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Acronyms

ADR	Alternative Dispute Resolution
AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
AJK	Azad Jammu & Kashmir
ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nations
AVE	Average Variance Extracted
BBIN	Bangladesh Bhutan India Nepal
BCDP	Bangladesh Climate Development Platform
BIISS	Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies
BIMSTEC	Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	Brazil Russia India China South Africa
BRAC	Bangladesh Rehabilitation Assistance Committee
CAT	Climate Action Tracker
CBMs	Confidence Building Measures
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CEF Clean	Environmental Facility
CENTO	Central Treaty Organisation
CEPA	Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement
CFA	Confirmatory Factor Analysis
CPEC	China Pakistan Economic Corridor
CR	Composite Reliability
CRC	Certified Recycled Content
CRI	Climate Risk Index
DUHS	Dow University of Health Sciences
EU	European Union

GBM	Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna
GCF	Green Climate Fund
GCI	Global Civilisation Initiative
GDI	Global Development Initiative
GEF	Global Environmental Facility
GGI	Global Governance Initiative
GSI	Global Security Initiative
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
HKH	Hindu Kush Himalaya
HTMT	Heterotrait-Mono Trait ratio
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICERD	International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination
ICIMOD	International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development
ICJ	International Court of Justice
ICSID	International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
IIOJK	Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IOMed	International Organisation for Mediation
IORA	Indian Ocean Rim Association
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
IPRI	Islamabad Policy Research Institute
IPT	International Political Theory
ISSI	Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad
ITLOS	International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea
LBA	Land Boundary Agreement
LDC	Least Developed Country

MEAs	Multilateral Environmental Agreements
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NAP	National Adaptation Plan
NCCP	National Climate Change Policy
NDB	New Development Bank
NDC	Nationally Determined Contributions
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OIC	Organisation of Islamic Cooperation
PLS-SEM	Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling
PSDP	Public Sector Development Programme
PSSM	Psychological Sense of School Membership
ROCG	Running of Civil Government
RSF	Resilience and Sustainability Facility
SAARC	South Asian Association of Regional Countries
SAFTA	South Asian Free Trade Area
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation
SEL	Social-Emotional Learning
SEM	Structural Equation Modeling
SECMC	Sindh Engro Coal Mining Company
SMHA	Sindh Mental Health Authority
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN	United Nations
UNCIP	United Nations Commission of India and Pakistan
UNCITRAL	United Nations Commission on International Trade Law
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNFCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

UNSC	United Nations Security Council
USA	United States of America
VIF	Variance Inflation Factor
WHO	World Health Organisation
WMO	World Meteorological Organisation
WTO	World Trade Organisation
WTO-DSM	World Trade Organisation's Dispute Settlement Mechanism

Research Papers

South Asian Security Architecture: Historical Constraints and Future Prospects

*Dr Bhumitra Chakma**

Abstract

This article analyses why South Asia has struggled to build a robust regional security architecture and explores how such a framework might emerge from the region's current strategic environment. It illustrates deep-rooted structural and historical factors—such as the legacy of decolonisation, India's regional dominance, persistent India-Pakistan hostility, and the involvement of external powers—that have hindered the evolution of a cooperative security system. Despite the ongoing impasse in India-Pakistan relations, policymakers in South Asia must move beyond entrenched adversarial perceptions and take meaningful steps to revitalise SAARC while promoting regional security cooperation. This need is particularly urgent given the present state of Indo-Pakistani relations. The paper advocates for a gradual, step-by-step, and path-dependent approach to building a coherent and sustainable regional security framework whilst maintaining the nuclear deterrence.

Keywords: South Asia, Regional Security, India, Pakistan, Adversarial Perceptions, Cooperative Security System, SAARC.

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Introduction

South Asia is one of the most volatile and conflict-prone regions in the world having two nuclear-armed rivals, India and Pakistan. They are often embroiled in crises and armed hostilities. Whereas, the other six states in the region, namely Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives and Afghanistan are also facing significant internal and transnational security challenges. The region is also increasingly intertwined with the broader geopolitical dynamics involving major external powers, particularly the United States and China. These factors have made the strategic landscape of the region more delicate and complicated for the geo-political stability.

One of the key reasons is the absence of a region-wide cooperative security framework. In many parts of the world, robust security frameworks have emerged as key mechanisms for managing interstate competition. Europe, for instance, has developed multi-layered institutional security structures through organisations such as the European Union and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe.¹ Similarly, Southeast Asia has gradually devised a regional framework centred on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its associated security mechanisms, including the ASEAN Regional Forum. While these institutions cannot escape strategic competition, they provide platforms for dialogue, transparency, and confidence-building measures that help manage tensions and reduce the risks of the conflict.²

Absence of any comparable regional security architecture in South Asia is noteworthy. Despite geographic proximity, shared historical experiences, and overlapping security challenges, South Asian states have struggled to develop institutionalised mechanisms for managing regional insecurities. Instead, the region's security order has largely been shaped by the persistent

¹ Günter Aybet, *A European Security Architecture After the Cold War: Questions of Legitimacy*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).

² Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, (London: Routledge, 2014); and Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, *Security Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

interstate rivalries, balance-of-power politics, limited regional institutionalisation, and predominance of bilateral or unilateral approaches to security.³ Although the SAARC, established in 1985, to promote regional cooperation, represents the most prominent regional institution, it has remained largely ineffective in addressing security concerns and has frequently been paralysed by political tensions among its member states.⁴ This situation raises important questions: why have South Asian states -- despite experiencing shared security challenges -- failed to develop a coherent regional security architecture comparable to those found in other regions? The point is under what conditions might such an architecture emerge in the future?

This article addresses these issues by exploring the causes, which are primarily structural and historical, that have constrained the growth of regional security cooperation in South Asia, while also assessing the prospects for the gradual emergence of a regional security architecture. Arguably, absence of such a forum is not simply the result of an institutional weakness, but rather reflects deeper structural dynamics, including asymmetric power relations within the region, entrenched interstate rivalries, the interaction between the domestic political considerations and foreign policy, and influence of extra-regional powers. Together, these factors have limited the incentives and political space for institutionalised security cooperation.

The article has three parts. The first section conceptualises the idea of security architecture and situates it within the broader theoretical literature on regional security governance. The second section analyses the historical and structural factors that have constrained the emergence of a comprehensive regional security architecture in South Asia. The final section explores the practical prospects for developing such a framework,

³ Bhumitra Chakma, 'South Asia's Realist Fascination and the Alternatives,' *Contemporary Security Policy* vol. 30, no. 3 (2009), pp. 395–420.

⁴ Bhumitra Chakma, *South Asian Regionalism: The Limits of Cooperation* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2020).

identifying potential institutional pathways through which regional states might gradually expand cooperative security mechanisms despite existing constraints.

Conceptualising Security Architecture

The region has emerged at an important level of analysis in the study of International Relations, leading to increased scholarly attention to regional order, governance, and institutionalised forms of security cooperation.⁵ Within this context, the concept of security has gained prominence. Broadly defined, security architecture refers to the set of formal and informal institutions, rules, norms, practices, and strategic relationships that structure how states manage security interactions within a particular region. Rather than referring to a single alliance or treaty arrangement, the concept encompasses a broader system of mechanisms through which states coordinate policies, address shared threats, manage disputes, and sustain regional stability.

Regional security structure is conceptualised as an ensemble of institutions, rules, and practices that govern security relations within a region.⁶ Arguably, security architectures are not solely confined to the distribution of power or balance-of-power politics; rather, they are constructed through the processes of political negotiation, institutional innovation, and normative development. Regional institutions such as the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the security mechanisms associated with ASEAN illustrate how institutionalised security architectures can structure interstate interactions and contribute to the maintenance of regional stability.

Security structure typically consist of several interconnected components. They include formal institutions that provide mechanisms for consultation, decision-making, and policy coordination. These may take the form of

⁵ Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁶ Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia...*

multilateral organisations or specialised agencies dealing with the particular security issues. Secondly, security architectures incorporate normative frameworks, including shared principles such as sovereignty, non-aggression, and peaceful resolution of the disputes. Such norms shape state behaviour by establishing expectations regarding acceptable conduct within the regional order.⁷

Thirdly, security architecture involves operational mechanisms that enable practical cooperation among the states. These mechanisms may include confidence-building measures, crisis communication channels, arms control agreements, and joint military or humanitarian initiatives. For example, confidence-building measures such as advance notification of military exercises or establishment of military hotlines can reduce the risk of miscalculation during the period of tension. These operational elements often play a crucial role in transforming abstract institutional commitments into tangible security practices.

Another important feature of the security architecture is its multi-layered character. Rather than consisting of a single institution, they often involve overlapping networks of organisations and arrangements operating at different levels. In Europe, for instance, the European Union and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation collectively contribute to the broader regional security architecture, each performing distinct yet complementary roles. Similarly, in Southeast Asia, ASEAN and associated institutions such as the ASEAN Regional Forum form part of a broader framework of regional security governance.⁸

International Relations theory offers several perspectives on how security architectures emerge and function. Realist theory primarily emphasises the distribution of power and power politics rather than cooperative security frameworks; however, it remains valuable for analysing the structure of regional conflicts and assessing whether a region is conducive to developing

⁷ Adler and Barnett, *Security Communities*.

⁸ Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community ...*

an institutionalised security framework.⁹ Liberal institutionalists, by contrast, highlight the role of institutions in facilitating cooperation among states by reducing uncertainty, promoting transparency, and creating mechanisms for dispute resolution.¹⁰ According to this approach, even states operating in an anarchic international system may find it advantageous to develop institutional frameworks that help manage security competition.

