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From Kabul to Kashmir: How Great Power Politics is Redefining Borders, Militancy, and Alliances in South Asia (2022–2025)

Dr. Dilawar Khan

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Bacha Khan University, Charsadda, KPK. Email: dilawar1983@gmail.com

Ms. Nadia

M.Phil Scholar in Political Sciences Scholar, Department of Politics & International Relations, Abasyn University, Peshawar.
Email: eshaal.awan2000@gmail.com

Dr. Sarfaraz Khan (Corresponding Author)

Assistant Professor of Pakistan Studies, Centre for Caucasian, Asian, Chinese and Pakistan Studies, University of Swat. Email: sarfarazkhan@uswat.edu.pk

M. Saqib Shinwari

Visiting Lecturer Kohat University of Science and Technology.
saqibphil88@gmail.com

Abstract

The period from 2022 to 2025 marks a significant reordering of geopolitical dynamics across South Asia, particularly from Kabul to Kashmir a corridor emblematic of enduring conflict and shifting alliances. This study investigates how great power politics, driven by the strategic interests of the United States, China, India, Iran, and Pakistan, is redefining state boundaries, fueling militant networks, and reconfiguring regional coalitions. In the wake of the Taliban's consolidation in Afghanistan, border regions have become hotspots for insurgency spillover, proxy warfare, and diplomatic friction. China's strategic expansion through the Belt and Road Initiative, especially via CPEC, is reshaping the region's economic and security architecture, while India strengthens its territorial control and security posture in Kashmir. Iran's evolving partnerships and Pakistan's delicate balancing act amid internal vulnerabilities and external pressures further complicate the picture. This research offers a comprehensive analysis of how strategic rivalries and alignments are altering the traditional political order in South Asia, with implications for sovereignty, regional integration, and long-term peace. The findings aim to equip scholars and policymakers with insights into managing the consequences of these transformations on regional stability.

Answer Key: Focus of Study, Geographic Scope, Key Powers Involved, Trigger Event, Militancy Shift, China's Strategy, India's Response, Pakistan's Role, Iran's Role, Study Aim.

Introduction

The geopolitical landscape of South Asia has been dramatically reshaped in the years following 2022, marked by a complex interplay of strategic competition, shifting alliances, and evolving patterns of militancy. From Kabul to Kashmir, the



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region has emerged as a critical battleground for global and regional powers pursuing their strategic ambitions. The withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan in 2021 marked a pivotal moment, creating a vacuum that accelerated the influence of China, Russia, Iran, and other regional actors. This shift not only altered power dynamics in Afghanistan but also triggered ripple effects throughout South Asia, particularly in relation to the Kashmir conflict and Indo-Pakistani relations. These changes have resulted in increased volatility, border tensions, and proxy engagements, redefining the traditional security paradigms and diplomatic alignments of the region (Rashid, 2022; Riedel, 2023). In Afghanistan, the return of the Taliban and the subsequent international disengagement allowed regional players to deepen their footprints, while non-state actors regained space to operate. Pakistan, once a key player in the Afghan peace process, found its influence increasingly contested by rising Chinese and Iranian interests. Concurrently, India's strategic outreach through its growing partnerships with the United States and Israel has intensified geopolitical polarization, especially in contested regions like Kashmir. This has escalated both direct and indirect confrontations, including hybrid warfare, intelligence maneuvering, and digital propaganda. The result is a heightened security dilemma across the region, where diplomatic efforts are frequently overshadowed by hard power calculations and nationalist ambitions (Fair, 2023; Tellis, 2023).

Militancy, both state-sponsored and insurgent-led, has undergone a transformation, adopting more decentralized and tech-enabled methods. The Kashmir valley, long a flashpoint between India and Pakistan, has seen new dimensions of unrest influenced by external ideologies, regional propaganda, and covert interventions. The role of international jihadist groups, re-emerging in Afghanistan and finding sympathetic nodes in other parts of South Asia, adds further complexity to the security calculus. Moreover, the region's unresolved border issues from the Durand Line to the Line of Control have become more volatile, with localized conflicts threatening to escalate into broader confrontations amidst global strategic rivalries (Jones, 2022; Yusuf, 2024).

As the U.S. recalibrates its South Asian strategy and China expands its Belt and Road Initiative through Pakistan and into Afghanistan, new alliances and fault lines are emerging. Regional forums like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and cross-border economic corridors have become arenas of influence rather than platforms for cooperative security. Simultaneously, the militarization of diplomacy, cyber surveillance, and propaganda warfare are increasingly being used to sway public opinion and undermine state sovereignty. Thus, South Asia stands at a strategic crossroads, where the intersection of great power politics, unresolved territorial disputes, and the rise of unconventional threats is redefining the future trajectory of regional peace and conflict (Pant & Joshi, 2023; Small, 2024).

Literature Review

The academic discourse surrounding South Asia's geopolitical transformation has evolved significantly in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. Numerous scholars argue that this strategic exit catalyzed a regional power reconfiguration, giving China, Russia, and Iran greater leverage in Afghan affairs while weakening Western influence. Rashid (2022) emphasizes that the power



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vacuum created by NATO's retreat allowed the Taliban's return to control, but also reignited the space for regional militancy, proxy groups, and ideological conflicts. This marks a revival of "The Great Game" narrative, with Kabul as its epicenter. Meanwhile, China's proactive engagement, particularly through economic incentives under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is seen as a strategic tool to establish influence without conventional military presence (Rashid, 2022; Small, 2024).

Militancy and cross-border terrorism remain deeply entrenched in South Asia's security calculus, with the Kashmir conflict being a focal point. Scholars like Fair (2023) and Jones (2022) highlight that militant groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan have diversified their operational scope, evolving into decentralized networks that thrive on digital platforms and ideological propaganda. These groups have gained renewed momentum, especially in regions affected by weak governance and porous borders. Moreover, Indian security analysts argue that external actors—mainly Pakistan-based proxies and transnational jihadist movements continue to exploit instability in Kashmir for strategic depth. This has complicated New Delhi's counterinsurgency strategy and exacerbated civilian-military tensions within the valley (Fair, 2023; Jones, 2022).

