy and Air Force. Air Force has its own doctrine which's classified, however the Naval Doctrine the so called 'India's Maritime Doctrine' is not. Then there is a sub-conventional warfare doctrine classified Joint Warfare doctrine, formulated by HQs Integrated Defence Staff of 2006. The Air Force doctrine is also classified, but not so the Naval doctrine, expansively termed 'India's Maritime Doctrine' which was released in 2009.

These four doctrines would serve as guide for conventional conflict strategy. Response to terror provocations emanating from Pakistan, such as in the form of ‘surgical strikes’ and action on the Line of Control, would be subsumed in the Sub-conventional portion of the spectrum of armed conflict.

With respect to China in terms of continental approach, India doesn’t have any such concrete doctrines therefore leaving void in it’s approach to Grand Strategic orientation. On the other hand, thought theoretically, the concept of Grand Strategy has evolved into a type of policymaking process rather than an independent theoretical idea it’s understood that in India’s case at present it doesn’t not having an independent theoretical idea on the concept of Grand Strategy.

Further, India’s strategic doctrine has not clearly mentioned either the nuclear strategy or the limited war theory concept. The Indian Army Doctrine (2004) has no discussion of limited war. What the new 2010 edition of the doctrine states in this respect is not known since, unlike its 2004 predecessor document, it is confidential.

On that note, it brings one to the issue of doctrinal formulation and promulgation in India. The absence of a Chief of Defense Staff leads to each service formulating and promulgating respective doctrine on its own. While admittedly this would be after due formal and informal networking with other services, yet organizational theory informs that this cannot be without the contaminating element of inter-service rivalry.

This is part of periodic updation of the doctrine of 2004 being conducted by the Army Training Command. As mentioned in the preface to the 2004 Indian Army Doctrine by the then Army Commander, ‘Part I will be reviewed every five years and updated, as necessary.’ This ‘main part’ was earlier accessible on the Army’s website; but is now available on the website of Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff. The second part is classified and is only for restricted circulation. As a whole, the doctrine is to be re-issued every ten years.<sup>18</sup>

Interestingly, the Cold Start strategy does not find mention in Part I and can be presumed to have been dwelt within the restricted Part II. In effect, both parts are likely being dealt with in the ongoing review, though only the revised Part I would be placed in the public domain eventually. The success of India’s war strategy, entailing orchestrated exercise military and non-military power, will be predicated on avoidance of this eventuality. However, in case of a more expansive conflict, a nuclear doctrinal shift from ‘massive’ punitive retaliation to ‘flexible’ punitive retaliation will be the recognition of the continuing need for limitation despite nuclearization of a conflict.

As with India has recently released its Joint warfare doctrine and earlier the maritime security strategy document where the concept of Grand Strategy has been discussed, it’s imperative that there will be discussions on its evolving approach with respect to it’s strategic and doctrine.<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, it’s true notwithstanding the internal discussion on strategy and doctrine it gives an important paradigm in India’s maritime thinking which is more important to it’s strategic partners and allies. The central focus is on improving its strategic outreach in the Asia-Pacific region, while also securing its maritime flank in the Indo-Pacific region. This would be done in co-operation with other maritime powers, so sharing collectively in their efforts to keep the Sea Lines of Communication open

In other words, rather than pursuing the offensive continental strategy towards China also, the argument put forward is to pursue a maritime strategy which involves forming alliances among countries which are wary of Beijing’s increased maritime presence in the Indo-Pacific region.

On the other hand, the logic to raise the mountain strike corps was based on this as India being primarily a continental strategic orientated country with a democratic political system in which the lost of territories will be considered volatile the move to raise a strike corps oriented towards China is more of a consideration given to reasons related to politico-military aspect rather than a economic aspect involving strategy.

The above two arguments brings to the table the problem of how India could operationalize its strategy in different theatres which brings questions at a Grand Strategy level. It extends to the fact that can India in addressing its immediate land based threat in its core can shelve its much acceptable role of expanding presence in its periphery in the South-East Asia or Indo-Pacific region by increasing its blue-water capabilities or the other way around.

India's strategic orientation towards China with developing its offensive maritime capabilities has increased with adding more strength to India's Eastern Naval Command based in Vishakapatnam and strengthen its tri-command service in the Andamans and Nicobar Islands and the now is the time to develop its land based capabilities by adding the mountain strike corps.

### **In conclusion,**

It's understood that Post Sindhoor operation, India has gone on an overdrive to develop it's military capabilities to negate threats from across border. However, the focus on Jointness, Integration and Theatrization will be the logical step and in that context the focus on Joint Doctrine will go on a long way as a part of the Joint Operations will be conducted in future by the individual services in India.

### **Notes:**

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# The Indus Waters Treaty: India's Historical Blunder

## Abstract

The Indus Waters Treaty (1960), brokered by the World Bank between India and Pakistan, has long been regarded as one of the most resilient water-sharing agreements in modern diplomatic history. Surviving multiple wars and prolonged political hostility, the Treaty has functioned as a stabilizing mechanism in an otherwise volatile bilateral relationship. However, recent developments, including India's decision to place the Treaty in 'abeyance' following renewed cross-border hostilities in 2025, have caused debates regarding its strategic, legal, environmental, and geopolitical implications to surface. This paper critically seeks to explore what the IWT entails, what it means to put a treaty into abeyance, the potential implications this could have for both India and Pakistan and the broader diplomatic and environmental consequences of such a move. It argues that while the Treaty has historically acted as a conflict-mitigating instrument, contemporary geopolitical realities necessitate a reassessment of its strategic viability. The paper concludes with policy recommendations aimed at balancing national security imperatives with international legal obligations and environmental sustainability.

**Keywords:** Indus Waters Treaty; Water Diplomacy; Treaty Suspension; India-Pakistan Relations; Hydro-Politics

## Introduction

The Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) is a transboundary water distribution agreement between India and Pakistan, mediated by the World Bank in the year 1960. The IWT, having been formulated & promulgated for over 6 decades, has recently garnered increased attention following the Pahalgam terror attack on 22nd April 2025 and India's subsequent retaliation through Operation SINDOOR (Strategic Initiative for Neutralising Destructive Opponents with Overwhelming Retaliation). As part of India's strategy to exert diplomatic pressure on Pakistan, the Government of India announced its decision to put the IWT into 'abeyance'.