Constructivist approaches further emphasise the importance of norms, identities, and shared understandings in the development of security architectures. Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett argue that security communities -- regions in which states expect disputes to be resolved peacefully -- emerge through the processes of socialisation, institutionalisation, and identity formation.¹¹ In such contexts, security architectures are not merely functional arrangements but also expressions of shared regional identities and political values.

For analytical purposes, a security architecture can, therefore, be understood as a comprehensive system of institutions, norms, and cooperative mechanisms that structure the management of security relations within a region. Such designs perform several important functions: they facilitate communication among states, provide mechanisms for conflict management, promote transparency in the military activities, and enable coordinated responses to shared threats. Under such conditions, war becomes less likely.

Structural and Historical Constraints on the Emergence of a Security Architecture in South Asia

The emergence of regional security architectures is uneven across the world. While regions such as Europe and Southeast Asia have developed

⁹ T.V. Paul, ed., *International Relations Theory and Regional Transformation*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹⁰ Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

¹¹ Adler and Barnett, Security communities...

institutional frameworks for conflict management and security cooperation, South Asia remains one of the least institutionally integrated regions globally. Notwithstanding several regional initiatives -- notably the SAARC, a robust security architecture has failed to emerge in South Asia.¹² The absence of such an architecture is rooted in the historical premise, its geopolitical configuration, and persistent structural tensions among regional actors. Notably, South Asia's security environment has been shaped by the legacies of colonialism and the process of decolonisation, interstate rivalry, asymmetrical power balances, and the entanglement of regional politics with global strategic competition. These factors have not been conducive to building a cooperative security framework in the region.

Decolonisation and Post-Colonial Regional Politics

The origins of South Asia's fragmented security landscape can be traced to the colonial period and the processes surrounding decolonisation. British rule in the Indian subcontinent introduced administrative and political structures that diverged significantly from those that existed during the Mughal era, which had been characterised by diversity, flexibility, and a degree of regional autonomy. In contrast, the colonial state established centralised authority and hierarchical governance. Such a legacy proved incompatible with the emergence of postcolonial nation-states, where politics increasingly revolved around identity formation and contestation.¹³ This trend gained increasing prominence, leaving the region politically and socially fractured.

The process of state formation across South Asia further reinforced fragmentation. Newly independent states such as India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and later Bangladesh (1971) focused primarily on consolidating sovereignty and addressing internal political challenges. As Ayoob has argued, the key security predicament of decolonised states derives largely from the internal

¹² Bhumitra Chakma, 'SAARC and Region-Building: Is South Asia a Region?' *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2018), pp. 189–205.

¹³ Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy* (London: Routledge, 2011).

sources.¹⁴ Regional cooperation was, therefore, not a primary priority. Instead, national security policies developed largely in isolation and often in opposition to neighbouring states.

The partition of British India in 1947, fundamentally altered the political geography of South Asia and set the stage for an ‘enduring rivalry’ between India and Pakistan, which became entrenched over time through politics, identity, and institutions.¹⁵ The creation of India and Pakistan was accompanied by large-scale violence, population displacement, and unresolved territorial disputes -- most notably over Kashmir. The Kashmir dispute quickly became the central axis of India-Pakistan rivalry, resulting in multiple wars (1947-48, 1965, and 1999) and prolonged militarised tensions.¹⁶ Unlike other regions, where security institutions emerged after reconciliation among former adversaries, South Asia entered the postcolonial period with unresolved conflicts embedded in the very foundations of the statehood.

Asymmetry and the Problem of Regional Hegemony

Another key factor inhibiting the emergence of a regional security architecture in South Asia is the profound asymmetry in the distribution of power within the region. India accounts for roughly three-quarters of South Asia’s geographic area, population, and economic output, as well as more than 80 percent of the region’s military expenditure. This imbalance produces a highly asymmetric regional power structure.¹⁷ The situation is further complicated by India’s central geographic position: it shares land borders with all the South Asian states except the island nations of Sri Lanka and the Maldives, while the other states in the region do not share borders

¹⁴ Mohammed Ayoob, *The Third World Security Predicament: State Making, Regional Conflict, and the International System* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995).

¹⁵ T.V. Paul, ed, *The India–Pakistan Conflict: An Enduring Rivalry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹⁶ Sumit Ganguly, *Conflict Unending: India–Pakistan Tensions since 1947* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

¹⁷ David M. Malone, *Does the Elephant Dance? Contemporary Indian Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

with one another. Theoretically, such structural imbalance, combined with the presence of a dominant power, is likely to generate security anxieties among regional states.¹⁸ In practice, India's dominant position has significantly shaped the regional perceptions of security, sovereignty, and cooperation, often constraining the development of a cohesive regional security framework.

From the perspective of smaller South Asian states -- Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and the Maldives -- India's dominance generates concerns about political and strategic autonomy. India's size and capabilities create a structural imbalance that complicates the formation of multilateral security arrangements. Smaller states, and even Pakistan, often fear that regional institutions could become instruments of Indian influence rather than platforms for collective security.¹⁹ Importantly, India has done little to mitigate these concerns. It has at times amplified them by adopting a regional security policy often described as the 'India Doctrine.'²⁰

India's foreign policy demonstrates a consistent preference for bilateral engagement with its South Asian neighbours, reflecting enduring strategic and historical trends in its regional diplomacy.²¹ Bilateralism allows New Delhi to maintain greater control over regional interactions and manage disputes individually. This preference has limited the scope of regional institutionalisation, particularly in the security domain.

The asymmetrical nature of the regional order also complicates the development of trust. Security architectures typically require a shared perception of threats and a willingness to coordinate policies or pool aspects

¹⁸ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001).

¹⁹ Chakma, SAARC and Region-Building: Is South Asia a Region...

²⁰ Devin T. Hagerty, 'India's Regional Security Doctrine,' *Asian Survey*, vol.31, no. 4(1991), pp. 351–63; and Bhabani Sen Gupta, 'Regional Security: The India Doctrine' *India Today*, 31 August, 1983, pp.20–21.

²¹ Partha Pratim Basu and Tanwir Arshed, eds., *75 Years of India's Foreign Policy: Bilateral, Conventional and Emerging Trends* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).

of sovereignty. In South Asia, however, threat perceptions diverge sharply. For India, the primary strategic challenges have historically involved Pakistan and China, whereas smaller states have often viewed India itself as a potential source of coercion or interference. These differing perspectives undermine the possibility of developing a common security framework.

Persistent Interstate Rivalries

The persistence of intense interstate rivalries is another major obstacle to regional security cooperation in South Asia. The most prominent of these rivalries is between India and Pakistan. Since independence, relations between the two countries have constituted an ‘enduring rivalry,’ characterised by deep mistrust, recurring crises, and military confrontation.²² The Kashmir dispute remains unresolved and continues to serve as a focal point of nationalist politics in both states. The rivalry intensified further after both countries conducted nuclear tests in 1998, making it even more entrenched.

While nuclear deterrence may have reduced the likelihood of full-scale conventional war, it has also generated new forms of instability, including the risk of limited conflict below the nuclear threshold.²³ Crises such as the Kargil conflict (1999), the military standoff of 2001-2, and recurring border tensions illustrate the fragility of regional stability, reflecting the classic stability-instability paradox in a nuclearised South Asia.²⁴

The India-Pakistan rivalry also spills over into regional institutions. SAARC, established in 1985 to promote regional cooperation, has been repeatedly hampered by bilateral disputes between its two largest members. Since SAARC operates on the principle of consensus and explicitly excludes bilateral contentious issues from its agenda, it lacks the mechanisms necessary to address the region’s most pressing security

²² T.V. Paul, ‘Why Has the India–Pakistan Rivalry Been so Enduring? Power Asymmetry and an Intractable Conflict,’ *Security Studies*, vol. 15, no. 4 (2006), pp.600–30.

²³ Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003).

²⁴ Chakma, *South Asia’s Nuclear Security...*

concerns.²⁵ Consequently, the organisation has remained largely focused on economic and developmental initiatives rather than security cooperation.

Other interstate tensions within the region have further complicated the prospects for a security architecture. India's relations with Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives have been periodically strained by the political interventions and disputes over foreign policy issues. Similarly, Bangladesh-India relations have historically been shaped by disagreements over border management, water sharing, and migration. Although these disputes are generally less severe than the India-Pakistan conflict, they have contributed to an environment of mistrust in which smaller states have at times adopted balance-of-power strategies by hedging and cultivating relations with extra-regional powers.²⁶ This, in turn, has undermined multilateral cooperative initiatives.

External Powers and Regions

South Asia's security environment cannot be fully understood without considering the influence of external powers. Regional sub-systems are often penetrated and shaped by the systemic powers, as regions function within a broader international structure.²⁷ During the Cold War, regional politics was deeply intertwined with the strategic rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. Pakistan became a key partner of the United States through alliances such as SEATO and CENTO, while India maintained close relations with the Soviet Union, particularly after signing the 1971 Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation.

These alignments reinforced regional divisions and reduced incentives for indigenous security cooperation. Instead of developing regional mechanisms for conflict management, states relied on external patrons for

²⁵ Kishore C. Dash, *Regionalism in South Asia: Negotiating Cooperation, Institutional Structures* (London: Routledge, 2008).

²⁶ Chakma, 'South Asia's Realist Fascination and the Alternatives'...

²⁷ Michael Brecher, 'International Relations and Asian Studies: The Subordinate State System of Southern Asia,' *World Politics*, vol. 15, no. 2 (1963), pp. 213–35.

strategic support. The involvement of external powers, thus, inhibited the consolidation of autonomous regional security structures.