The influence of great powers namely the United States, China, and Russia on regional alliances and conflict dynamics has been another core subject in scholarly debate. While U.S.-India relations have grown stronger, especially through defense agreements and intelligence sharing under frameworks like QUAD, Pakistan has tilted further toward China and Russia to balance its regional position. According to Tellis (2023), India's grand strategy is increasingly oriented toward aligning with Western democracies to contain China and secure its northern and western frontiers. In contrast, Pakistan's reliance on China for economic and military support, especially through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), has fostered a new axis that threatens to marginalize traditional U.S.-led security mechanisms in the region (Tellis, 2023; Pant & Joshi, 2023).

Hybrid warfare and the rise of digital conflict have added new dimensions to traditional interstate rivalries. Authors like Yusuf (2024) and Riedel (2023) explore how cyber operations, fake news campaigns, and narrative manipulation are increasingly used to redefine national identities, question borders, and create internal dissent. These asymmetric tools of statecraft have blurred the lines between peace and war, with Kashmir, Balochistan, and the Durand Line becoming battlegrounds for psychological operations. Particularly, social media manipulation by both state and non-state actors has made conflict more ideological and harder to control through conventional diplomatic means (Yusuf, 2024; Riedel, 2023).

Furthermore, regional institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and SAARC have largely failed to mediate or reduce tensions, despite opportunities for collective diplomacy. Pant and Joshi (2023) argue that instead of fostering collaboration, these platforms have been hijacked by power rivalries especially between India and China which limit their effectiveness. As a result, bilateral tensions are increasingly resolved through strategic partnerships and military posturing, bypassing institutional diplomacy. This trend further entrenches the security dilemma in South Asia, where every state's attempt at safeguarding national interests is perceived as a threat by its



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neighbors (Pant & Joshi, 2023; Small, 2024).

Theory

The theory of Neorealism, also known as structural realism, provides the most suitable lens to analyze the redefinition of borders, militancy, and alliances in South Asia from Kabul to Kashmir. According to neorealism, the anarchic international system compels states to prioritize survival and maximize relative power, which explains the intensified strategic competition among regional actors like India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, and global powers such as China, the U.S., and Russia. The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan disrupted the regional balance of power, prompting neighboring states to adjust their foreign policies and alliances to protect national interests. India's alignment with the U.S. and Israel, and Pakistan's deepening strategic ties with China and Russia, reflect classical neorealist behavior of balancing against perceived threats. Similarly, the militarization of diplomacy, proxy wars, and hybrid warfare strategies in Kashmir and along the Durand Line highlight the neorealist assertion that in an insecure world, states rely on power rather than institutions to secure their borders and project influence. Thus, neorealism effectively explains the structural causes behind the volatile transformations across South Asia.

Problem Statement

The resurgence of great power competition in South Asia since 2022 has significantly altered traditional security dynamics, alliances, and border conflicts, especially from Kabul to Kashmir. This shift has intensified militancy, undermined regional stability, and exposed the limitations of existing diplomatic frameworks.

Research Objective

1. To analyze how great power politics between 2022 and 2025 has influenced border disputes, militancy, and regional alliances in South Asia, particularly from Kabul to Kashmir.

Research Question

1. How has the strategic competition among global powers redefined borders, fueled militancy, and reshaped alliances in South Asia between 2022 and 2025?

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design using a case study approach.

Data Collection

Data will be collected from credible secondary sources including peer-reviewed journals (e.g., *Journal of South Asian Studies*, *Foreign Affairs*), think tank publications (e.g., Carnegie Endowment, Brookings, IISS), official government and UN reports, and reputable media outlets (e.g., *Al Jazeera*, *BBC*, *Dawn*, *Gulf News*) covering the period from 2022 to 2025.

Data Analysis



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Thematic analysis will be employed to identify patterns related to power politics, militancy, and alliances across South Asia.

Significance

This study is significant as it explores the evolving nature of great power politics and its direct impact on South Asia's security landscape, particularly from Kabul to Kashmir. It contributes to understanding how global rivalries reshape regional borders, alliances, and patterns of militancy. The findings will aid policymakers, researchers, and strategic analysts in crafting informed responses to emerging threats and diplomatic challenges.

The New Great Game Begins: Post-U.S. Withdrawal and the Power Vacuum in South Asia

The phrase "The New Great Game" refers to the evolving geopolitical contest among regional and global powers in South Asia, particularly after the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan in August 2021. This departure marked not just the end of America's longest war but also the beginning of a new phase of power realignment in the region. The void left by the U.S. exit is now being contested by regional actors such as China, Russia, Iran, India, Pakistan, and Turkey, each seeking to safeguard or advance their strategic interests. These developments have reignited historical rivalries while giving rise to new alliances and partnerships centered around influence, resources, and regional security. The sudden and chaotic withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces resulted in the swift collapse of the Afghan government and the resurgence of the Taliban. This unexpected shift in power disrupted the fragile balance in South Asia and triggered anxiety among neighboring states. Pakistan, long seen as a key stakeholder in Afghanistan, now faces both strategic advantages and growing challenges, including the resurgence of militant groups and increased border insecurity. India, which had invested heavily in the Afghan state-building process, found its regional leverage significantly reduced. (Rashid, 2021).

China's Strategic Entry and Russia's Recalibrated Role

China quickly filled parts of the vacuum by expanding its economic and diplomatic engagement, including proposing the integration of Afghanistan into the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China's primary concerns are regional stability and the prevention of extremist spillover into its Xinjiang province. At the same time, China sees an opportunity to access Afghanistan's untapped natural resources, estimated at over \$1 trillion, while consolidating its geopolitical influence in Central and South Asia.

Russia, too, has sought to reassert itself in the region, reviving ties with the Taliban and hosting regional security dialogues in Moscow. Unlike during the Cold War era, Russia now positions itself as a neutral broker advocating for a multipolar region. Moscow's engagement is driven by security concerns about terrorism, drug trafficking, and instability spilling into Central Asian states, which Russia views as part of its strategic backyard. Russia's diplomatic balancing act with India, Pakistan, and China reflects a pragmatic shift in its South Asian policy. (Zhao, 2022 & Kucera, 2021)

India's Strategic Dilemma & Pakistan's Paradox



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India finds itself in a precarious position in the New Great Game. Having lost direct influence in Afghanistan, India is now focused on securing its northern borders and strengthening partnerships with the U.S., Japan, and Australia through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). New Delhi fears that Afghanistan under the Taliban could once again become a safe haven for anti-India terrorist groups, particularly those with links to Pakistan-based outfits. India's diplomatic channels with Iran and Central Asian republics are now more critical than ever for bypassing the Pakistan-Afghanistan axis. Pakistan initially viewed the Taliban's return as a strategic win, but the unfolding realities have revealed complex challenges. The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has escalated attacks within Pakistan, straining Islamabad's internal security. Meanwhile, Pakistan's relations with the Afghan Taliban have shown signs of tension over issues like border fencing, refugee flows, and cross-border terrorism. At the same time, Pakistan seeks to leverage Afghanistan as a connector to Central Asia, hoping to become a transit hub for energy and trade under Chinese patronage (Pant & Joshi, 2021, Yusuf, 2022).