### What is the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT)?

The Indus basin, comprising the Indus, Ravi, Beas, Sutlej, Chenab, and Jhelum rivers, emerges in southwest Tibet. The Indus Basin enters Kashmir and flows into Punjab, eventually draining into the Arabian Sea. The IWT allows for the unrestricted use of the water of the three 'eastern rivers', namely the Beas, Ravi and Sutlej by India while that of the three 'western rivers', namely the Indus, Chenab and Jhelum flows to Pakistan. India has approximately 20% of the total share of water carried by the latter three, whereas Pakistan gets the major share, approximately 80% (PIB, 2019).

With 80% of the waters allocated to Pakistan and a meagre 20% to India, to start with, India is at a disadvantage. This unfair and asymmetric allocation raises legitimate questions, especially as to why the Government of India, at that time, agreed to such an unbalanced allocation instead of pursuing an equitable division (Down To Earth, 2023). Given the strategic importance of natural resources for the development of any nation, it is indeed a matter of scrutiny whether national interests were adequately safeguarded at the time.

Furthermore, India's upstream position (all six rivers first flow through India and then into Pakistan) does not give it any operational advantage. India cannot capitalize on its upstream position and restrict the water flow of the western rivers due to the binding provisions of the IWT. Albeit, India does enjoy limited rights over the use of the water from the western rivers for non-consumptive purposes such as irrigation, water storage and hydropower.

Pakistan is predominantly an agrarian economy, and nearly 80% of its agriculture depends upon the water that flows from the Indus system (Singh, 2025). Thus, any kind of action by India to stop the flow of water into Pakistan may have a crippling effect on its agricultural and economic landscape (Singh, 2025). Therefore, a reliance of such nature necessitates the need for a more balanced approach with respect to water sharing; one where the interests of both nations are safeguarded equally.

The IWT has stood the test of time surviving four wars, and repeated acts of cross-border terrorism against India by Pakistan. However, a roadblock occurred in what appeared to have marked a rare moment of cooperation and goodwill between the two nations on April 23, 2025. The treaty was placed in “abeyance” for the first time following the heinous attack on Indian and foreign tourists by Pakistani terrorists in the lush meadows of Baisaran in Pahalgam (Barua et al., 2025; Bhaumik, 2025).

### **Hitting Pause, Literally and Legally**

Abeyance denotes putting a halt on something temporarily, with temporary being the key word. It suggests a state of waiting or holding. India suggested putting the IWT into abeyance, i.e., temporarily suspending the water supply to Pakistan in order to put pressure on various factions within the Government of Pakistan to take concentrated and targeted steps to curb cross-border terrorism emanating from its land.

However, it is crucial to understand that the term ‘abeyance’ does not have any formal recognition, either in the IWT or the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (1969). India is not a signatory to the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, and although Pakistan is, it has not ratified it. It is important to note that the purview of international law does not allow nations to pause treaty obligations unilaterally, especially in the case of treaties about shared resources such as water, where cooperation is highly essential.

It has been stipulated by Articles XII (3) and XII (4) of the IWT that any amendments or termination of the treaty must be agreed upon by both India and Pakistan, something highly unlikely in the present scenario of rising tensions. Alternatively, Articles 60-62 of the Vienna Convention stipulate that countries can suspend treaties under very specific circumstances such as serious violations by the other party or if there is an incapacity to perform.

Initially, India did not invoke any of these allegations as a basis for temporarily suspending the treaty and therefore the move could be looked at as a political message and an attempt to exert diplomatic pressure on Pakistan rather than from a legal lens (Barua et al., 2025). In practice, this meant that by pausing cooperation, India may stop sharing information on water related projects in the western rivers (violation of Article IV and Article VIII), it might withhold flood and hydrology data that Pakistan relies on (violation of Article VI and Article VIII), and could flush silt from dams without prior notice which affects water flow and planning in Pakistan (violation of Article III(2), Article VII, and Article VIII). This would not cancel the treaty but would constitute a breach of key provisions of the IWT by India and also hurt and disrupt water management and planning in Pakistan.

### **The Ripple Effects for India and Pakistan**

The abeyance of the treaty comes as a blessing for the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir (UT-J&K). If any part of India has had to directly bear the brunt of this lopsided Treaty, it has been the then state and now UT-J&K. The economy of UT-J&K is heavily reliant on agriculture but the constraints over the use of the water from the western rivers imposed by the IWT hindered irrigation projects and other advancements in the agricultural sector in the UT. The people of the region have blamed the IWT for its underdevelopment and sought the termination of the Treaty. The IWT has since been a permanent bone of contention in the Assembly. The Indus River Basin has an estimated hydropower potential of around 20,000 MW (with 16,480 MW already identified), most of which remains untapped. The main reason is the restrictions imposed by the IWT, which only permits run-of-the-river projects meaning India is constrained from building dams that would significantly alter the river’s flow into Pakistan. As a result, the state cannot fully benefit from its own natural water resources, limiting both its energy development and economic growth. Furthermore, the IWT has put the UT at the risk of regular flooding, leading to large scale loss of life, property and biodiversity. Therefore, putting the IWT into abeyance has come as a blessing for UT-J&K for more than a couple of reasons.

By holding the IWT in abeyance, India is effectively halting 39 billion cubic metres of water annually, significantly threatening the availability of water in Pakistan. A disruption in water supply, especially during the summer months will leave Pakistan parched in the heat. The Indus and its tributaries are the backbone of Pakistan’s energy industry powering hydroelectric dams like Tarbela and Mangla, which account for nearly 30% of the total electricity generated.

A disruption in the water flow will impact power generation. To put it into perspective, analysts have predicted that it could cause widespread blackouts lasting up to as long as 16 hours daily. Additionally, this would severely affect its agriculture, trade, employment, and food prices. Water scarcity will have a negative impact on industries such as sugar, rice and textile, which could potentially reduce Pakistan's exports, thereby worsening its balance of payments situation.

On the flip side, for India, there is an increasing scrutiny over whether or not India has the infrastructural capabilities to withhold such large volumes of water, and rightly so. The Bhakra Nangal Dam on the Sutlej, Thein (Ranjit Sagar Dam) on the Ravi, and Pong and Pandoh Dams on the Beas have been constructed to use the waters of the eastern river efficiently and reap maximum benefits. However, India's run-of-the-river hydropower plants do not possess the capabilities for large-scale storage and therefore India may consider unexplored options which could entail the redesigning of hydropower projects to increase its storage capacity and deploying drawdown flushing of its reservoirs. Releasing large volumes of water abruptly could also cause sudden flooding downstream in Pakistan. However, the National River Linking Project (NRLP) deserves a mention here. The NRLP aimed at addressing the problems of water scarcity by transferring waters from surplus river basins to water-deficient areas (PIB, n.d.). One of the two major components of the project was the Himalayan Component, which focused on linking rivers like Brahmaputra and Ganga. This intersects with the IWT because of the shared nature of several northern rivers and any attempt to interlink the rivers of the Indus basin would need prior consultation with Pakistan. Slated for completion in 2016, the project faced delays as India wanted to mobilize the necessary resources and detailed environment and feasibility studies. These steps were essential for the systematic & sustainable implementation of a project given its magnitude, impact, and strategic importance.