In the post-Cold War era, external involvement has continued to influence South Asia's strategic landscape. China's expanding economic and military presence -- particularly through projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) -- has introduced new geopolitical dynamics into the region. The growing strategic alignment between China and Pakistan further complicates the regional security dynamics. This partnership, along with China's increasing footprint in the smaller South Asian states through the BRI, is often perceived in India as a form of strategic encirclement, reinforcing New Delhi's security concerns.²⁸

The expanding role of the United States, meanwhile, in the Indo-Pacific region, including its strengthening partnership with India, adds another layer of geopolitical complexity. The overlapping interests of these external factors contribute to a security environment in which regional cooperation is often overshadowed by broader strategic competition.

Domestic Political Factors and Security Narratives

Domestic political dynamics have also played a crucial role in shaping South Asia's security environment. National identity formation in many South Asian states has been closely linked to the narratives of external threat.

In India and Pakistan, in particular, nationalist discourses frequently invoke their rivalry as a defining element of national identity. Political elites often mobilise these narratives for domestic legitimacy, making compromise more difficult. As a result, security issues become deeply embedded in the domestic political debates, limiting policymakers' flexibility in pursuing cooperative initiatives. The Kashmir dispute exemplifies this dynamic: it is

²⁸ Bhumitra Chakma, 'The BRI and India's Neighbourhood,' *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 43, no. 3 (2019), pp. 183–86.

so deeply embedded in the domestic politics in both the states that policymakers find it difficult to pursue a political resolution.

Moreover, the presence of internal conflicts -- such as insurgencies in Kashmir, the Maoist movement in Nepal, the Baloch issue in Pakistan, and the fissures in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, have long complicated the regional security landscape. This is further exacerbated by mutual allegations of 'proxy warfare.'

Internal instability can spill across borders through refugee flows, cross-border militancy, and humanitarian crises. However, rather than encouraging cooperative security mechanisms, these challenges have often reinforced unilateral and militarised responses. This pattern contrasts with other regions, where shared security challenges have sometimes served as catalysts for institutional cooperation.

Institutional Weakness and the Limits of Regionalism

The institutional landscape of South Asia reflects the broader challenges facing regional cooperation. SAARC remains the primary regional organisation, yet it has been unable to evolve into a security institution comparable to the European Union or ASEAN. Its limited mandate, consensus-based decision-making, and exclusion of bilateral disputes significantly constrain its effectiveness.

Moreover, regional integration in South Asia remains extremely low compared to other regions. Intra-regional trade accounts for less than 5 per cent of the region's total trade, reflecting limited economic interdependence.²⁹ Economic integration often serves as a foundation for broader political and security cooperation, as demonstrated in Europe and Southeast Asia. The absence of such interdependence in South Asia further reduces the incentives for institutionalised security collaboration.

²⁹ World Bank, *South Asia Economic Focus: Beaten or Broken? Informality and COVID-19* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2020).

Alternative regional initiatives, such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), have attempted to circumvent the paralysis of SAARC by excluding Pakistan and focusing on the sub-regional cooperation. Similarly, growth corridors such as the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) initiative have sought to promote regional connectivity. However, these frameworks have thus far delivered limited tangible outcomes.

The absence of a robust security architecture in South Asia is, therefore, the result of a complex interplay of historical legacies, geopolitical rivalries, structural asymmetries, domestic politics, and external influences. Understanding these structural, historical, and geopolitical constraints is essential for assessing the prospects for any future security architecture in South Asia.

Constructing a South Asian Security Architecture

Despite the formidable constraints, the need to develop a robust security architecture in South Asia remains inevitable. Arguably, regional security landscapes do not arise spontaneously. These are, in fact, constructed through deliberate political choices, institutional innovation, and gradual development of shared norms among states. In the South Asian context, the establishment of such an architecture would necessitate a fundamental transformation in the security perceptions and behavioural patterns of the regional actors.

This section focuses on building a security architecture in South Asia. The most viable approach is arguably an incremental, path-dependent strategy, drawing on lessons from other regions while remaining attentive to the distinctive political and strategic realities of South Asia. Given the current strategic environment -- particularly the enduring India-Pakistan rivalry -- the emergence of a cooperative framework akin to those in Europe or ASEAN remains highly unlikely in the near future. A more practical approach would be first to stabilise these strategic rivalries and only then

gradually work towards building a broader security strategy, whilst continuing with a stable Indo-Pakistani deterrence.

Stable Rivalry and Cold Peace

South Asia's contemporary strategic landscape is shaped by two broad dynamics. The first is the intense geopolitical rivalry between India and Pakistan. The second is the more subdued concern among smaller states about preserving their sovereignty and strategic autonomy in the shadow of a dominant neighbour. It is the first dynamic that most strongly defines the region's overall strategic environment. Therefore, any effort to build a durable security strategy must begin by stabilising relations between the two central powers.

Stabilising the India-Pakistan strategic rivalry remains a daunting challenge, given their long history of crises and wars -- including one as recently as May 2025. Yet the strategic case for restoring their ties is clear: both are nuclear-armed states. In a nuclearised environment, the most serious dangers often arise not from deliberate aggression but from misperception, miscalculation, and the absence of communication channels that could otherwise help manage crises.³⁰

Re-establishing diplomatic engagement between New Delhi and Islamabad is, therefore, critically important to reduce strategic risks in South Asia. At present, there are limited bilateral contact opportunities for effective crisis management and conflict prevention. Reopening regular diplomatic channels would be an important first step toward stabilising relations. Such engagement will not immediately resolve longstanding disputes; its primary function would be to create a predictable framework for managing competition and preventing escalation.

If sustained over time and accompanied by sound political choices, renewed diplomacy could facilitate the emergence of a 'stable rivalry.' Stable

³⁰ Sagan and Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons...*

rivalries can be characterised by enduring competition between adversaries that nevertheless remain bounded by mutual deterrence and institutionalised mechanisms for crisis management. For India and Pakistan, the development of such a framework would require attention to both arms-race stability and crisis stability.³¹ Arms-race stability refers to conditions in which neither side believes it can gain a decisive strategic advantage through rapid military expansion or technological breakthroughs. Crisis stability concerns the ability of both states to avoid incentives for pre-emptive action during the periods of heightened tension. Given the presence of nuclear weapons on both sides, maintaining these forms of stability is not merely desirable but essential.

Confidence-building measures (CBMs) represent an important mechanism through which stable rivalry can be reinforced. CBMs are designed to enhance transparency, reduce uncertainty, and build a minimum level of trust between adversaries without requiring deep political reconciliation. South Asia already possesses several such measures, including agreements on pre-notification of ballistic missile tests and mechanisms for communication between military leadership. However, the scope of existing CBMs remains limited and could be expanded significantly. Potential initiatives might include enhanced nuclear risk-reduction mechanisms, improved border communication systems, and renewed commitments to ceasefire agreements along contested boundaries.

Importantly, stable rivalry and CBMs tend to reinforce each other. A stable strategic environment makes it easier for policymakers to introduce cooperative mechanisms without appearing politically vulnerable. Simultaneously, the gradual expansion of CBMs can help institutionalise restraint and predictability, thereby strengthening the foundations of strategic stability. In other words, CBMs serve not as substitutes for

³¹ Bhumitra Chakma, 'Nuclear Arms Control: Challenges in South Asia,' *India Review*, vol. 9, no. 3 (2010), pp. 364–384.

deterrence but as complementary mechanisms that reduce the probability of accidental escalation within a competitive relationship.

Beyond the India-Pakistan dyad, the broader regional order in South Asia is shaped by India's structural predominance. As the largest military, economic, and political power in the region, India inevitably occupies a central role in the regional security dynamics. This position carries a corresponding responsibility to contribute constructively to the development of a stable regional order. Smaller neighbouring states -- including Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and others -- often perceive India's overwhelming capabilities with caution, fearing potential encroachments on their sovereignty or political autonomy.³²

While India's "Neighbourhood First" policy has emphasised regional engagement, its implementation has not always fully alleviated these concerns. To foster a more cooperative regional environment, New Delhi must demonstrate a consistently accommodative and consultative approach toward its smaller neighbours. Policies that emphasise economic partnership, respect for political autonomy, and inclusive regional initiatives would help mitigate the effects of the regional security dilemma. By reducing perceptions of dominance and insecurity, such measures could create a more favourable environment for a broader regional cooperation. Ultimately, the pursuit of diplomatic engagement, stable rivalry, and expanded CBMs represents a pragmatic pathway toward enhancing strategic stability in South Asia. While deep political disagreements between India and Pakistan are unlikely to disappear in the near term, the establishment of institutionalised mechanisms for communication and restraint can significantly reduce the risks associated with the nuclear competition. Therefore, the first step towards a cooperative security framework is to stabilise the region's strategic landscape -- or what can be described as a 'cold peace,' characterised by the absence of open conflict but the persistence of strategic caution and competition.

³² Iftekharuzzaman, 'The India Doctrine,' *BISS Journal*, vol. 11, no. 4 (1990), pp. 15–32.

Regional Cooperative Framework: Gradualism and Incremental Institutionalisation

Once a condition of cold peace is established -- particularly between India and Pakistan -- the next step towards a cooperative security framework would be to gradually institutionalise collaboration in non-contentious areas such as trade, investment, culture, education, and environmental initiatives. Economic cooperation is especially significant, as it is less politically sensitive and carries fewer strategic risks. Experiences from Europe and Southeast Asia demonstrate that the steady expansion of trade and economic interdependence can reduce the intensity of security competition while fostering trust among states. A sustained cold peace would, therefore, create the necessary environment for South Asian countries to move along a similar path towards deeper cooperation. Importantly, the pattern of stable rivalry or cold peace will need to be maintained as South Asia develops its security architecture, setting it apart from the models seen in Europe and Southeast Asia.

South Asia already possesses a key advantage in transitioning from cold peace to meaningful regional cooperation with the existence of a region-wide organisation of the SAARC. Although the organisation is currently dormant, it still offers an established institutional foundation upon which deeper collaboration can be built. It means that South Asia does not need to construct a regional institutional architecture from scratch. Instead, the real challenge is to revitalise the existing organisation and reform its institutional design to enhance its effectiveness.