Iran and Turkey: Rising Players

Iran is pursuing a dual policy of pragmatism and caution. While maintaining ties with the Taliban, it remains deeply concerned about sectarian violence, narcotics, and refugee influx. Iran also seeks to build eastward corridors connecting Afghanistan with its Chabahar Port. Turkey, on the other hand, has sought a greater role by offering technical and military assistance to stabilize Kabul Airport post-withdrawal, positioning itself as a bridge between the West and the Muslim world (Vakil, 2021).

Terrorism, Militancy, and Humanitarian Crisis

The power vacuum has also exacerbated threats from transnational terrorist groups such as ISIS-K, Al-Qaeda, and others. These entities threaten not only Afghanistan's neighbors but also global security. Meanwhile, the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, marked by economic collapse, food shortages, and mass migration, requires urgent multilateral attention. Failure to address these issues could lead to prolonged instability, radicalization, and conflict spillovers across the region.

The U.S. exit from Afghanistan has redefined the strategic landscape of South Asia, ushering in a new Great Game where no single power dominates. Instead, a multipolar contest is emerging, characterized by overlapping ambitions, shifting alliances, and enduring rivalries. The geopolitical future of South Asia will depend on how regional states balance competition with cooperation and whether they can address security threats while promoting economic integration and political stability (UNAMA, 2022 & Tellis, 2021).

Taliban's Return and Regional Shockwaves: Afghanistan's Transformation and Its Cross-Border Implications

The return of the Taliban to power in August 2021, following the swift withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces, marked a seismic shift not only within Afghanistan but also across South and Central Asia. The collapse of the Afghan Republic and the Taliban's takeover stunned the international community, ushering in new uncertainties about regional security, extremism, refugee flows,



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and geopolitical alignments. The ideological and political transformation underway in Afghanistan is having ripple effects, forcing neighboring states and global powers to reassess their strategies and alliances. Since regaining control, the Taliban have attempted to rebrand themselves as a more moderate force compared to their rule in the 1990s. However, reports suggest a return to rigid governance marked by restrictions on women's rights, media censorship, and public punishments. The group's exclusionary policies and lack of international recognition have further deepened Afghanistan's isolation, compounding its economic and humanitarian crises. Despite initial promises, the Taliban have failed to form an inclusive government, alienating ethnic minorities and civil society (Giustozzi, 2021 & Amnesty International, 2022).

Security Implications for Pakistan

Pakistan, historically accused of supporting the Taliban during their insurgency, faces a complex situation. Initially welcoming their return, Islamabad is now contending with a sharp rise in cross-border attacks by the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), who draw ideological and operational inspiration from the Afghan Taliban. The porous Durand Line has become a point of tension, with Taliban resistance to Pakistan's border fencing. Meanwhile, refugee flows and economic instability in Afghanistan threaten Pakistan's internal stability and border provinces. (Yusuf, 2022).

India's Strategic Setback and New Outreach

India's investments in Afghanistan's infrastructure and education sectors were wiped out with the Taliban's return. New Delhi, which had supported the previous democratic government, lost its strategic foothold. Initially sidelined, India has since initiated cautious engagement with the Taliban through backchannel diplomacy and humanitarian aid. However, concerns remain about Afghanistan once again becoming a launchpad for anti-India jihadist groups like Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba, particularly in Kashmir (Pant & Singh, 2022)

Iran's Dual Strategy & China's Calculated Engagement

Iran shares deep cultural and historical ties with Afghanistan and has long supported the Shia Hazara minority and groups opposed to the Taliban. However, after the U.S. withdrawal, Tehran adopted a more pragmatic stance, engaging directly with the Taliban to ensure border stability and secure its economic and political interests. Nevertheless, Iran remains wary of Taliban hostility toward Shia communities and the rise of Sunni jihadism near its borders, which poses a threat to its internal sectarian balance. China quickly adapted to the new reality by increasing diplomatic contacts with the Taliban and advocating for regional stability. Beijing's primary concerns include preventing any extremist influence from spilling into Xinjiang and protecting its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investments. While cautious, China has offered economic assistance and proposed integrating Afghanistan into the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). However, China remains concerned about the presence of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and overall security volatility (Vakil, 2021 & Zhao, 2022).



Central Asian Republics and Border Stability

Countries like Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan have adopted a cautious approach to Taliban rule. These states, all sharing borders with Afghanistan, fear a resurgence of Islamist extremism, drug trafficking, and refugee crises. Tajikistan, with its ethnolinguistic ties to Afghanistan's Tajik population, has taken a harder stance, opposing Taliban legitimacy and hosting exiled Afghan leaders. In contrast, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have opened diplomatic channels and explored trade connectivity projects to integrate Afghanistan economically (Kassenova, 2022).

Resurgence of Terrorism and ISIS-K

The Taliban's return has not quelled militant threats; in fact, groups such as ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K) have escalated attacks within Afghanistan. The Taliban's limited control over certain provinces has allowed terrorist safe havens to persist. This has raised fears across the region that Afghanistan could once again become a hub for global terrorism, especially as groups like Al-Qaeda remain quietly active under Taliban protection. The threat extends to neighboring states and beyond, challenging international counterterrorism efforts (Jones, 2022).

Humanitarian Crisis and Regional Responsibility

Afghanistan is facing one of the worst humanitarian crises in recent history, with over 90% of the population living in poverty. Sanctions, lack of recognition, and the freezing of assets have crippled the economy. The burden of humanitarian aid is falling heavily on regional neighbors, who fear a mass refugee influx that could strain their economies and social cohesion. While the international community demands human rights assurances, regional actors must balance realism with moral responsibility. The return of the Taliban has sent shockwaves through South and Central Asia, redrawing political, security, and diplomatic lines. Each neighboring country is recalibrating its approach based on a mix of threat perception, economic opportunity, and ideological compatibility. While the Taliban seek international legitimacy, their governance remains rigid and exclusionary. The regional landscape is now characterized by a fragile balance marked by insecurity, unspoken alliances, and geopolitical opportunism—that will shape the future of Afghanistan and its neighbors for years to come (UNHCR, 2022 & Tellis, 2021).