The IWT has also been giving rise to military constraints. Since India is permitted to use the water from the western rivers only for certain specific purposes, this limits India's ability to use water for military operations such as building military infrastructure or diverting water for strategic purposes. Any deviations from the Treaty's criteria could lead to disputes, affecting water availability for military and even civilian purposes.

From a geopolitical perspective, the IWT may seem to have served as a stabilizing force in the relationship of India and Pakistan, especially in the domain of water-sharing but this is far from reality. By acting as a conflict-reducing mechanism, the Treaty has prevented water disputes from blowing into full-fledged wars, even during the times of heightened hostility such as the 1965, 1971 wars as well as the Kargil War in 1999 (Yadav, 2025). Its durability has often been a textbook example of the so-called successful bilateral cooperation in the otherwise strained diplomatic relations.

However, the 2025 suspension of the IWT comes as an unprecedented shift, coming in direct response to cross-border terrorism sponsored by the Pakistani establishment, marking the first time in six decades that the Treaty has been actively suspended by one party as a form of strategic pressure. This stance by India has reaffirmed its policy of zero tolerance towards terrorism, and has gone to show that India will, if need be, take such steps in order to push Pakistan to take credible steps to curtail terror outfits and their notorious activities.

The possibility of India having to face international pressure for putting the IWT into abeyance cannot be ruled out. After all, the suspension of a long-standing treaty, that too on the sharing of water resources is bound to garner a lot of attention. However, this time India has a strong and compelling reason to justify its actions – 'national security'. It would only be fitting if the same degree of diplomatic pressure would be put on Pakistan to dismantle the terror networks operating from its soil. The world need not take seriously, human rights concerns raised by a nation that has a documented history of sponsoring terrorism. If the international community is concerned with peace and stability across the world, it must recognize that cooperation can never be unilateral. Ignoring the cause of such extreme measures - especially state sponsored terrorism – can reinforce the notion of an imbalance status-quo. India's move should thus be seen not as a disregard to international laws but as a medium to enforce accountability and responsibility so that the burden of peacebuilding is not shouldered unequally.

From an environmental point of view, water scarcity in Pakistan could lead to the disruptions of natural and biological ecosystems. Scarcity of water could lead to depletion of freshwater reserves, wetlands, aquatic plants and animals as well as amphibians.

It could affect migratory patterns of birds and may also lead to the loss of arable land, thereby leading to a decline in agricultural productivity. Low water levels could affect rivers' ability to flush out industrial pollutants naturally which may cause the toxin levels in water to spike that could affect plant, animal, and human life. Overall, ecosystems may become more vulnerable to the rising threats posed by climate change.

While suspending the IWT would seem like a strategic move for India, it would have serious environmental ramifications within its own borders as well. Increased risk of floods may lead to loss of soil quality in Himalayan and riverine regions. Waterlogging, reservoir strain, and effects on seasonal agricultural cycles could be the possible repercussions of over-retention of water. Environmental concerns are often transboundary, and those arising from the suspension of the IWT will seriously hinder India's efforts to stay true to its climate goals provided appropriate and timely measures are taken.

### **A Tightrope Walk: A Result of India's Misplaced Optimism**

This is not the first time that India and Pakistan have faced tensions over water sharing but never had the IWT been put under abeyance. For instance, when Pakistan raised objections over India's Kishanganga project on the Jhelum (2010-2013), the dispute was resolved at the Permanent Court of Arbitration, which allowed India to proceed with the project while ensuring minimum water flow to Pakistan. A second instance was the Tulbul Navigation Project, where India's proposal to build a barrage on the Jhelum invited objection from Pakistan. The project has been stalled by Pakistan citing the IWT (Mohan, V., May 2025).

However, what sets this moment apart is India's unprecedented move to do just that – sending a clear and assertive message that it will not tolerate threats to its national security and is prepared to safeguard its interests even if it means restricting Pakistan's access to a resource as basic and vital as water. While dispute resolution mechanisms such as the Permanent Indus Commission (PIC), which comprises representatives from both nations have been established to manage disputes, one cannot estimate the degree to which these mechanisms will prove to be of help given the prevailing tensions between both nations. Alternatively, the IWT also provides for dispute resolution through neutral experts or by international bodies such as the World Bank.

Over the years, the IWT has come to emerge as a constraint imposed by India on itself; a self-dug grave. Given the current geopolitical tensions between India and Pakistan, adhering to the Treaty seems like tying our own hands. Keeping it in abeyance/suspension or even walking away from it permanently seem like options that would give India the flexibility it needs in such times of heightened conflict. But this seems easier said than done. As mentioned earlier, India may have to face serious backlash from international bodies, other nations as well as human rights groups in the form of charges of violating basic human rights by denying the Pakistani people access to a vital resource such as water. India is walking a very tight rope, trying to balance national security interests and global responsibility. Any action that India may take in this direction must be done with a careful, well-charted, and precise legal and diplomatic plan.

The recent turn of events serves as a stern reminder for India to not engage in any formal agreements/treaties with nations that have a proven track record of hostility and unreliability. Any more destructive actions by Pakistan could have a detrimental impact on India's socio-economic developmental endeavours and act as a serious blow to public morale. Pakistan has consistently showcased its disregard for mutual trust and cooperation. Far from being a friend, it has always failed (sometimes even wilfully and with strategic intent) to uphold its commitments. India's patience all along, hoping that things would change, has brought us nowhere; and today, we bear the dire consequences of this very avoidable optimism.

As a consequence of the deep erosion of trust, India's stance today remains firm, asserting that it shall not engage in any dialogue with Pakistan unless it "irrevocably adjures its support for cross-border terrorism". The weaponization of the IWT is a novel move and goes to show the changing face of exerting diplomatic pressure on enemy countries. While the IWT has been the cornerstone in managing water disputes between India and Pakistan, challenges do persist and the Treaty's resilience will now hinge not just on procedural adherence, but also on continued dialogue, mutual trust and adherence to its established mechanism, contingent on the bilateral nature of these efforts.

## Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The Indus Waters Treaty has historically functioned as a stabilizing diplomatic instrument, insulating water cooperation from broader political hostility. However, changing geopolitical realities, persistent cross-border terrorism, and evolving national security considerations have altered the calculus.

While suspension may offer short-term strategic leverage, it introduces legal ambiguity, environmental risks, and potential diplomatic isolation. Therefore, India's approach must balance assertiveness with prudence.

## Policy Suggestions and Action Points

1. **Strategic Legal Framing:** Any alteration to the implementation of the Treaty needs to be grounded in internationally defensible legal reasoning under the Vienna Convention framework.
2. **Infrastructure Modernization:** India should accelerate development of permissible storage and run-of-the-river projects within Treaty limits to maximize existing entitlements.
3. **Hydrological Transparency Reform:** Instead of abrupt suspension, recalibrate data-sharing frameworks to align with security concerns while avoiding complete breakdown of cooperation.
4. **Re-negotiation Mechanism:** Explore structured re-negotiation avenues focusing on climate change adaptation, disaster management, and equitable modernization of the Treaty framework.
5. **Environmental Safeguards:** Conduct rigorous environmental impact assessments to mitigate transboundary ecological damage from altered water flows.
6. **Diplomatic Preparedness:** Prepare a comprehensive diplomatic strategy anticipating multi-lateral scrutiny and framing actions within national security imperatives (Bhaumik, 2025).

On a closing note, the IWT represents both a diplomatic constraint and a strategic asset. Whether it continues as a stabilizing mechanism or evolves into a tool of calibrated pressure will depend on careful legal structuring, infrastructural readiness, and diplomatic foresight.

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# India's Digital Diplomacy: A Case Study of the Unified Payment Interface

## Abstract

In the present tech world, digital diplomacy cannot remain an exception to this. It implies the use of different social media platforms, technologies to spread and influence the global perception in favour of you. This paper is aimed at to see India's digital diplomacy through UPI, its genesis in India and its expansion in the globe. Role of digitization in economic growth, effect of digital schemes on economy and the significance of the Stack Knowledge programme. This paper also tried to understand the challenges faced by UPI stakeholders and its growing expansion in various countries.

**Key Words:** Digital Diplomacy, UPI, Global Expansion, Soft Power.

## Introduction

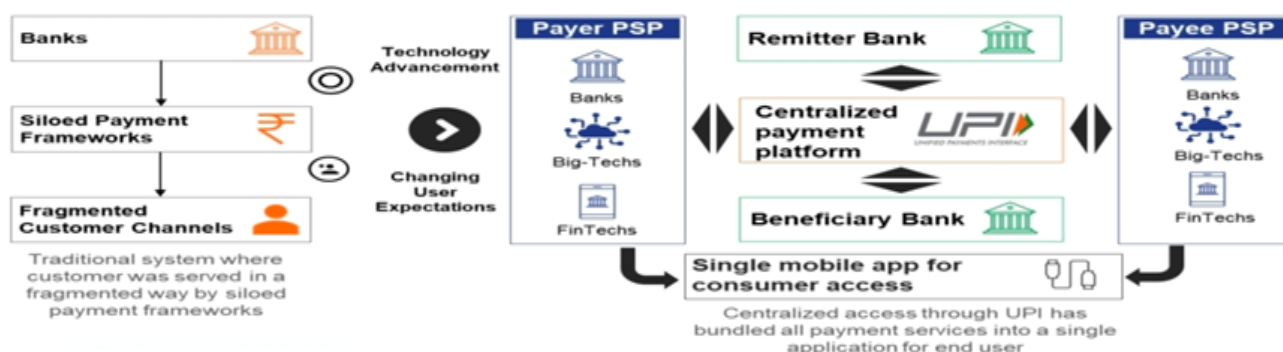
In International Relations, there are various sub-disciplines of studies conceptualized throughout the centuries. One such study includes – ‘Diplomacy’. The early diplomatic thinkers and scholars settled the meaning of diplomacy with ‘normative perception dealing with advocacy, negotiation, and problem-solving with missions of reflection and problematization’ (Constantinou, Kerr, & Sharp, 2016, p. 16). However, the breakthrough for modern diplomacy began with the Raison D'état idea on linking diplomacy to statecraft, separating diplomacy from the humanist-centric approach towards International Relations studies (Constantinou, Kerr, & Sharp, 2016, p. 16). Thus, the traditional idea of diplomacy transformed into the definition of “the principal means by which states communicate with each other, enabling them to have regular and complex relations. It is the communications system of the international society” (Berridge & James, 2003, p. 71). This definition signifies that the traditional practice of diplomacy sustains state actors’ initiatives for establishing foreign relations among each other. In the 21st Century, the evolution of diplomacy has completely altered the standard definition into a modern notion with the rise of Information Communication Technology (ICT).

### A. Digital Diplomacy and India

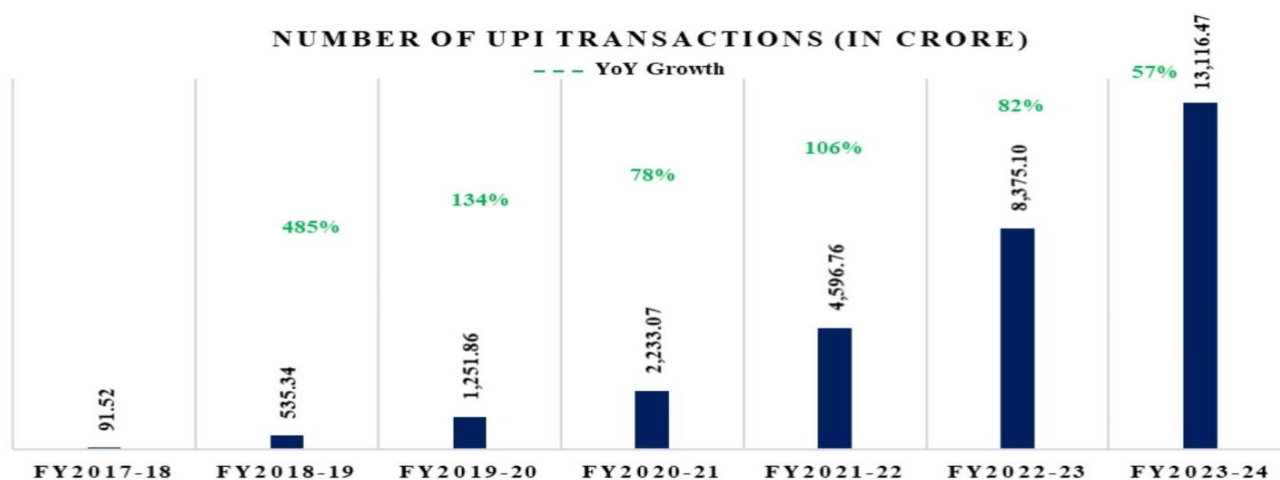
According to Corneliu Bjola & Ilan Manor (2024), “Digital diplomacy refers to the use of digital technologies, such as social media and other online platforms, including virtual communication channels and the metaverse, by ministries of foreign affairs (MFAs) and international organizations (IOs) to communicate with each other and the general public, conduct diplomacy, and advance their foreign policy goals”. This definition missed the evolving and dynamic nature of digital diplomacy. According to Eytan Gilboa (2016), the standard definitions of Digital Diplomacy based on social media aspects point out discrepancies, because there are alternative sources for the networking the society through various means. One such example, India's Unified Payments Interface (UPI), is a unique glocalized product shaping India's global image as an emerging leader in the digital payment landscape. For instance, in 2025, Qatar became the eighth country to adopt the UPI payment system for Indian travellers (Kumar, 2025).