A caveat is warranted: the revival of SAARC ultimately hinges on political decisions in New Delhi and Islamabad. Institutional reforms alone cannot overcome the structural constraints created by enduring political mistrust. As the broader literature on regionalism emphasises, regional organisations are fundamentally political projects that depend on the strategic calculations

and political will of the member states.³³ Without a change in the political orientation of the region's two largest states, technical reforms are unlikely to produce meaningful outcomes.

India's role in revitalising SAARC is especially significant, given its status as both the largest power in the region and geographically central. Despite this centrality, India has historically struggled to assert leadership in promoting regional cooperation. As Partha Ghosh observes, regionalism has not been deeply ingrained in India's strategic outlook,³⁴ thus constraining its willingness to fully invest in the regional institutions. Nevertheless, India's engagement is crucial for revitalising SAARC and fostering meaningful cooperation across the region. Arguably, without India's involvement, SAARC cannot be made effective.

India's broader strategic ambitions suggest that a reconsideration of its lack of interest in regionalism is essential. As a rising power aspiring to attain great-power status in the 21st century, India must first establish legitimacy and acceptability within its immediate region. Regional leadership is often regarded as a critical component of great-power emergence, as successful powers typically demonstrate their capacity to organise and stabilise their surrounding regions. In this context, the revitalisation of SAARC offers India an opportunity to enhance its regional legitimacy while simultaneously promoting economic integration and political stability. Failure to pursue such a strategy risks perpetuating a regional environment characterised by balancing behaviour from Pakistan and hedging strategies among smaller South Asian states.

Pakistan's position in the regional order is shaped by a different set of structural constraints. Since independence, the country has faced recurring cycles of political instability, high levels of military expenditure, and

³³ Andrew Hurrell, 'Regionalism in Theoretical Perspective,' in *Regionalism in World Politics*, edited by Louise Fawcett and Andrew Hurrell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 37-73; Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia*.

³⁴ Partha S. Ghosh, 'Region without Regionalism: Cooperation in South Asia,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 51, no. 32 (2016).

relatively modest economic growth. While periods of reform and economic improvement have occasionally emerged, these gains have often been undermined by persistent domestic and geopolitical challenges. A revitalised regional institutional framework could help mitigate some of these pressures by promoting economic connectivity, regional trade, and cooperative security mechanisms.

The smaller states of South Asia have generally supported regional cooperation initiatives, as such frameworks provide opportunities to enhance economic development and political autonomy. However, their strategic behaviour has often reflected hedging strategies between larger regional actors, particularly India and external powers. Despite these complexities, smaller South Asian states stand to benefit significantly from a more institutionalised regional order, particularly in areas such as trade integration, climate governance, energy cooperation, and disaster management.

Taken together, these structural conditions suggest that the revival of SAARC remains both possible and potentially beneficial for the region. The decisive factor, however, remains the political will of New Delhi and Islamabad. If the political leadership in both capitals were to prioritise regional cooperation, SAARC could be gradually revitalised through incremental institutional reforms and functional cooperation. Over time, such a process could lay the foundations for deeper regional integration.

Toward a South Asian Security Community

If a stable framework of institutionalised cooperation could be established through SAARC, the gradual emergence of a regional security community in South Asia could become conceivable over the long term. The concept of a security community, first articulated by Karl W. Deutsch, refers to a group of states among which the use of force becomes highly unlikely because

shared norms, institutions, and identities foster peaceful conflict resolution.³⁵

Subsequent scholarship emphasises that security communities do not emerge suddenly but evolve through prolonged processes of interaction, trust-building, and institutional development.³⁶ Regional institutions play an important role by facilitating repeated interactions among political elites, encouraging policy coordination, and promoting shared expectations regarding peaceful dispute settlement. From a constructivist perspective, regional institutions can gradually contribute to the formation of shared identities and collective norms among member states.³⁷ If SAARC is successfully revitalised and sustained over time, it could provide an institutional platform through which such processes unfold in South Asia. Historical and civilisational factors also provide a potential foundation for the emergence of a security community in the region. Despite its considerable diversity, South Asia shares a deeply interconnected civilisational heritage characterised by centuries of cultural exchange, economic interaction, and social mobility across the subcontinent. While modern nation-states have introduced political fragmentation and competing national identities, the underlying historical interconnectedness of the region remains significant.

This shared historical background does not automatically guarantee regional integration. However, it suggests that the development of a regional identity in South Asia is not inconceivable. If sustained institutional cooperation generates mutual trust and shared expectations over time, the region could gradually move toward a more stable and cooperative regional order. In this long-term perspective, the evolution of a South Asian security community, while challenging, remains plausible.

³⁵ Karl W. Deutsch, Sidney Burrell, Robert Kann, Maurice Lee, Martin Lichterman, Richard Lindgren, Frank Loewenheim, and Robert Van Wagenen, *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957).

³⁶ Adler and Barnett, *Security Communities...*

³⁷ Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia...*

Conclusion

South Asia's persistent failure to develop a coherent regional security architecture is not simply the result of institutional shortcomings or missed opportunities for cooperation. Rather, as this article has analysed, it reflects a deeper constellation of structural, historical, and political constraints that have shaped the region's strategic trajectory since decolonisation. Enduring interstate rivalries -- most notably between India and Pakistan -- combined with asymmetrical power relations, domestic political imperatives, and the continued involvement of external powers, have produced a regional environment in which cooperation remains difficult and often politically costly. In such a context, the absence of a robust and institutionalised framework for managing security relations is not anomalous but, to a significant extent, structurally conditioned.

At the same time, the comparative experiences of other regions demonstrate that security architectures are neither preordained nor static. They are constructed over time through deliberate political choices, gradual institutional development, and the cultivation of shared norms and expectations. The cases of Europe and Southeast Asia illustrate that even regions marked by historical conflict and strategic competition can, under certain conditions, move toward more cooperative and institutionalised forms of security governance. For South Asia, however, such a transformation would require a fundamental shift in both strategic thinking and political priorities among the regional actors.

A key insight from this analysis is that any meaningful progress toward a regional security architecture must begin with the stabilisation of core interstate rivalries. In particular, the India-Pakistan relationship remains the linchpin of regional security dynamics. Without a minimum level of strategic stability between these two states, broader efforts at regional cooperation are unlikely to succeed. The pursuit of a "cold peace" -- characterised by the absence of active conflict alongside the persistence of strategic competition -- offers a pragmatic and attainable starting point. Within such a framework, the expansion of CBMs, the restoration of

diplomatic engagement, and the institutionalisation of the crisis-management mechanisms could significantly reduce the risks of escalation, especially in a nuclearised environment.

Beyond bilateral stabilisation, the gradual development of a regional cooperative framework represents the next critical step. Rather than attempting to replicate the comprehensive security architectures of other regions, South Asia is more likely to follow an incremental and path-dependent trajectory. Functional cooperation in less contentious areas -- such as trade, climate change, public health, and disaster management -- can help build trust and create constituencies for deeper collaboration over time. In this regard, the revitalisation of existing institutional platforms, particularly SAARC, is both a practical necessity and a strategic opportunity. While SAARC's limitations are evident, it nonetheless provides an established framework that can be reformed and expanded, provided there is sufficient political will among member states.

India's role in this process is especially significant. As the region's predominant power, its policies and strategic choices will heavily influence the prospects for regional cooperation. A more accommodative and inclusive approach toward neighbouring states could help mitigate concerns about dominance and foster a more conducive environment for institutional collaboration. At the same time, Pakistan's engagement remains equally critical, particularly in relation to stabilising bilateral relations with India and supporting regional initiatives. Smaller states, for their part, have a clear interest in the development of a more institutionalised regional order, which could enhance both their economic prospects and strategic autonomy.

Ultimately, the emergence of a South Asian security architecture -- and potentially, over the longer term, a security community -- will depend on the gradual transformation of regional political dynamics. This is inherently a long-term and uncertain process, shaped by evolving domestic, regional, and global conditions. While significant obstacles remain, the analysis presented in this article suggests that progress is not impossible. Through

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incremental cooperation, sustained political engagement, and the careful management of strategic rivalries, South Asia can begin to move toward a more stable and institutionalised regional order.■

Climate Dialogue as Functional Peacebuilding in South Asia: Environmental Cooperation as a Contributor to Regional Peace

*Dr Dmitry Erokhin**

Abstract

This article examines the potential of climate dialogue and practical environmental cooperation to serve as a form of functional peacebuilding in South Asia. It argues that, although climate cooperation cannot resolve the foundational political disputes that structure regional insecurity, it can nevertheless generate politically consequential forms of engagement. These include sustained channels of communication, reduced uncertainty, strengthened technical interdependence, incremental trust-building, and the normalisation of working relations across an otherwise fragmented regional order. In doing so, the article contributes to the environmental peacebuilding literature by developing a South Asia-specific account of functional climate peacebuilding, demonstrating how modest and technically oriented cooperation may acquire political significance even in the absence of progress on core disputes. The article situates this argument within the region's increasingly transboundary climate vulnerabilities. Heatwaves, glacial melt, riverine flooding, drought, air pollution, and adaptation pressures already exceed national borders and are likely to intensify under continued warming. Drawing on scholarship in environmental peacebuilding, climate security, water diplomacy, and regional governance, the article offers a conceptual and policy-oriented synthesis of four domains in which climate dialogue may

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support peacebuilding: transboundary water and cryosphere governance, hydro-meteorological cooperation and early warning systems, regional air-quality governance, and cross-border electricity cooperation. The analysis suggests that climate cooperation is most likely to contribute to peace when it is technically specific, institutionally regularised, politically insulated from maximalist claims, and framed in terms of mutual risk reduction rather than moral concession. Conversely, its prospects are weakest when cooperation is expected to substitute for political settlement or when it becomes attached to highly securitised questions of sovereignty. The article concludes that climate dialogue should be understood not as a pathway to comprehensive conflict resolution, but as a realistic confidence-building architecture for South Asia, which is limited in scope, yet potentially durable in its political effects.