Kashmir in the Crosshairs: India's Internal Strategy and Its Fallout on Regional Stability

The Kashmir conflict has remained one of the most deeply entrenched and complex territorial disputes in the world, and it continues to shape the political and strategic landscape of South Asia. India's internal strategy concerning Jammu and Kashmir, particularly after the abrogation of Article 370 and Article 35A in August 2019, marks a profound shift in its approach to the region. These constitutional provisions had granted the former state a degree of autonomy and allowed it to define its permanent residents and property rights. Their revocation was followed by the bifurcation of the state into two union territories Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh bringing the region directly under the central government's control. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government justified this move by



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arguing it was necessary to integrate Kashmir fully into India, eliminate separatism, and foster economic development. However, critics and analysts argue that the move was more politically motivated and ideologically driven, aligning with the BJP's long-standing vision of a uniform national identity, often at the expense of regional particularities (Bose, 2021).

The abrogation was immediately followed by a severe crackdown in the Kashmir Valley. The Indian government deployed tens of thousands of additional troops, imposed a complete communications blackout, detained thousands of political leaders and activists, and enforced a curfew that lasted months. This militarized response not only sparked outrage within the valley but also attracted international concern. Human rights organizations, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, raised alarms about the suppression of civil liberties and democratic rights in the region. India's internal strategy has increasingly resembled a securitized model of governance, where military force and surveillance take precedence over political engagement and dialogue. This heavy-handedness has alienated significant segments of the Kashmiri population, contributing to a growing sense of disenfranchisement and eroding trust in Indian democratic institutions (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

The internal developments in Kashmir have had far-reaching consequences on regional stability. First and foremost, the abrogation of Article 370 has further strained India-Pakistan relations, which have historically been volatile due to the Kashmir dispute. Pakistan responded by downgrading diplomatic ties with India, expelling the Indian High Commissioner, and halting bilateral trade. Additionally, Islamabad took the issue to international forums, including the United Nations, where it received support from some Muslim-majority countries and China. Pakistan views India's unilateral move as a violation of UN Security Council resolutions and an infringement upon the rights of Kashmiris to self-determination. The situation has led to frequent cross-border skirmishes along the Line of Control (LoC), with both sides accusing each other of ceasefire violations and supporting militant activities. This has created an environment ripe for escalation, where a single miscalculation or provocation could trigger a full-scale conflict between two nuclear-armed states (Riedel, 2020).

Another significant regional dimension of India's internal Kashmir strategy is the deepening of India-China tensions. The bifurcation of the former state into two union territories, especially the creation of Ladakh, was perceived by China as a threat to its territorial claims in the Aksai Chin region. The situation escalated in 2020 with violent clashes in the Galwan Valley, resulting in casualties on both sides for the first time in decades. China has since increased its military deployments along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), prompting a similar response from India. The Kashmir policy thus inadvertently contributed to the reconfiguration of the broader South Asian security environment, drawing in China as a more direct actor in the regional conflict. India's growing alignment with the U.S. through strategic partnerships like the Quad further complicates this equation, as it shifts the regional balance of power and deepens geopolitical fault lines (Panda, 2021).

India's internal policy in Kashmir also affects its democratic credentials and international image. While the country has long been regarded as the world's largest democracy, its approach to Kashmir has invited criticism for curbing



press freedoms, suppressing dissent, and violating human rights. The recent domicile law, which allows non-residents to buy land and settle in Jammu and Kashmir, has been interpreted as a move to alter the region's demographic character—raising fears of a settler-colonial project. Many Kashmiris see this as an attempt to dilute their identity and culture, thereby exacerbating ethnic and religious tensions. Furthermore, these policies risk radicalizing the local population, especially the youth, who feel increasingly disempowered and voiceless. Reports of enforced disappearances, custodial killings, and arbitrary detentions have further fueled resentment, potentially serving as a fertile ground for militancy and extremist ideologies (Chowdhury, 2021).

The fallout of India's Kashmir strategy on regional stability is also evident in the weakening of regional organizations like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Indo-Pak tensions over Kashmir have paralyzed SAARC's functioning, hindering regional cooperation on critical issues such as climate change, health security, and trade. Additionally, India's strained relations with neighbors like Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka often due to perceived hegemonic behavior have undermined regional cohesion. By prioritizing a hardline nationalistic agenda in Kashmir, India risks alienating its neighbors and undermining the vision of a peaceful and integrated South Asia. As the Kashmir issue becomes more internationalized, with global human rights watchdogs and media highlighting abuses, New Delhi finds itself increasingly on the defensive diplomatically. The policy thus appears counterproductive, both in terms of securing internal peace and maintaining regional stability (Bajpai, 2020).

In conclusion, India's internal strategy in Kashmir, marked by constitutional changes, military control, and demographic restructuring, has significant implications not just for the region's inhabitants but for South Asia as a whole. While New Delhi aims to consolidate territorial integrity and promote development, its approach has deepened alienation, triggered international backlash, and destabilized the fragile regional equilibrium. Lasting peace in Kashmir and South Asia requires a recalibration of policies toward inclusive governance, meaningful dialogue with all stakeholders, and adherence to democratic norms and human rights. Without such measures, Kashmir will continue to remain in the crosshairs—both as a symbol of resistance and as a flashpoint for broader regional tensions.

Proxy Wars and the Weaponization of Militancy: How States are Using Non-State Actors for Strategic Gains

In the evolving landscape of modern warfare, the traditional boundaries between states and non-state actors have increasingly blurred, giving rise to a complex web of proxy wars and militant networks strategically employed by states to pursue national interests without engaging in direct confrontation. The weaponization of militancy refers to the deliberate use, funding, arming, or training of non-state militant groups by sovereign states as tools to achieve geopolitical objectives. This phenomenon, which gained prominence during the Cold War, has become more pronounced in the 21st century amid asymmetric warfare, regional rivalries, and ideological polarization. States prefer proxy warfare because it offers plausible deniability, reduces direct casualties, and can be financially and politically less costly than traditional war. Examples span from the U.S.-backed Mujahideen in Afghanistan during the 1980s to Iran's support of



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Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Syrian conflict, to Pakistan's alleged support for militant groups in Kashmir and Afghanistan. These relationships between state sponsors and militant proxies have drastically altered security dynamics, destabilized regions, and prolonged conflicts (Byman, 2005).