After the disintegration of the USSR, Western countries compelled Third-World developing states to implement public good infrastructure through the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) by the World Bank and IMF. This structural reform in the economy also strengthens the idea of digital governance in India. In 2006, the National e-Governance Plan (NeGP) brought a breakthrough path in the history of e-governance by establishing mission-mode projects for ensuring efficient, transparent, reliable, and affordable services at the doorstep of the citizens (Second Administrative Reforms Commission, 2008, p. 106). In 2015, the Modi government launched the Digital India Plan, acknowledging India's digitally empowered society and knowledge economy through building hi-tech digital infrastructure, which promoted one of the niche mission-mode projects in the payment sector, i.e., Unified Payments Interface (UPI). On 11 April 2016, the NPCI and the RBI announced the launch of the Unified Payments Interface (UPI), a regional digital payment ecosystem across India.

After the launch, the demonetization and COVID-19 pandemic boosted the adoption of UPI in the Indian financial market among individuals, merchants, and governments. Simultaneously, Third-Party App Providers such as Google Pay, PhonePe, Paytm, etc., began concentrating their roots in India's digital payment market share in 2017-18. This chart illustrates that UPI is a centralized Application Programming Interface (API) payment platform that provides seamless interoperable transactions between sender and receiver, replacing fragmented, siloed payments. The UPI system notifies the banks to transfer the amount instantly in the virtual space.



Source: National Payments Corporation of India (2023)



Source: Department of Financial Services (n.d.)

This graph showcases a record-breaking boom of UPI transactions, leading from 91.52 crore to 13,116 crore, which has definitely revolutionized India's financial market. In recent years, the growth of UPI has happened due to the user-friendly approach of UPI to conduct small-scale pay transactions among customers, which has increased the volume and value of transactions in India.

### A. UPI & India's Stack Knowledge Programme

India Stack is an open APIs digital public infrastructure that includes 3 core layers – identity, payment, and data (Manjunath et al., 2024). In 2009, India Stack began with the Aadhaar project, the world's largest biometric digital identity system, with over 1.4 billion users by 2025 (Banking Frontiers, 2023; Unique Identification Authority of India, n.d.). The next phase, Unified Payments Interface (UPI), rapidly transformed the Indian financial banking system, providing an interoperable payment transaction with 684 live banks, exceeding a volume of 20 million in November 2025 (National Payments Corporation of India, n.d.; Watson, 2024). The third component is the Data Empowerment and Protection Architecture (DEPA), a personalized cloud data storage, like Digilocker (Watson, 2024). On July 7 – 9, 2022, India Stack Knowledge Exchange Programme applauded India Stack's move beyond Indian jurisdiction towards international expansion (Press Information Bureau, 2022). According to Press Information Bureau (2023), "India signed MoU with three countries namely Armenia, Sierra Leone, and Suriname on sharing INDIA STACK i.e. successful digital solutions implemented at population scale". This leads India's exportation of the Global Digital Public Goods Repository to emerge international digital technology leader.

## India's Digital Diplomacy: A Theoretical Perspective

Joseph Nye's book "Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics," had defined and widened the term 'soft power' in the aftermath of the Iraq-US (2003) war. The book emphasized that the usage of soft power is essential for establishing oneself as a global hegemon in the competitive world politics. According to Nye (2004), "Soft power is getting others to want the outcomes that you want co-opts people rather than coerces them" (p.5). This statement highlights the potential of soft power to achieve self-interest outcomes from others through attraction rather than force. Similarly, India's UPI has been adopted by various countries through self-acceptance rather than India's external pressure. In this approach, 8 countries have incorporated UPI in their regional payment system, boosting the gateway for the international financial system.

Joseph Nye's theory suggests India has observed high demand for UPI adoption in many countries such as Oman, Cyprus, Japan, and others (Embassy of India, Muscat, 2022; ET Online, 2025; Laskar, 2025). According to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, "The Unified Payments Interface (UPI) developed by India is a huge success story and has been adopted in many countries. Last year, together with His Highness Sheikh Mohamed, it was launched in the UAE as well. We can also cooperate with other BRICS countries in this area." (Ministry of External Affairs, 2024, PM Modi, 2024). This statement highlights that India's UPI is shifting the multipolar world order towards virtual space and emphasizing India's emerging leadership towards BRICS countries as a trustworthy and cooperative-driven country.