Keywords: Climate Diplomacy, Environmental Peacebuilding, Climate Cooperation, South Asia, Regional Security.

Introduction

South Asia is entering a period in which climate change is no longer merely an environmental background condition but a central driver of governance stress, developmental risk, and interstate interdependence. The World Bank estimates that, at least, more than 750 million South Asians were affected by one climate-related disaster over the past two decades and that climate change could sharply diminish living conditions for up to 800 million people.¹ The World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) reports that Asia is warming more than twice as fast as the global average,² while the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) identifies growing heat stress, water deficits, heavier rainfall extremes, glacier-related hazards,

¹ World Bank, “Climate and Development in South Asia,” accessed April 8, 2026, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/sar/brief/integrating-climate-and-development-in-south-asia/integrating-climate-and-development-in-south-asia-region>.

² World Meteorological Organization, “Rising Temperatures and Extreme Weather Hit Asia Hard,” June 23, 2025, <https://wmo.int/news/media-centre/rising-temperatures-and-extreme-weather-hit-asia-hard>.

and cascading risks to food, health, and livelihoods across South and High Mountain Asia.³

These pressures unfold in a region that remains weakly integrated despite deep geographic interdependence. South Asia is described as one of the least integrated regions in the world,⁴ with its intraregional trade being only about 5 percent of the region's total trade, far below comparator regions.⁵ Shared shocks are hardest to manage where cooperation mechanisms are weakest. Rivers, monsoon systems, glacier-fed watersheds, air sheds, and energy systems do not align with political frontiers, yet the political institutions designed to govern them remain limited, uneven, or vulnerable to broader diplomatic downturns. This structural mismatch creates a compelling case for forms of cooperation that are practical enough to survive political volatility.

Environmental peacebuilding defined as a field at the intersection of environment, conflict, peace, and security⁶ offers a useful framework for understanding why climate dialogue might matter in such a setting. Environmental cooperation is shown to support peace through mechanisms such as trust-building, improved mutual understanding, and institution-building.⁷ Evidence suggests that environmental agreements can support

³ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), "Chapter 10: Asia," in *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*, Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the IPCC, ed. H.-O. Pörtner et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/chapter/chapter-10/>.

⁴ World Bank, "Our Regional Strategy to Build a Stronger South Asia," accessed April 8, 2026, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/south-asia-regional-integration/overview>.

⁵ World Bank, "Trade," accessed April 8, 2026, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/south-asia-regional-integration/trade>.

⁶ Tobias Ide, Carl Bruch, Alexander Carius, Ken Conca, Geoffrey D. Dabelko, Richard Matthew, and Erika Weinthal, "The Past and Future(s) of Environmental Peacebuilding," *International Affairs* 97, no. 1 (2021): 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaa177>.

⁷ Tobias Ide, "The Impact of Environmental Cooperation on Peacemaking: Definitions, Mechanisms, and Empirical Evidence," *International Studies Review* 21, no. 3 (2019): 327–346, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viy014>.

reconciliation in international rivalries under certain conditions.⁸ Though empirical research remains limited, a substantial majority of studied cases identify a peace-promoting role for natural-resource management.⁹

This article develops a restrained but conceptually specific account of climate dialogue as functional peacebuilding in South Asia. It argues that climate cooperation can contribute to peace by creating regular channels of communication, shared technical practices, issue-specific epistemic communities, and forms of interdependence in a region where even limited habits of cooperation carry strategic value. Its central contribution is both conceptual and regional. It applies the idea of functional peacebuilding to climate dialogue in South Asia, defining it as a limited, sectoral, and institutionally repeated form of cooperation that supports peace by reducing uncertainty and sustaining working relations rather than by producing political settlement.

The India-Pakistan relationship is analytically central to this argument because the rivalry has historically constrained wider South Asian regionalism and represents the most difficult test for any peacebuilding claim in the region. Yet the article is not dyad-specific. India-Pakistan is treated as the most politically demanding case, while other relationships, including India-Bangladesh, India-Nepal, and India-Bhutan, illustrate how functional cooperation may operate under different levels of political tension, institutional capacity, and technical feasibility. South Asia's shared rivers, forests, air sheds, mountain systems, and ecological vulnerabilities create multiple openings for environmental peacebuilding across the

⁸ Tobias Ide, "Does Environmental Peacemaking between States Work? Insights on Cooperative Environmental Agreements and Reconciliation in International Rivalries," *Journal of Peace Research* 55, no. 3 (2018): 351–365, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343317750216>.

⁹ Aleksandra Balinskaia, "Interstate Environmental Peacebuilding: A Systematic Review," *Environment and Security* 3, no. 3 (2025): 265–298, <https://doi.org/10.1177/27538796241287366>.

region.¹⁰ The article's findings are, therefore, region-wide, while remaining attentive to variation across dyads and sectors. Cooperation is likely to be more feasible in technically focused areas such as hydro-meteorological early warning, air-quality monitoring, glacier science, and electricity exchange than in highly securitised disputes over sovereignty or territorial control.

Empirically, the article synthesises evidence from four climate-sensitive domains including water and cryosphere governance, hydro meteorological cooperation and early warning, air-quality governance, and cross-border electricity cooperation. These domains combine high levels of transboundary exposure with identifiable institutional or technical mechanisms through which cooperation can occur. Climate cooperation is, therefore, understood here as a form of functional peacebuilding that is incremental, sectoral, and problem-driven rather than transformative in a single step.

For the purposes of this article, a contribution to peace refers to the preservation of cross-border technical communication during periods of political tension, the regular exchange of climate and hazard data, the creation or maintenance of joint working routines, the reduction of uncertainty in crisis-prone sectors, and the capacity to manage shared environmental risks without immediate diplomatic breakdown. The article examines the production of practical confidence-building outcomes that can make regional relations less brittle.

Methodologically, the article is a qualitative analytical study based on a synthesis of peer-reviewed scholarship in international relations, peace and conflict studies, environmental governance, water diplomacy, and energy policy, alongside recent assessments by the IPCC, World Bank, WMO, and the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development. Sources

¹⁰ Mirza Sadaqat Huda, "An Ecological Response to Ethno-Nationalistic Populism: Grassroots Environmental Peacebuilding in South Asia," *International Affairs* 97, no. 1 (2021): 119–138, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaa176>.

were included where these addressed the peacebuilding effects of environmental cooperation, the transboundary character of climate-related risks in South Asia, or the institutional feasibility of regional cooperation in climate-sensitive sectors. Sources were excluded where these treated climate change only as a general environmental problem without relevance to cross-border governance, security, or cooperation. The study uses secondary literature and policy reports to construct a conceptual and policy-oriented synthesis in order to develop a conceptually grounded and policy-relevant argument that is regionally specific and analytically restrained. Climate dialogue is neither dismissed as merely symbolic nor exaggerated as a substitute for political settlement. Rather, it is assessed as a plausible contributor to peace under identifiable conditions. Given its synthetic and qualitative design, its claims are interpretive rather than causal in a strict empirical sense. Climate dialogue is treated as a plausible contributor to peacebuilding where observable mechanisms are present, including regular communication, data exchange, institutional continuity, and reduced uncertainty.

This limitation reinforces the article's central claim that climate cooperation may strengthen conditions for peace, but it should not be presented as sufficient to produce peace on its own. The mechanisms discussed in the article are, therefore, treated as observable through proxies rather than as directly measured peace outcomes. Reduced uncertainty is indicated by regular data exchange, shared forecasts, risk assessments, and agreed warning protocols. Technical interdependence is indicated by common platforms, recurring trainings, compatible standards, and cross-border infrastructure or service provision. Modest trust-building is indicated by the continuity of expert meetings, data-sharing, joint reviews, or operational cooperation during periods when broader political relations remain difficult. These indicators structure the analysis and provide a basis for future empirical research.

Environmental Peacebuilding and the Logic of Cooperation

The most useful way to think about climate dialogue in South Asia is through the lens of functional peacebuilding. The environmental peacebuilding literature does not suggest that ecological cooperation automatically produces peace, but it does indicate that shared environmental problems can create opportunities for communication and institution-building that would otherwise be absent. The most relevant mechanisms are increased understanding, greater trust, and the buildup of institutions.¹¹ For example, water cooperation can facilitate more peaceful interstate relations, especially through common problem-solving and repeated engagement.¹² In practice, this means that the political significance of environmental cooperation often lies less in dramatic settlements than in the creation of durable routines.

This functional logic is particularly relevant for South Asia, since the region's central difficulty is not the absence of shared interests but the weakness of mechanisms that translate those interests into stable cooperation. Climate change generates exactly the kinds of cross-border problems that are materially urgent, technically tractable, and difficult to solve unilaterally. Climate change, water scarcity, and energy insecurity increasingly shape the conflict-development nexus in South Asia and make environmental diplomacy more salient. The point is not that shared vulnerability produces harmony.¹³ It is that vulnerability increases the practical value of low-visibility, high-utility cooperation. When states exchange hydrological data, align forecasting systems, or coordinate early warning, they are not merely managing hazards. They are also reducing uncertainty and keeping channels of contact alive.

¹¹ Ide, "The Impact of Environmental Cooperation on Peacemaking..."

¹² Tobias Ide and Adrien Detges, "International Water Cooperation and Environmental Peacemaking," *Global Environmental Politics* 18, no. 4 (2018): 63–84, https://doi.org/10.1162/glep_a_00478.