Proxy wars enable states to achieve strategic depth and regional leverage, often by exploiting ethnic, sectarian, or ideological fault lines in fragile societies. For instance, Iran's patronage of Shia militias across Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen has established what analysts describe as a "Shia Crescent" through which Tehran projects influence. Iran supports these actors under the guise of resistance to imperialism and Sunni extremism, but strategically they serve to counter Saudi and American influence in the Middle East. Similarly, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have backed Sunni militias and political factions to counter Iran's expanding footprint, particularly in Yemen and Syria. This strategic rivalry has turned these regions into battlegrounds for proxy conflicts that have devastated civilian populations and infrastructures. These actions highlight how the use of non-state actors transforms localized grievances into internationalized conflicts, complicating resolution efforts and increasing humanitarian costs (Phillips, 2016).

In South Asia, proxy warfare has significantly shaped security discourses, particularly between India and Pakistan. Pakistan has been widely accused of using militant groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) to further its objectives in Indian-administered Kashmir. These groups have allegedly carried out high-profile attacks, including the 2001 Indian Parliament attack and the 2008 Mumbai attacks, leading to repeated diplomatic crises between the two nuclear-armed neighbors. While Islamabad officially denies state involvement, the presence of training camps, financial support networks, and ideological convergence between sections of the Pakistani military-intelligence establishment and these groups suggest otherwise. Such actors allow Pakistan to exert asymmetric pressure on India, especially as open war has become increasingly unfeasible due to nuclear deterrence. However, these strategies have also backfired by internationalizing the Kashmir issue, inviting global scrutiny, and nurturing militant groups that have at times turned against the Pakistani state itself (Riedel, 2011).

The United States and Russia have historically engaged in the weaponization of militancy during the Cold War and continue to use proxies for strategic influence. In Afghanistan, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), through Operation Cyclone, funded and armed Mujahideen fighters against Soviet forces during the 1980s. While this was seen as a strategic victory against communism at the time, the long-term consequences included the rise of extremist factions such as the Taliban and al-Qaeda. This demonstrates the double-edged nature of supporting militant non-state actors: they may serve immediate objectives but often evolve beyond the control of their sponsors. Russia, on the other hand, has utilized private military companies like the Wagner Group and pro-Russian militias in eastern Ukraine, Georgia, and Syria to influence outcomes without officially committing state forces. These operations not only provide Moscow with plausible deniability but also help maintain strategic ambiguity and sustain pressure on adversaries (Weinstein, 2007; Galeotti, 2021).



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The Middle East remains a hotbed for proxy warfare, particularly in Syria and Yemen, where multiple external powers back rival factions. In Syria, the civil war has become a proxy battleground involving the United States, Russia, Iran, Turkey, and Gulf States. While Russia and Iran have supported the Assad regime, the U.S. and its allies have provided varying degrees of support to different opposition groups, including Kurdish militias such as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Turkey, meanwhile, has targeted Kurdish groups like the YPG, which it considers terrorist organizations. This multilayered proxy involvement has prolonged the conflict, caused massive civilian displacement, and created a vacuum for jihadist groups like ISIS to thrive. The proliferation of proxies in such environments often blurs the line between resistance and terrorism, making conflict resolution extremely complex. Moreover, the use of proxies undermines the sovereignty of host nations and often violates international law, eroding global norms and weakening multilateral institutions (Lister, 2016).

One of the most concerning aspects of proxy warfare is its impact on state fragility and long-term peace building. Countries that host proxy wars often suffer from prolonged instability, weakened institutions, and fragmented political orders. Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen illustrate how external involvement via proxies contributes to state collapse, governance voids, and chronic violence. Militias gain significant autonomy and often operate parallel to or even within state institutions, making demilitarization and reintegration incredibly challenging. Furthermore, these groups can manipulate democratic processes, engage in criminal activities, and perpetuate sectarian divisions. For instance, in post-2003 Iraq, Iran-backed militias such as Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq have played dual roles as political actors and armed militias, undermining state sovereignty and promoting Iranian influence (Mansour, 2018). The longer these proxies are allowed to operate, the more entrenched they become, leading to a cycle of dependency, impunity, and destabilization.

The digital age has further enhanced the capabilities of states and proxies to coordinate, recruit, and disseminate propaganda. Social media platforms, encrypted messaging apps, and cyber warfare tools have allowed militant groups to operate transnationally with greater efficiency. States like Iran, Russia, and even non-state actors such as ISIS have demonstrated sophisticated use of information warfare and psychological operations to manipulate public opinion, recruit supporters, and destabilize adversaries. Hybrid warfare a blend of conventional and irregular tactics, including cyber, economic, and informational tools has become the new normal in proxy conflicts. This evolution in warfare requires states to rethink their defense and intelligence architectures to account for threats that are non-conventional but deeply destabilizing (Clarke & Knake, 2019).

The weaponization of militancy and reliance on proxy wars reflect a dangerous trend in international relations where states opt for indirect conflict to maintain influence, project power, and avoid accountability. While such strategies may yield short-term strategic advantages, they carry long-term consequences that include regional instability, radicalization, erosion of international norms, and blowback effects. A sustainable global order requires the enforcement of international laws that prohibit state sponsorship of terrorism and the promotion of multilateral conflict-resolution mechanisms.



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Dialogue, institution-building, and regional cooperation must replace proxy violence if enduring peace and stability are to be achieved in conflict-prone regions.

China's Strategic Encirclement: From CPEC to the Himalayas China's Growing Reach

China's strategic encirclement policy refers to its comprehensive approach to expanding geopolitical influence across Asia and beyond, not through direct confrontation but through layered strategies involving economic investment, infrastructure development, military posturing, and diplomatic engagement. One of the central pillars of this strategy is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship component of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). CPEC stretches from China's Xinjiang province to Pakistan's Gwadar port on the Arabian Sea, offering Beijing direct access to the Indian Ocean and bypassing the Strait of Malacca China's traditional maritime vulnerability. Through a network of roads, railways, energy pipelines, and industrial zones, CPEC not only enhances China's trade and energy security but also deepens its presence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. The project, while promising economic development for Pakistan, also serves China's strategic objective of containing Indian influence and projecting its power into the Middle East and Africa through maritime connectivity (Small, 2015).