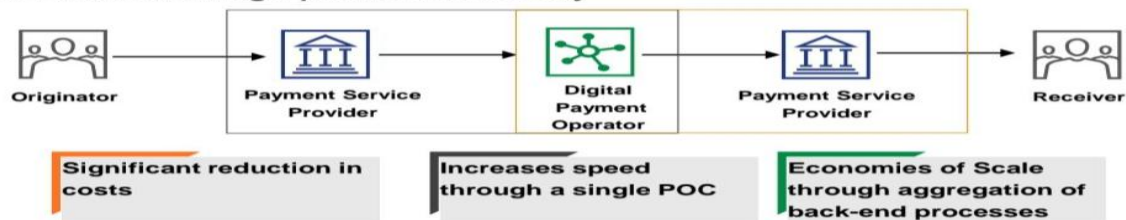
Nye's theory includes three elements of soft power, i.e., culture, value and policy legitimacy. India's UPI promotes a culture of global public good as a trustworthy and reliable partner for financial cooperation in different countries. Simultaneously, India's digital culture presents the transformational shift of India's global leadership in digital payment systems from 'Digital Vishwaguru' to 'Digital Vishwamitra' for the world. Not as a 'World Teacher' but as a 'World Friend', especially for small nation states (Ghosh, 2025). Further, the UPI holds key value of real-time payment system for instant transfer, availing low-cost facility through zero Merchant Discount Rate (MDR), offering ease of use system for efficient services, etc., ultimately aims for global financial inclusion (National Payments Corporation of India, 2023; World Bank, 2021). The policy legitimacy brings up the concept of 'One Digital Family' by offering UPI for the Global South through signing MoUs with multiple countries, organizations, and companies to foster a digital payment system.

Further, the limitation of the theory discusses that soft power is attractive but it is optional, not mandatory, for countries risking alternative production of the digital payment system by others, such as cases where the UPI payment system faces obstacles towards unchallengeable alternatives, like in the USA MasterCard, Brazil PIX payment system, and others.

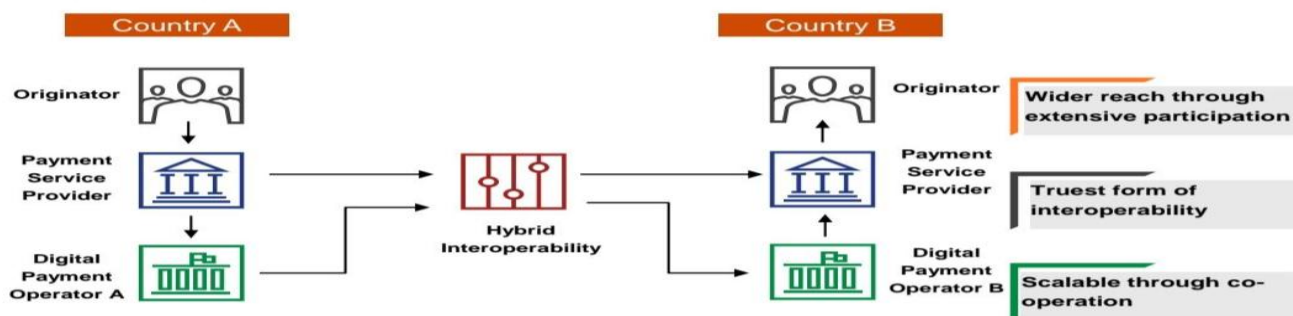
### Global Expansion of India's UPI:

On 3 April 2020, the establishment of NPCI International Payments Limited (NIPL), a subsidiary of NPCI, introduced a gateway for India's UPI in the global financial market. The vision statement of NIPL embarks "To be a leader in empowering global citizens with accessible digital payment solutions" (NPCI International Payments Limited, n.d.). In 2018, India-Singapore fintech collaboration of RuPay International card and SBI's UPI-based remittance app during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit rooted India's UPI expansion on the international payment system (High Commission of India, Singapore, 2019; PTI, 2018). In 2021, Bhutan became the first country to accept and adopt the UPI payment system. Since then, Nepal, the UAE, Singapore, France, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, and Qatar, initiated India's digital payment leadership across the globe. This chart explains the international working structure of India's UPI. The UPI system works on hybrid interoperability in a single point of connectivity between two different countries based on their regional system. For example, Indian tourist Ramesh bought chocolates in Nepal. The payment service providers (Paytm, NEPALPAY Business) of both countries sent a notification of the amount transfer to the respective banks (SBI, Nepal Bank Ltd.) and digital payment operators (NPIL, Fonepay Payment Service Ltd.) communicate for transactions. Once approved, the amount is immediately deducted from Ramesh's Indian bank account and sent to the merchant's Nepal bank account by calculating Nepalese Rupees (NPR) through the local clearing system. This is called cross-border payment transactions among different countries.

**1) UPI to act as a single point of connectivity**



**2) UPI & international counterpart to allow connectivity between two real time payments systems**



Source: National Payments Corporation of India (2023)<sup>1</sup>

Financial Year	Volume	Value (in Lakhs)
FY 2021-22	180	0.03
FY 2022-23	144	0.04
FY 2023-24	37,060	1,970.00
FY 2024-25	7,55,445	25,853.00
FY 2025-26 (till July 2025)	6,01,002	16,929.00

Source: Ministry of Finance, Government of India (2025)<sup>2</sup>

The table represents the cross-border transactions of India’s UPI globally. The figures in the table illustrate that the initial growth of cross-border payment had lower volume and value of transactions due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. However, the post-COVID era has marked significant progress of the digital payment system in the international market in terms of payment transactions.

**Achievements**

**A. Rapid Expansion of UPI Global**

In 2025, 8 countries have officially accepted India’s UPI in their regional digital payment system (NPCI International Payments Limited, n.d.). On 12 February 2024, India’s UPI services were officially launched in Sri Lanka and Mauritius during a virtual joint ceremony of the three nations. The President of Sri Lanka said, “You no longer have coins, you have Lanka QR and NIPL together” (Reserve Bank of India, 2024). Whereas, the Prime Minister of Mauritius stated, “The Bank of Mauritius has taken the modernization of the payment infrastructure to a higher level with the collaboration of National Payments Corporation of India” (Reserve Bank of India, 2024). This highlights that UPI enhances India’s global image across the world, especially in the Global South.

**B. Ensure Trustful & Cooperative Financial Partnership**

During the G-20 Summit 2023 PM Modi stated, “India has created a highly secure, highly trusted, and highly efficient public digital infrastructure in its digital payments ecosystem” (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023). Similarly, in Global Fintech 2025 PM Modi states, “Today’s India is among the most technologically inclusive societies in the world, Friends, we have democratized digital technology as well...and made it accessible to every citizen and every region of the country. Today, it has become the hallmark of Bharat’s good governance model (PM Modi, 2025).

These statements signify India aims inclusivity of all, including sharing a trustworthy and cooperative financial partnership through the UPI digital payment system in the world, emphasizing the idea of “One Earth, One Family, One Future”.