¹³ Mabroor Hassan, Manzoor Khan Afridi, and Muhammad Irfan Khan, "Environmental Diplomacy in South Asia: Considering the Environmental Security, Conflict and Development Nexus," *Geoforum* 82 (2017): 127–130, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2017.04.003>.

Empirical literature supports caution. There is a risk of the “dark side” of environmental peace building, including politicisation, inequality, displacement, and symbolic agreements with weak substantive effect.¹⁴ The field is evolving beyond simple conflict-resolution claims and must grapple with the broader questions of justice and political context.¹⁵ In South Asia, these risks are not abstract. Transboundary water or hydropower cooperation, for example, could reproduce inequalities if upstream and downstream communities bear environmental costs that political or commercial benefits accrue mainly to central governments or large utilities. Similarly, air-quality cooperation could become symbolic if states announce regional dialogue without committing to transparent emissions data, enforceable standards, or public-health accountability. Hydro-meteorological cooperation could also be co-opted if data-sharing remains selective, securitised, or inaccessible to vulnerable borderland communities most exposed to floods, heatwaves, and glacier-related hazards. That is why a neutral account of climate cooperation in South Asia should reject both triumphalism and cynicism. Climate dialogue is not a substitute for diplomacy on territorial, ideological, or military disputes. It is better understood as a complementary layer of regional statecraft that can reduce friction, preserve communication, and widen the social and institutional infrastructure through which more stable relations become possible. To mitigate these risks, climate cooperation should be designed around transparency, inclusive governance, and equitable benefit-sharing, and public accountability. Practical safeguards could include open technical data where security concerns allow joint monitoring mechanisms, consultation with affected local communities, benefit-sharing clauses, grievance alleviation mechanisms in water and energy projects, and regular public reporting on implementation. These design principles would not remove political asymmetries, but these would reduce the likelihood that

¹⁴ Ide, “The Dark Side of Environmental Peacebuilding...”

¹⁵ Udi Sommer and Francesca Fassbender, “Environmental Peacebuilding: Moving beyond Resolving Violence-Ridden Conflicts to Sustaining Peace,” *World Development* 178 (2024): 106555, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2024.106555>.

environmental cooperation becomes merely symbolic or reinforces existing inequalities.

This restrained approach also aligns with findings from South Asia-specific literature. Environmental peacebuilding in South Asia can increase trust and interdependence, though research in the region has focused too heavily on highly contested resources.¹⁶ That observation suggests that climate peace building is the most plausible when it begins with less symbolically charged domains such as early warning, forecasting, clean air, glacier science, and technical adaptation planning. In that sense, the climate dialogue should not be judged by its ability to resolve the hardest disputes first. It should be judged by whether it creates credible working relationships in areas where the need for cooperation is undeniable and the political cost of engagement is comparatively low.

The gap in the South Asia literature is that the environmental peacebuilding is often examined through single sectors or highly contested domains, especially water and hydropower, rather than through a cross-sectoral account of climate cooperation as functional peacebuilding. Studies of water cooperation, hydro-energy projects, and environmental diplomacy have shown that shared ecological risks can generate opportunities for trust-building and interdependence, but those do not fully explain how multiple climate-sensitive domains might together create a broader architecture of routine cooperation. This article fills that gap by synthesising four domains, including water and cryosphere governance, hydro-meteorological early warning, air-quality governance, and cross-border electricity cooperation to show how different forms of technically specific cooperation can cumulatively support communication, reduce uncertainty, and normalise working relations. Unlike studies that focus primarily on contested resources or on whether environmental cooperation can produce reconciliation, this article examines more modest peacebuilding outcomes such as the creation of durable routines, technical channels, and sectoral

¹⁶ Huda, “An Ecological Response to Ethno-Nationalistic Populism...”

interdependence in areas where cooperation is politically feasible even when core disputes remain unresolved.

South Asia's Climate Interdependence

The material basis for climate dialogue in South Asia is unusually strong, since the region's environmental risks are deeply transboundary. Heat stress, water scarcity, glacier hazards, and extreme rainfall are already affecting health, food security, and infrastructure across Asia,¹⁷ with 2024 being Asia's warmest or second warmest year on record, marked by prolonged heatwaves, marine heatwaves, glacier loss, and damaging extremes.¹⁸ In South Asia, these risks concentrate in systems that physically link countries together through shared mountain ranges, shared river basins, shared monsoon dynamics, shared pollution corridors, and partly complementary energy systems. Climate change, therefore, sharpens a pre-existing regional condition when states remain politically separate, but many of the threats they face are ecologically entangled.

The Hindu Kush-Himalaya region is perhaps the clearest example of this interdependence. The HKH is a mountain system whose ecosystem services support roughly two billion people,¹⁹ while its rapidly disappearing snow and ice have grave implications for water, biodiversity, and downstream livelihoods.²⁰ Mountain ecosystems, glaciers, rivers, and communities are deeply intertwined, while borders carve these into ecologically incomplete sections.²¹ In such a context, science diplomacy is one of the few practical

¹⁷ IPCC, "Chapter 10: Asia..."

¹⁸ World Meteorological Organization, *State of the Climate in Asia 2024* (Geneva: World Meteorological Organization, 2025), <https://wmo.int/publication-series/state-of-climate-asia-2024>.

¹⁹ International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), "Hindu Kush Himalaya Assessment," accessed April 8, 2026, <https://www.icimod.org/hkhassessment/>.

²⁰ International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), "HI-WISE: Water, Ice, Society, and Ecosystems in the Hindu Kush Himalaya," accessed April 8, 2026, <https://hkh.icimod.org/hi-wise/>.

²¹ Aditya Valiathan Pillai, *Abiding by Nature, Not National Borders: Institution Building in the Himalayas* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2021), <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/635231619759687620/pdf/Abiding-by-Nature-Not-National-Borders-Institution-Building-in-the-Himalayas.pdf>.

means through which states can manage risks that none of them can govern alone.

Water governance shows the same pattern in a different institutional form. Transboundary water cooperation and joint river-basin management are pivotal to climate-resilient development in South Asia because climate change is altering monsoons, intensifying floods and droughts, accelerating glacial melt, and threatening water-energy-food-environment security across shared basins.²² Treaties and repeated agreements matter less as absolute guarantees against conflict than as institutional platforms that support cooperation under growing variability.²³ Meanwhile, the water diplomacy literature emphasises the importance of bridging science, policy, and practice in transboundary water settings.²⁴ These studies suggest that the value of climate dialogue lies not only in resource allocation but in creating adaptive institutions that can absorb uncertainty without collapsing into crisis politics.

The air basin of northern South Asia offers a parallel lesson. South Asia contains nine of the world's ten most polluted cities.²⁵ PM2.5 exposure in some densely populated areas reaches levels far above WHO guidelines. Air pollution causes an estimated two million premature deaths annually across

²² Md. Arfanuzzaman, "Transboundary Water Cooperation and Joint River Basin Management Are Pivotal for Climate Resilient Development in South Asia," *World Development Perspectives* 38 (2025): 100681, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wdp.2025.100681>.

²³ Shlomi Dinar, David Katz, Lucia De Stefano, and Brian Blankespoor, "Do Treaties Matter? Climate Change, Water Variability, and Cooperation along Transboundary River Basins," *Political Geography* 69 (2019): 162–172, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2018.08.007>.

²⁴ Martina Klimes, David Michel, Elizabeth Yaari, and Phillia Restiani, "Water Diplomacy: The Intersect of Science, Policy and Practice," *Journal of Hydrology* 575 (2019): 1362–1370, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhydrol.2019.02.049>, and Marko Keskinen, Erik Salminen, and Juho Haapala, "Water Diplomacy Paths: An Approach to Recognise Water Diplomacy Actions in Shared Waters," *Journal of Hydrology* 602 (2021): 126737, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhydrol.2021.126737>.

²⁵ World Bank, *Striving for Clean Air: Air Pollution and Public Health in South Asia* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2023), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/sar/publication/striving-for-clean-air>.

the region.²⁶ It travels long distances across municipal, state, and national boundaries, and close coordination among countries is required for cost-effective solutions. The World Bank Breath of Change roadmap builds on this logic by explicitly focusing on coordinated air shed-wide action.²⁷

Climate Dialogue through Water and Cryosphere Cooperation

Transboundary water and cryosphere governance offer the clearest substantive field in which climate dialogue can contribute to more peaceful regional relations. Water remains politically sensitive in South Asia, but climate change is making older, more rigid approaches to water governance increasingly difficult to sustain. Climate-resilient development in South Asia depends on joint river-basin management because glacial melt, rainfall shifts, and growing hydrological variability are undermining assumptions of predictability.²⁸ Water cooperation can function as environmental peacemaking when it promotes repeated interaction and common problem-solving.²⁹ In South Asia, it implies that climate dialogue should prioritise shared monitoring, basin-level risk assessment, adaptive review clauses, and transparent expert exchange rather than rhetorical contestation over abstract rights alone.

This is especially important in the Himalayan upstream-downstream context. Changes in the HKH cryosphere will alter the hydrological cycle and overall water availability, with flows likely increasing at higher elevations until mid-century before decreasing thereafter in many settings.³⁰ The World Bank makes a complementary institutional argument by highlighting International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development's

²⁶ World Bank, *Striving for Clean Air...*

²⁷ Martin Philipp Heger, Marion Cros, and Ashley Pople, eds., *A Breath of Change: Solutions for Cleaner Air in the Indo-Gangetic Plains and Himalayan Foothills* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2025), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/sar/publication/a-breath-of-change-solutions-for-cleaner-air-in-the-indo-gangetic-plains-and-himalayan-foothills>.

²⁸ Arfanuzzaman, "Transboundary Water Cooperation and Joint River Basin Management..."