CPEC's strategic importance is amplified by its proximity to the disputed regions of Gilgit-Baltistan and Kashmir. This geographical alignment places China squarely in the middle of the India-Pakistan territorial dispute, effectively altering the status quo in favor of Pakistan. India has consistently protested CPEC's route through what it considers Indian territory, arguing that China is undermining its sovereignty. Additionally, the development of Gwadar Port, operated by Chinese companies, threatens India's naval dominance by providing China with a potential naval base near the Strait of Hormuz, a crucial chokepoint for global oil supplies. Thus, CPEC acts as both an economic corridor and a geopolitical lever, giving China unprecedented leverage in South Asia. It is part of a broader strategy to encircle India through economic influence, military partnerships, and infrastructure development in neighboring countries like Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh (Pant & Passi, 2017).

China's expanding reach into the Himalayan region further demonstrates its encirclement strategy. In recent years, China has dramatically increased its infrastructure development along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) the de facto border with India. This includes the construction of roads, airstrips, and military installations in Tibet and adjacent regions. The 2020 Galwan Valley clashes, which resulted in casualties on both sides, revealed how fragile the Himalayan frontier had become. China's assertiveness in this terrain is not accidental; it aims to assert its territorial claims, project military strength, and test India's resolve. The rapid militarization of the Himalayan frontiers also allows China to maintain pressure on India's northern borders, thereby diverting Indian strategic attention and resources. Furthermore, China's close ties with Nepal evident in joint military exercises, infrastructure aid, and diplomatic support have reduced India's traditional influence in the region, contributing to a subtle but deliberate encirclement (Shukla, 2020).

Beyond the Himalayas, China has expanded its influence across the Indian Ocean



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Region (IOR) through the so-called “String of Pearls” strategy. This involves the development of a series of ports and infrastructure projects in countries like Myanmar (Kyaukpyu port), Sri Lanka (Hambantota port), Bangladesh (Chittagong port), and the Maldives. Although China claims these investments are economically motivated, many of them possess dual-use capabilities, allowing both commercial and military functions. For instance, after Sri Lanka failed to repay its loans, China took over the Hambantota Port on a 99-year lease, raising concerns about “debt-trap diplomacy.” These facilities allow the Chinese Navy to refuel, resupply, and potentially stage operations far from its shores, thereby projecting power in India’s maritime backyard and threatening vital sea lanes. India, in response, has sought to strengthen its own naval capabilities and partnerships, but the speed and scale of China’s maritime outreach remain a strategic concern (Kaplan, 2010).

Diplomatically, China’s encirclement is reflected in its assertive role in regional multilateral forums such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Through these platforms, China has created alternative economic and security architectures that diminish the influence of Western institutions and challenge India’s leadership in South Asia. Furthermore, China’s deepening ties with India’s neighbors especially Pakistan, but increasingly also Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh are designed to restrict India’s strategic options. Beijing’s support for Pakistan in forums like the United Nations Security Council, particularly on the Kashmir issue, underscores the political dimension of its encirclement. By embedding itself economically and politically in India’s neighborhood, China is reshaping the regional balance of power in its favor (Tellis, 2020).

In addition to regional initiatives, China’s militarization of the South China Sea and its growing presence in Africa and Central Asia extend the global dimension of its encirclement strategy. While not directly aimed at India, these actions indicate a broader objective of establishing a China-centric world order where strategic dependencies on Beijing are normalized. The establishment of China’s first overseas military base in Djibouti and its involvement in peacekeeping and infrastructure development in Africa reflect this shift. Through such global expansions, China not only projects influence but also creates a security buffer around its core strategic interests. As a result, countries like India find themselves increasingly isolated, with their traditional spheres of influence now under active contestation by a rising Chinese superpower. China’s strategic encirclement is a multi-pronged, long-term strategy that utilizes economic projects like CPEC, military build-up along disputed borders, infrastructure investments in neighboring states, and diplomatic alliances to establish a sphere of influence surrounding India and extending globally. Far from being accidental, this encirclement is systematic and rooted in China’s grand vision of regional dominance and global prominence. While these moves provide China with economic dividends and strategic depth, they also create new tensions, particularly with India and other regional actors, setting the stage for prolonged geopolitical rivalry in the 21st century (Zhou, 2019).

Iran’s Pivot to the East: Border Tensions with Pakistan, Chabahar, and Regional Leverage

Iran’s pivot to the East reflects a strategic shift in its foreign policy aimed at



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reducing dependency on the West and strengthening ties with regional neighbors and emerging global powers such as China, Russia, and India. This reorientation has gained momentum in the wake of prolonged Western sanctions, the collapse of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and increasing geopolitical isolation. Iran is actively engaging with countries in Asia to build economic, political, and security partnerships that can serve as a counterbalance to Western pressure. This pivot is also driven by Iran's ambition to become a central hub in regional trade and energy routes, leveraging its geographic position at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. A key feature of Iran's regional strategy is the development of Chabahar Port, located on its southeastern coast near the Pakistani border. Chabahar is Iran's only oceanic port and has been developed with Indian investment to serve as a gateway for trade with Afghanistan and Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan. The port is strategically significant as it offers an alternative to Pakistan's China-backed Gwadar Port, which lies just 170 km away. Iran sees Chabahar not only as an economic asset but also as a geopolitical tool to deepen its ties with India and counterbalance Chinese and Pakistani influence in the region. Moreover, Chabahar enhances Iran's capacity to shape regional connectivity, especially in light of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, by offering an alternative route for landlocked countries (Pant & Joshi, 2017).

However, Iran's eastern border with Pakistan has remained tense due to periodic security incidents, particularly in the restive Sistan-Balochistan province. Militant groups like Jaish al-Adl have conducted cross-border attacks, prompting retaliatory actions from both sides. In early 2024, missile strikes exchanged between Iran and Pakistan highlighted the volatility of their border relationship. Despite historical cooperation, these tensions reveal the fragility of Iran-Pakistan ties and complicate Tehran's ambitions for regional connectivity. Iran has accused Pakistan of harboring Sunni militant groups, while Pakistan has pointed to Iran's alleged support for sectarian militias. These dynamics underscore the challenge Iran faces in balancing regional partnerships while securing its peripheries (Abbas, 2024).