### **C. Unique Position of India’s Digital Payment System**

The success rate of UPI in India’s regional payment transactions has increased trust and confidence among various countries. According to the ACI Worldwide report (2024), India stands as the largest real-time payment transactions (129.3B) compared to Brazil (37.4B) and Thailand (20.4B) in 2023. Whereas, at the 2022 G-20 Bali summit PM Modi stated, “Last year, over 40 percent of the world’s real-time payment transactions took place through UPI. Similarly, we opened 460 million new bank accounts on the basis of digital identity, making India a global leader in financial inclusion today” (Ministry of External Affairs, 2022) had unlocked UPI’s unique features of instant payment transfer, interoperability, modular & open-source tech stack, lower transaction fees, and convenience (National Payments Corporation of India, 2023, p. 29). All these lead India’s UPI to challenge digital and financial hegemony like the USA, China, Brazil, and others.

### **Challenges**

#### **A. UPI Bares Criticism**

According to the Office of the United States Trade Representative (2025), “In November 2020, the state-owned National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) announced a market share limitation of 30 percent (measured by transactions) for foreign electronic payment service suppliers processing online payments made through India’s Unified Payment Interface, which is owned and operated by NPCI. Foreign digital payment companies were given until January 2023 to ensure their market shares met the 30 percent limit, but the Ministry of Finance has not enforced this market share ceiling” (p. 207). The United States’ criticism advocates India’s UPI leverages a geo-economic tool for acquiring a global digital payment system by restricting the share of foreign payment companies in India and expanding self-reliant UPI in the world.

#### **B. Cybersecurity Breach**

Cybersecurity breach is a major concern for India’s UPI expansion in the globe. According to Press Information Bureau (2025a), India’s general cyber fraud has risen from 10.29 lakh in 2022 to 22.68 lakh in 2024. Internationally, according to a Times of India report, “Maharashtra Cyber Department has collated information that in last 4-5 days, cyber resources on cyberspace of India especially related to information, infrastructure and banking have been under attack from China. The number of attacks has increased,” said Yashasvi Yadav, Inspector General (IG), Maharashtra State Cyber Department (ANI, 2020). Although this indicates India has not faced a major cybersecurity breach in the UPI payment system. Yet, these examples illustrate that UPI needs a robust cybersecurity system for tackling future cyber challenges.

#### **C. Emergence of Alternative Payment Systems**

According to the ACI Worldwide report (2024), Brazil has seen a 77.9% rise compared to 44.6% in India in the YoY growth rate of Volume of Real-Time Payments in 2022-2023, though positioning second-highest real-time payment system after India. The rapid expansion of Brazil PIX has increased the alternative competition of the digital payment system against India. However, PIX lack multi-currency support (a single transaction containing multiple currencies), which has edged India’s UPI (Chandra et al., 2024, Part 1, p.12). Others include Fed Now (America), WeChat Pay and Alipay (China), M-Pesa (Kenya), and Faster Payments Service (UK’s FPS) emerging as a major contender for India’s UPI for establishing the global digital payment leadership.

## Discussion and Findings

### A. Data Interpretation and Analysis

The data analysis investigates the growing perception of bankers and youths to strengthen this literature and encapsulate their insight on the rise of UPI and its impact on India's emerging leadership in the global digital payment system. The primary data collection of bankers and youths includes 14 responses & 35 responses respectively.

#### Bankers Perceptions

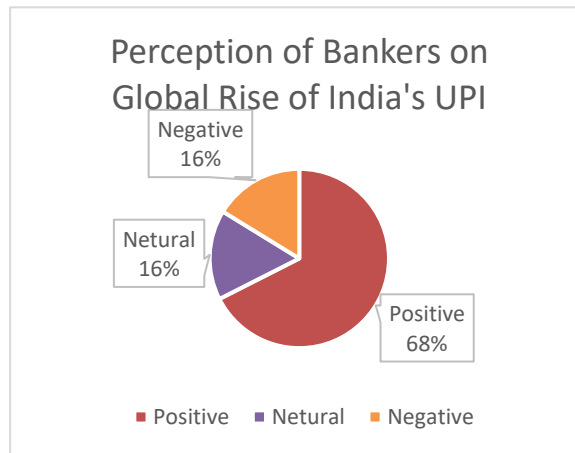


Fig.1.

This chart illustrates positive perception of bankers on global rise of India's UPI. The bankers' perception is essential because they are key technical intermediaries managing India's financial sector at the grassroots level for digital transactions and provides realistic insights into how UPI works in India and expands in the world.

#### Youths Perceptions

The pie chart showcase youths are also positively driven on global expansion of UPI because India is a youth-driven country and youths are exponential contributors to UPI transactions in India; this success story inspires other nation-states' youngsters to demand the adoption of the UPI system in their region

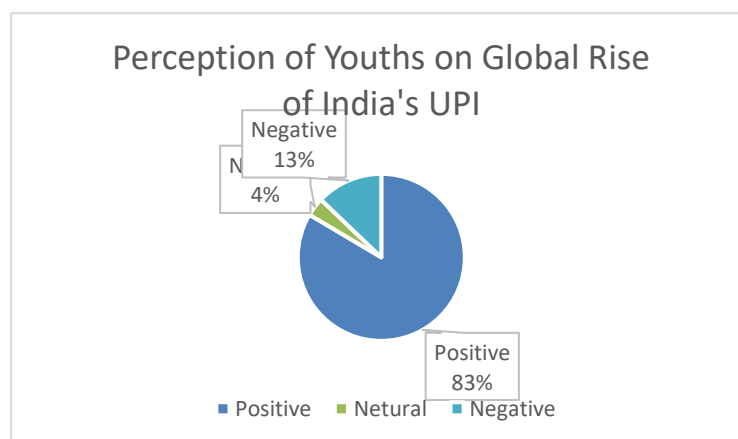


Fig. 2.

## Findings

### a. India's UPI as a Digital Diplomacy shapes India's Foreign Policy

Since the introduction of UPI, India's financial sector has significantly transformed into a digital economy and influenced its global politics. "UPI has become the world's largest platform for payments—compared to Visa's 639 million daily transactions in 2024, UPI recorded 644 million on 1 June 2025 and 650 million on 2 June" (Chikermane, 2025). Simultaneously, Chikermane (2025) indicates UPI leverages India's Grand Strategy for collaborating global digital payment system.

Meanwhile, the Fintech innovation has influenced India's inclusive presence in the international digital market. In 2022, India and Singapore signed a FinTech Co-operation Agreement (CA), which builds cross-border collaboration in Fintech innovations progressing towards global fintech cooperation (Monetary Authority of Singapore & International Financial Services Centres Authority, 2022). These events signified the strategic importance of India's UPI as digital diplomacy shapes India's foreign policy.