²⁹ Ide and Detges, "International Water Cooperation and Environmental Peacemaking..."

³⁰ ICIMOD, "HI-WISE..."

(ICIMOD) value as a cross-border platform that encourages states to think beyond their immediate frontiers.³¹ In a region where glacier, snowpack, and glacial-lake risks are shared but politically awkward to discuss, climate dialogue can create an entry point that is simultaneously scientific, adaptive, and strategically prudent.

There is also a wider lesson from hydro-energy cooperation in the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna region. Hydroelectric cooperation in the GBM basin can generate significant benefits, but only if participating states can build consensus around governance, legitimacy, and environmental impacts.³² Cooperation is not treated as automatic, but as contingent on institution-building, credible information, and negotiated benefit-sharing. That is precisely why climate dialogue matters. It can widen the frame from narrow distributive conflict to resilience, adaptation, and long-term common risk management. In politically divided regions, such reframing does not eliminate disagreements, but it can make them more governable.

Hydro-Meteorological Cooperation and Early Warning

If river treaties and basin politics are often politically loaded, hydro-meteorological cooperation is usually more operational and thus more immediately feasible. That makes it one of the strongest candidates for functional peacebuilding in South Asia. The South Asia Hydromet Forum supports regional engagement to improve hydromet, early warning, and climate services through collaboration, capacity-building, and knowledge exchange.³³ The forum brings together national meteorological and hydrological services for technical training, data sharing, and knowledge exchange, and hosts a knowledge hub to leverage regional data for stronger

³¹ Pillai, *Abiding by Nature, Not National Borders...*

³² Mirza Sadaqat Huda and Saleem H. Ali, "Environmental Peacebuilding in South Asia: Establishing Consensus on Hydroelectric Projects in the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM) Basin," *Geoforum* 96 (2018): 160–171, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2018.08.015>.

³³ World Bank, "South Asia Hydromet Forum for Climate Resilience and Regional Cooperation for Climate Action," accessed April 8, 2026, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/sar/brief/south-asia-hydromet-forum>.

services. These are technical arrangements, but their political significance lies in their routine character. They keep professionals talking across borders in a region where political channels often narrow at exactly the wrong moments. A concrete example is the Forum's forecaster-to-forecaster engagement. The Forecasters Forum is a continuous platform through which regional hydromet professionals discuss new models and data, share expertise, and support consensus forecasting. More than 90 percent of members consider the sessions useful, especially for discussing upcoming extreme weather events.

The newer CREWS South Asia project deepens this logic by seeking to strengthen collaboration among national meteorological and hydrological services, improve hydro-meteorological and early warning services, and expand regional access to forecasting.³⁴ Such infrastructures convert episodic cooperation into a habit. In strategic terms, they reduce the risk that extreme weather events become moments of mutual accusation rather than coordinated response. In peace-building terms, they create a modest but durable professional community that is invested in continuity.

Early warning cooperation is also politically attractive because it can be framed as humanitarian prudence rather than geopolitical concession. A WMO statement on Asia's climate emphasises the urgency of turning science into action to protect livelihoods,³⁵ while the World Bank presents hydromet and early warning cooperation as part of a regional resilience agenda.³⁶ In this domain, climate dialogue works precisely because it does

³⁴ World Meteorological Organization, "Unlocking South Asia Regional Synergies for Resilience Building through Enhanced Access to Early Warning Services – CREWS South Asia Project," accessed April 8, 2026, <https://wmo.int/activities/projects/project-portfolio/unlocking-south-asia-regional-synergies-resilience-building-through-enhanced-access-early-warning>.

³⁵ World Meteorological Organization, "Statement by Prof. Celeste Saulo, WMO Secretary-General, on the Occasion of the Launch of the Regional State of the Climate in Asia 2024," June 23, 2025, <https://wmo.int/content/statement-prof-celeste-saulo-wmo-secretary-general-occasion-of-launch-of-regional-state-of-climate>.

³⁶ World Bank, "South Asia: Collaborating for Climate Resilience through Hydromet and Early Warning Systems," *World Bank Results Story*, accessed April 8, 2026,

not need to settle larger disputes. It can proceed through forecast models, standard operating procedures, training exercises, shared terminology, and the professionalisation of risk communication. That combination of technical specificity and low political visibility is one reason hydro meteorological cooperation deserves to be seen as a serious contributor to peace.

Air Pollution, Public Health, and the Case for Smog Diplomacy

Regional air pollution may be the most underappreciated opening for climate-linked peacebuilding in South Asia. The region is described as home to nine of the world's ten most polluted cities. Ambient air pollution is estimated to cause around two million premature deaths annually across the region.³⁷ Less than half the air pollution in South Asia's major cities is produced within those cities. The region consists of six major air sheds, and full air shed coordination would be far more cost-effective than fragmented policy action. The World Bank explicitly advances a regional roadmap for coordinated implementation.³⁸ These findings make air pollution one of the clearest cases in which sovereignty alone cannot deliver safety.

There is already a small but suggestive scholarly basis for treating air cooperation as a diplomatic opportunity. India-Pakistan air-quality cooperation is described as unusually promising, stressing that pollution is a shared public-health burden rather than a zero-sum strategic resource.³⁹ For Pakistan, stronger air-pollution control and climate-mitigation strategies would yield substantial health and emissions co-benefits, while current measures remain insufficient under baseline conditions. The value of such

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/results/2024/09/04/south-asia-collaborating-for-climate-resilience-through-hydromet-and-early-warning-systems>.

³⁷ World Bank, *Striving for Clean Air...*

³⁸ Heger, Cros, and Pople, *A Breath of Change...*

³⁹ Khalid Mehmood, Saifullah, Muhammad Iqbal, Zed Rengel, and Muhammad Mohsin Abrar, "Pakistan and India Collaboration to Improve Regional Air Quality Has Never Been More Promising," *Integrated Environmental Assessment and Management* 16, no. 5 (2020): 549–551, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ieam.4292>.

findings for regional peace is indirect but real.⁴⁰ Joint air monitoring, shared emissions inventories, seasonal crop-burning coordination, compatible smog advisories, and common health-risk communication can all create regularised cooperation without forcing states into premature negotiations on more symbolically explosive issues.

Air cooperation is also socially legible in a way that some other transboundary issues are not. Citizens understand smog, respiratory illness, school closures, and heat-amplified pollution events in immediate terms. That gives governments a politically defensible basis for engagement. Rather than asking rival states to make abstract concessions, smog diplomacy asks them to solve a visible and recurring welfare problem whose drivers and consequences are spatially interconnected. Climate dialogue can strengthen this opening because many of the measures required for cleaner air, such as more efficient energy use, cleaner transport, better agricultural residue management, and emissions coordination, also advance broader adaptation and mitigation goals. In that sense, clean air governance is a practical confidence-building field in which cooperation produces public goods that citizens can feel.

Electricity Cooperation and Low-Carbon Interdependence

Cross-border electricity cooperation provides a fourth pathway through which climate dialogue can contribute to more peaceful regional relations. South Asia's energy geography is marked by complementarity including hydropower potential in Nepal and Bhutan, very large demand centers in India and Bangladesh, and persistent regional gains from better interconnection. There are considerable potential economic gains from electricity trade in South Asia, but these gains are constrained by national and regional barriers.⁴¹ Political challenges, more than purely technical

⁴⁰ Kaleem Anwar Mir, Pallav Purohit, Sylvain Cail, and Seungdo Kim, "Co-Benefits of Air Pollution Control and Climate Change Mitigation Strategies in Pakistan," *Environmental Science & Policy* 133 (2022): 31–43 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2022.03.008>.

⁴¹ Anoop Singh, Tooraj Jamasb, Rabindra Nepal, and Michael Toman, "Electricity Cooperation in South Asia: Barriers to Cross-Border Trade," *Energy Policy* 120 (2018): 741–748, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2017.12.048>.

ones, have impeded pipelines and electricity grids.⁴² These studies reveal that the region often lacks incentives neither in principle nor in economics, but in political trust and institutional design.

The quantitative case for deeper electricity cooperation is strong. Unrestricted regional electricity trade could save South Asia roughly US\$226 billion in electricity supply costs over 2015-2040,⁴³ and broader cross-border trading could reduce power-sector CO2 emissions by about 8 percent in the same period.⁴⁴ Hydro-energy cooperation in South Asia has advanced most visibly in the BBIN sub-region, where water and energy security concerns are tightly connected.⁴⁵ The implication is not that energy trade automatically produces peace. It creates a material constituency for predictable relations, compatible rules, and sustained communication.

There is also an evidence that long-term cross-border energy collaboration can generate mutual security benefits. India-Bhutan hydropower cooperation rests on reciprocal benefits that extends to broader energy security.⁴⁶ The 720 MW Mangdechhu Hydroelectric Project illustrates this logic in concrete terms. Jointly inaugurated in August 2019, and handed

⁴² Mirza Sadaqat Huda and Matt McDonald, "Regional Cooperation on Energy in South Asia: Unraveling the Political Challenges in Implementing Transnational Pipelines and Electricity Grids," *Energy Policy* 98 (2016): 73–83, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2016.07.046>.

⁴³ Govinda R. Timilsina, Michael Toman, Jorge Karacsonyi, and Luca de Tena Diego, "How Much Could South Asia Benefit from Regional Electricity Cooperation and Trade?" *Policy Research Working Paper* 7341 (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1596/1813-9450-7341>.

⁴⁴ Govinda R. Timilsina and Mike Toman, "Potential Gains from Expanding Regional Electricity Trade in South Asia," *Energy Economics* 60 (2016): 6–14, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eneco.2016.08.023>.

⁴⁵ Udisha Saklani, Padmendra P. Shrestha, Aditi Mukherji, and Christopher A. Scott, "Hydro-Energy Cooperation in South Asia: Prospects for Transboundary Energy and Water Security," *Environmental Science & Policy* 114 (2020): 22–34, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2020.07.013>.