Iran's broader pivot also includes deepening ties with China and Russia through long-term strategic agreements. The 25-year cooperation deal with China, signed in 2021, involves multi-billion dollar investments in Iran's energy and infrastructure sectors in return for discounted oil supplies and expanded security cooperation. Such partnerships not only provide Iran with economic lifelines but also bolster its strategic leverage in international negotiations. Additionally, Iran's growing collaboration with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), to which it became a full member in 2023, enhances its role in Asian multilateralism and strengthens its eastern orientation. These alliances are central to Iran's aim of creating a multipolar regional order less dominated by Western powers. In conclusion, Iran's pivot to the East is a multidimensional strategy shaped by necessity and ambition. While it offers Tehran new avenues for economic recovery and geopolitical relevance, challenges remain especially with neighboring Pakistan and the balance of power in the Arabian Sea. The development of Chabahar, border security dilemmas, and strategic alignment with eastern powers all highlight Iran's attempt to redefine its regional posture in a rapidly changing geopolitical environment (Vakil, 2021).



Iran, U.S., and India: Strategic Convergence or Containment? Analyzing Their Alliance and Its Effect on South Asia's Balance

The triangular relationship between Iran, the United States, and India is marked by a complex mix of cooperation, competition, and strategic ambiguity. While India has maintained close economic and energy ties with Iran, especially through projects like the Chabahar Port, it also shares a deepening strategic partnership with the United States, particularly through defense agreements, technology transfer, and Indo-Pacific cooperation. This dual engagement places India in a delicate balancing act, as it seeks to preserve access to Iranian energy and trade routes while aligning itself with the U.S. vision of regional order. For Iran, India's cooperation with the U.S. raises concerns of containment and strategic marginalization, particularly as Washington continues to apply sanctions and isolate Tehran diplomatically. From the U.S. perspective, India is a key partner in its Indo-Pacific strategy aimed at counterbalancing China's rise. Washington views India as a democratic counterweight in Asia and has elevated its defense and intelligence cooperation with New Delhi through frameworks like the Quad and bilateral agreements such as COMCASA and BECA. However, India's engagement with Iran particularly on infrastructure projects like the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) creates friction, as the U.S. has previously imposed pressure on India to reduce energy imports from Iran under its maximum pressure campaign. Despite this, India has attempted to maintain a degree of strategic autonomy, arguing that engagement with Iran serves both regional stability and economic connectivity objectives (Pant & Joshi, 2017 & Tellis, 2020).

Iran sees India as a valuable partner in circumventing American and Western-imposed isolation. The Chabahar Port, developed with Indian investment, offers Iran access to regional markets while bypassing Pakistan, strengthening its economic and geopolitical standing in Central Asia and Afghanistan. However, Iran has expressed disappointment with India's cautious approach in recent years, especially its reduction in oil imports and delayed investments in Iranian infrastructure due to U.S. sanctions. At the same time, Iran has turned toward China and Russia, forging long-term strategic agreements to mitigate Western containment. This shift has altered regional alignments, as Tehran perceives both the U.S. and its close allies potentially including India as part of a broader coalition seeking to limit its regional influence (Fulton, 2020).

The Iran-U.S.-India triangle affects the strategic balance of South Asia by influencing Pakistan, Afghanistan, and maritime security in the Indian Ocean. U.S.-India defense cooperation has prompted concerns in both Iran and Pakistan about regional encirclement. For Pakistan, deeper U.S.-India ties reinforce fears of isolation, driving closer cooperation with China. For Iran, India's participation in U.S.-led regional forums may dilute its traditional role as a regional connector. However, India's unique position allows it to act as a potential bridge between East and West if it can maintain balanced relations. This balance is increasingly difficult amid escalating U.S.-Iran tensions and growing Chinese engagement with both Iran and Pakistan. The dynamic between Iran, the U.S., and India reflects a blend of strategic convergence and containment. While India strives to engage both powers, the growing polarization of international politics forces difficult choices. The impact of these shifting alliances is profound for South



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Asia, influencing trade corridors, energy security, and regional diplomacy. The outcome of this strategic triangle will likely shape the future balance of power in the region (Baru, 2021).

Iran–Pakistan: Pakistan’s Dilemma in a Shifting Order

In the evolving regional and global geopolitical landscape, Pakistan finds itself navigating a complex and often conflicting set of strategic relationships especially with Iran. Historically linked through geography, culture, and religion, Iran and Pakistan share deep-rooted ties, yet their bilateral relationship is frequently challenged by external pressures and divergent regional alignments. As Pakistan seeks to balance its alliances with Saudi Arabia, the United States, and increasingly China, its relations with Iran remain cautious, marked by both cooperation and strategic mistrust. Border tensions, sectarian spillovers, and differing priorities in Afghanistan add layers of complexity to their ties (Khan, 2022).

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the subsequent regional power vacuum have heightened Iran’s significance in South Asian politics. However, Pakistan’s increasing tilt toward Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), driven by economic dependencies and security cooperation, often contradicts Iran’s strategic objectives. Furthermore, Iran’s growing ties with India especially through the Chabahar Port, which bypasses Pakistan are viewed with concern in Islamabad, as they challenge Pakistan’s own strategic leverage via the Gwadar Port under CPEC. Another dilemma stems from the Iran–U.S. rivalry and Iran’s international isolation. Pakistan, traditionally aligned with the West and reliant on U.S. military and financial aid, has been cautious in engaging with Iran beyond limited economic and border security cooperation. Sanctions on Iran have also limited trade potential and energy collaboration between the two neighbors, especially the long-stalled Iran–Pakistan gas pipeline. Thus, while both nations emphasize Muslim solidarity, realpolitik often dictates Pakistan’s approach toward Iran (Hussain, 2021 & Rizvi, 2020).

At the same time, shifting regional alignments such as the increasing China–Iran partnership and the prospect of Iran joining multilateral platforms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) present new opportunities for trilateral or regional collaboration. Pakistan’s strategic dilemma lies in harmonizing its ties with Iran without alienating its Gulf allies or undermining its partnerships with China and the United States. This demands a flexible, multi-vector foreign policy rooted in economic pragmatism and regional stability (Baloch & Shah, 2023).