**b. India Stack serves Global Digital Public Goods in a Multipolar World Order**

India Stack is a digital public infrastructure that builds 3 core layers of identity (Aadhaar), payment (UPI), and data (Digilocker). Nandan Nilekani (2023) said, "India's unique contribution to digital public infrastructure, and therefore, there is a major move afford to take this model to 50 countries in five years" (Nandan Nilekani, 2023). The success of India's Digital Public Infrastructure encouraged global adoption. However, PM Modi advocate, "India Stack is a beacon of hope for the world, especially for the nations of the Global South" (Press Information Bureau, 2025b) and the IMF report highlighted, "India has developed a world-class digital public infrastructure (DPI) to support its sustainable Development goals" (Alonso et al., 2023). This statement justifies India Stack serves as global digital public goods initiating India has digitally leading player in the multipolar world order.

**c. UPI builds India's Robust Soft Power Perception Across the Globe**

UPI builds India's robust soft power perception across the globe, the finest example befits French President Emmanuel Macron said, "I will not forget the chai we shared together close to the palace (Hawa Mahal). It was a chai paid with UPI" during his official visit to India on 26 January 2024 (Mohan, 2024). Also, Mr. Wayne Nakhid, Deputy National Chief Digital Officer of Trinidad and Tobago, said, "The UPI programme is a step forward, a step into the future that our people need, want, and deserve" (Ministry of Public Administration and Artificial Intelligence, 2024). This explains India's global image has positively grown in Western and African countries, emphasizing that India's soft power perception is acknowledged worldwide.

**d. Global Financial Inclusion is a key persistent challenge for India's UPI**

The key challenges include the inclusion of global real-time payment settlement, the lack of digital sovereignty, regulatory hindrances, technological disparities, different foreign media perceptions, etc. For instance, The Guardian report states 'They treat us like animals', showcasing negative connotations of India's e-commerce market. However, India's UPI gained good popularity, stating 'UPI has brought a leapfrogged transition in linking millions of Indians' bank accounts to apps, and smaller items can be paid through a QR code on a mobile' (Ellis-Petersen, 2023). While China Daily states, "China's mobile payment is leading the world in both market size and user numbers and Chinese mobile payment companies have stepped up efforts to expand their presence in overseas markets" (Fan, 2019), such mixed claims from different countries hinder India's progress towards secured global financial inclusion.

India's UPI set a unique position for global expansion establishing its emerging leadership in the international financial system. India believes in its own technology, which inculcates the idea of indigenous knowledge exported to the world by Tilak's Swadeshi slogan. This conception situates a similar idea of India's UPI as a globalized product, advocating for an efficient, cost-effective, and faster payment system for the global financial system. This notion has developed the positive image of India as the regional self-reliance product is not only utilized for Indian citizens but also aids other countries' progress for a better global digital system without a realistic perception. This aims to position India as a trusted, reliable, and cooperative state for global development, signifying the concept 'Digital Vishwamitra' across the globe. Whereas the Youth have confidence in India's UPI growth in the global system, yet a certain skeptical perception remains. For instance, UPI's success is undeniable, but issues like transaction failures and the need for better cybersecurity measures still need attention. This justifies that India has the capability for achieving global digital payment leadership, yet India needs close watch to address key challenges for attaining the goal.

## Conclusion

The emergence of the 21st Century has introduced greater competition among major powers for establishing hegemonic power in the multipolar world order. According to Ian Bremmer (2024), there are three forms of world orders, i.e., security, economic, and digital. He says, “The digital order is coming soon and even more important, because it provides a way for a techno-polar order dominated by technology companies rather than the states”. This statement is justified as India, the US, China, Brazil, Europe, and others are in a winning race in specialized fields. For example, the US in military and economic power, Russia in oil & natural resources, Europe in trade & commerce, and China in manufacturing and science & technology. Similarly, India has also cultural & demographic power; however, India also explores the fintech arena through UPI. The rapid growth of UPI in India and its global reach has a significant impact on world politics. This brought the digital revolution in the contemporary era; India’s UPI stands for digital economy through the promotion of digital diplomacy. As, Amitabh Kant exclaimed, “From India to the world, UPI is leading the digital payment revolution!” (TOI Business Desk, 2025). Meanwhile, UPI is a niche product that emerged from India Stack, a digital public infrastructure that advocates for global public goods.

In May 2024, Ghana-India has signed an agreement between Ghana’s GhIPSS (Ghana Interbank Payment and Settlement Systems) & India’s UPI for operationalizing the cooperative instant payment system (Ricci et al., 2025, p. 39). Whereas, Euro’s Target Instant Payment Settlement (TIPS) and India’s Unified Payments Interface (UPI) initiated the “realisation phase” to interlink both systems, enabling an instant cross-border payment system, and also aiming for the initiation of Nexus Global Payments to integrate the global payment system in November 2025 (European Central Bank, 2025). This shows India’s global leadership in the Global South is also emerging along with the Global North’s appreciation, showcasing India’s shift from ‘Digital Vishwaguru’ to ‘Digital Vishwamitra’.

India’s ancient ideology, expressed in S. Jaishankar’s (2024) book, “Why Bharat Matters”, situates the arrival of 2014 Modi’s foreign policy, which introduced India as Bharat in the contemporary era. The terms Global South, Global Good, AatmaNirbhar Bharat, and South-South cooperation in the book resonate with India as a trustworthy & cooperative partner. The book in builds ancient Bharat has always remained a reliable partner through trade and commerce, similarly, Bharat is liable for digital economic partnership in contemporary times. Also, Maya Chadda (2014), in her book “Why India Matters”, figures out that the role of regional coalition government has always strengthened the economic and foreign policy of India for progressing India’s soft power assets – cultural and civilization, diaspora, and democracy, to make India a world leader.

This changing international political economy shapes the sphere of the world order bringing a scope for the research. Hence, this research article investigates how India’s digital diplomacy utilizes UPI as a soft power tool to shape its emerging leadership in the global digital payment system.

## End Notes:

1. National Payments Corporation of India (2023, p.26).
2. The UPI Cross-Border transactions data of 7 countries i.e. the UAE, Nepal, Bhutan, Singapore, Mauritius, France and Sri Lanka are available, except Qatar. Because Qatar has incorporated UPI recently on 6 October 2025 and the availability of Qatar’s data is limited.

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