Rewriting Borders, Redrawing Alliances: How Power Politics is reshaping the Map Literally and Politically

In the 21st century, global and regional power politics are not only influencing international relations but also reshaping territorial boundaries and alliance structures. From Eastern Europe to South Asia, the world is witnessing attempts to rewrite existing borders sometimes through military aggression, sometimes via political maneuvering or economic integration. The annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 and China’s assertiveness in the South China Sea are prominent examples of how powerful states are reasserting territorial claims in defiance of international norms. These shifts are not just cartographic changes; they



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represent broader challenges to the post–World War II liberal order (Kaplan, 2016).

Simultaneously, traditional alliances are undergoing transformation. In South Asia and the Middle East, for instance, countries like India, China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan are recalibrating their partnerships in response to shifting global power centers. The U.S.'s relative retreat from certain regions has created a vacuum that regional powers are eager to fill. As a result, multilateral organizations such as BRICS, SCO, and the China-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are emerging as tools for reshaping political and economic alliances. These platforms challenge Western-dominated institutions and foster new alignments based on regional interests and strategic competition. Furthermore, the redrawing of borders and alliances often exacerbates tensions among neighboring countries. The Indo-China border standoff in the Himalayas, the Israel–Palestine conflict, and tensions in the Taiwan Strait are cases where contested boundaries and competing alliances provoke instability. These disputes are no longer isolated events; they are interconnected within the larger framework of global strategic competition. Countries increasingly engage in hybrid warfare using economic pressure, information operations, and proxy conflicts to assert influence without triggering full-scale wars (Friedman, 2020). In this shifting landscape, weaker states are compelled to make difficult choices between competing powers, while strong states seek to reassert dominance through both coercive and cooperative means. The redrawing of borders and realignment of alliances are not just about geography they are a reflection of the evolving global order, where sovereignty, influence, and strategic autonomy are constantly being contested and redefined (Cohen, 2015).

Toward a New Regional Security Architecture: Forecasting the Future Risks, Opportunities, and Challenges

The concept of a new regional security architecture is gaining traction in response to the shifting dynamics of global power, regional conflicts, and emerging non-traditional threats. As U.S. influence recedes in certain parts of the world, particularly in the Middle East and South Asia, regional actors are stepping up to redefine security frameworks based on local priorities rather than global mandates. This transition reflects a multipolar world where countries like China, Russia, India, Turkey, and Iran are increasingly asserting themselves to shape the security environment in their respective spheres of influence. One of the key risks in this evolving architecture is the absence of a universally accepted security framework to manage growing regional rivalries. For instance, in Asia, the strategic competition between China and the U.S. over Taiwan, the South China Sea, and Indo-Pacific maritime routes continues to destabilize the region. Likewise, in the Middle East, overlapping interests among Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Turkey contribute to chronic insecurity. Without multilateral mechanisms or confidence-building platforms, these tensions may escalate into prolonged conflicts or proxy wars (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

Conversely, opportunities exist for building inclusive regional security structures that go beyond military alliances and embrace economic cooperation, counterterrorism, climate resilience, and cyber governance. Initiatives such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) show potential, but they must evolve to address complex, transnational



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threats. Collaborative approaches to peacekeeping, humanitarian intervention, and pandemic response are becoming critical components of future security dialogues. Policy shifts are also noticeable in countries that are traditionally aligned with great powers but are now exploring autonomous or diversified security strategies. For example, Pakistan is increasingly advocating for geo-economics approaches over geopolitics, while ASEAN nations push for neutrality in the U.S.–China rivalry. These changes highlight the growing desire for regional states to assert agency in shaping their security futures building architectures that are more localized, pragmatic, and responsive to shared challenges (Pant & Joshi, 2022).

Conclusion

From Kabul to Kashmir, the period between 2022 and 2025 has witnessed the intensification of great power politics, reshaping not only the physical and ideological borders of South Asia but also redefining the nature of militancy and regional alliances. The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, China's growing strategic and economic footprint, India's assertive regional posturing, and Pakistan's balancing act between East and West have all contributed to a volatile yet transformative geopolitical environment. Borders are no longer just territorial demarcations they are flashpoints for ideological contests, proxy conflicts, and shifting loyalties. Meanwhile, militant networks have adapted to new realities, often serving as tools in broader power struggles rather than isolated insurgent threats. As alliances evolve from traditional blocs to issue-based and pragmatic partnerships, regional powers are recalibrating their strategies to navigate uncertainty and assert sovereignty. The emerging order is characterized by multipolar engagement, hybrid warfare, and an erosion of clear-cut alignments. In this context, South Asia's security, stability, and prosperity depend on the willingness of its leaders to foster inclusive diplomacy, strengthen regional institutions, and resist external manipulation. The path forward demands resilience, strategic clarity, and above all, a collective commitment to peace in a region long shaped by conflict and great power rivalry.

Findings

1. The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan shifted regional power dynamics, empowering local actors like the Taliban.
2. China has emerged as a dominant regional power through strategic and economic expansion in South Asia.
3. Militancy has evolved into decentralized and hybrid threats influenced by regional rivalries.
4. Kashmir remains a contested geopolitical hotspot, shaped by nationalism and external silence.
5. Regional alliances are shifting from ideological blocs to interest-based strategic partnerships.
6. Border tensions have intensified, especially along the India–China and Pakistan–Afghanistan frontiers.
7. Refugees and minority populations are increasingly politicized as tools in regional power struggles.
8. Multilateral institutions have played a minimal role in resolving South Asian conflicts.



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9. Limited but real opportunities for peace exist through economic cooperation and regional dialogue.

Recommendations

1. Establish a South Asian Security Council to formalize regional dialogue on strategic and border issues.
2. Revive confidence-building measures between India, Pakistan, and China to reduce military tensions.
3. Enhance intelligence-sharing and joint counterterrorism operations to tackle transnational threats.
4. Promote inclusive economic projects like CPEC and Chabahar to increase interdependence and stability.
5. Uphold refugee rights and prevent their use as tools in geopolitical conflicts.
6. Utilize multilateral forums like SCO and OIC to mediate disputes and promote dialogue.
7. Encourage neutral international mediation in high-risk areas like Kashmir and the Durand Line.
8. Invest in education and de-radicalization to counter militant recruitment and extremism.
9. Develop joint strategies to address climate-induced security risks and resource competition.
10. Strengthen democratic institutions and civil society to support peaceful regional policies.

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