⁴⁶ Cecilia Tortajada and Udisha Saklani, "Hydropower-Based Collaboration in South Asia: The Case of India and Bhutan," *Energy Policy* 117 (2018): 316–325, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2018.02.046>.

over to Bhutan's Druk Green Power Corporation in December 2022, it had generated more than 9,500 million units of energy by the time of handover. The example shows how electricity cooperation can create repeated planning, financing, construction, transmission, and benefit-sharing routines rather than remaining a one-off diplomatic gesture. The analytical relevance of this case lies in its demonstration that asymmetrical relationships need not be purely extractive if they are structured around credible mutual benefit, stable institutions, and long-term planning. Climate dialogue can reinforce such arrangements by framing them as part of a larger regional resilience agenda rather than simply as bilateral commerce. Electricity interdependence, when fairly governed, can make stability more valuable than disruption. In a region where formal integration remains shallow, that kind of sectoral interdependence can play a disproportionate peace-supporting role.

Limits, Risks, and Conditions for Success

A serious argument for climate dialogue as a contributor to peace must confront what it cannot do. It cannot substitute for political settlement on territorial disputes, identity conflicts, or militarised rivalry. It cannot erase asymmetries of power or capacity. It cannot ensure that technically sound cooperation will be politically protected when domestic narratives reward suspicion. Climate-security literature itself advises caution. Evidence on climate-conflict links in South Asia is sparse and highly contextual.⁴⁷ Environmental peacebuilding can depoliticise conflict or reproduce inequality if poorly designed.⁴⁸ Neutral analysis should, therefore, reject the idea that climate cooperation is inherently virtuous. Its value depends on how it is structured and what it is expected to do.

⁴⁷ Pernilla Nordqvist and Florian Krampe, *Climate Change and Violent Conflict: Sparse Evidence from South Asia and South East Asia*, SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security 2018/4 (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2018), <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-09/sipriinsight1804.pdf>.

⁴⁸ Ide, "The Dark Side of Environmental Peacebuilding..."

Those caveats, however, do not undermine the central argument. They specify the conditions under which it is plausible. Climate dialogue is most likely to support peace when it is narrowly problem-driven, technically specific, and institutionally repeated. It works best when states cooperate on forecast sharing, glacier monitoring, basin data, heat-health warning, air-quality surveillance, or grid coordination before trying to attach environmental cooperation to emotionally charged sovereignty questions. It is also more durable when it is nested across scales: bilateral where necessary, sub-regional where possible, and regional where depoliticised institutions can lower the symbolic cost of engagement. Institutions such as ICIMOD can survive precisely by organising cooperation around ecological realities rather than geopolitics.⁴⁹

In the India-Pakistan context especially, climate dialogue should be framed neither as appeasement nor as an alternative to principle. It should be framed as prudent statecraft. Cooperation on flood forecasting, glacier observation, smog monitoring, heat-health preparedness, agricultural climate services, and disease-sensitive early warning benefits populations on both sides of the border regardless of the status of wider disputes. The political payoff may be modest, but modesty is the point. In rivalry prone regional settings, even limited mechanisms that preserve communication, reduce uncertainty, and generate visible public goods can have real peace-supporting value. Climate dialogue, in that sense, is not a shortcut to reconciliation. It is a disciplined way of making relations somewhat less brittle in a century of shared environmental risk.

Conclusion

Climate dialogue should not be treated in South Asia as a symbolic add-on to “real” diplomacy. It is part of real diplomacy because the material drivers of insecurity are increasingly transboundary and climate sensitive. Major international reports all point to a regional future shaped by more intense heat, greater water stress, stronger extremes, and rising adaptation burdens.

⁴⁹ Pillai, *Abiding by Nature, Not National Borders...*

Since these risks are shared, purely national responses will remain incomplete. Given that South Asia is politically fragmented, the most plausible path forward is not a single grand bargain but the gradual thickening of issue-based cooperation in domains where mutual benefit is strong, and political symbolism can be contained.

This requires a practical policy agenda. First, ICIMOD and national climate agencies should expand joint cryosphere and river-basin monitoring by creating shared glacier-risk maps, basin-level data protocols, and annual technical reviews. Success could be measured through the number of joint datasets produced, frequency of expert meetings, and the operational use of shared risk assessments in national adaptation plans. Second, WMO, CREWS, and national meteorological and hydrological services should institutionalise regional early-warning cooperation through common forecasting standards, cross-border flood and heat alerts, and regular simulation exercises. Metrics of success could include warning lead times, number of cross-border alerts issued, and participation in joint preparedness drills. Third, regional institutions or SAARC-successor platforms should establish an air shed cooperation mechanism for the Indo-Gangetic Plain and Himalayan foothills, beginning with shared emissions inventories, comparable air-quality monitoring, and seasonal smog-response coordination. Progress could be assessed through data transparency, joint public-health advisories, and reductions in severe pollution days. Fourth, national energy ministries and regulators should deepen cross-border electricity cooperation through harmonised grid codes, transparent tariff rules, and climate-resilient power-trade agreements. Success could be measured by electricity traded, grid reliability, emissions avoided, and the number of formal regulatory coordination meetings. Finally, all cooperation mechanisms should include transparency, benefit-sharing, and community consultation provisions so that climate peacebuilding does not reproduce inequality or remain confined to elite technical circles.

Climate Dialogue as Functional Peacebuilding in South Asia...

Climate cooperation will not by itself resolve the major political conflicts of South Asia. However, it can widen communication, normalise technical exchange, reduce uncertainty, create modest trust, and generate public goods that make regional relations less adversarial and more governable. In that sense, climate dialogue is best understood as functional peacebuilding: not a substitute for settlement, but a contributor to peace. In a region where strategic breakthroughs are rare and reversals are frequent, that kind of cumulative, problem-driven cooperation may be one of the most realistic forms of peace-supporting statecraft available.■

Reframing the Jammu and Kashmir Dispute

Ahmer Bilal Soofi*

Abstract

This article reframes the Jammu and Kashmir dispute as an outstanding question of International Law. Tracing the controversy to the conditional accession of 1947, and the assurances given regarding the wishes of the people of the State, the disputed status of the territory and the right of its people to self-determination still stands firmly. It was established through successive United Nations Security Council resolutions, the UN Charter, and Customary International Law. Against this framework, the article documents India's sustained failure to comply with its obligations. India has refused to demilitarise, avoided a plebiscite under UN supervision, and persistently characterised the issue as a domestic concern, a posture that culminated in the unconstitutional abrogation of Articles 370 and 35A on 5th August 2019. It situates these measures within the wider Hindutva project and demonstrates how governance practices in the Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK) breach India's obligations under core human rights treaties, including the ICCPR, CAT, CEDAW, CRC and ICERD, as well as the Fourth Geneva Convention's prohibitions on altering the demographic character of an occupied territory and on collective punishment. The article concludes

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with a set of legal and diplomatic recommendations through which Pakistan may pursue accountability, namely treating the IIOJK as an occupied territory, enacting domestic accountability legislation, invoking the genocide framework before the ICJ, engaging the ICC, and activating international human rights mechanisms. It affirms that a just and durable settlement lies in law, and not force.

Keywords: UN Charter, UNSC, Kashmir, Jammu, International Law, *Hindutva*, IIOJK, AJK.

Introduction

The Jammu and Kashmir issue has been a flashpoint between India and Pakistan for the last about 80 years.¹ It has posed great risks for regional stability² and international peace. This pertinently questions the efficacy of international institutions since it is among the most debated conflicts in the post-colonial international order. A legacy of the colonial period, it unraveled as a result of ignoring the wishes of the majority of the people of the State of Jammu & Kashmir. At the time of the British withdrawal from the Indian Subcontinent in 1947, the Indian princely States had to join either India or Pakistan.³ Acceptance of the accession of the State of Jammu and Kashmir by India in October 1947 was coupled with assurances on the part of India that the final status of the State would be

¹ Invoking Article 34 and 35 of the UN Charter, the Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, lodged a formal complaint with the United Nations Security Council on 1st January 1948.

² “How the Kashmir Dispute affects Security in South Asia”, available at <https://www.cfr.org/articles/how-kashmir-dispute-affects-security-south-asia>.

³ This was the advice tendered by Lord Mountbatten as the Governor General of India to all the rulers of the princely States. Mountbatten though admitted that the Rulers of the princely States were not bound to join either India or Pakistan, and could maintain their independent status, nevertheless ruled out dominion status for any of the princely states, and advised them to accede to one or the other of the dominions, India and Pakistan. See Jyoti Bhusan Das Gupta, ‘Jammu and Kashmir’ (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff 1968) 79.

determined as per the wishes of the people of the State.⁴ The commitment was later carried out periodically in a series of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolutions,⁵ consequently internationalising the dispute.⁶

Many resolutions by the UNSC on this issue explicitly frame Jammu and Kashmir as a disputed region and reiterate the significance of a free and impartial plebiscite under the UN auspices.⁷ Hence, the factual foundation of this dispute has been reflected in these resolutions along with the principle for the resolution of the matter, i.e. right to self-determination of the people of Jammu and Kashmir as encapsulated in Article 1(2) of the United Nations (UN) Charter,⁸ and Customary International Law.⁹ Pakistan heavily relies on this framework and has repeatedly highlighted that by invoking the fact that right to self-determination is the only viable solution.¹⁰

⁴ Mohan Krishen Teng, Ram Krishen Kaul Bhat and Santosh Kaul, 'Kashmir Legal Documents' (Reply from Lord Mountbatten to Maharajah Sir Hari Singh) (np.: Light and Life Publishers 2006) 230.

⁵ "UN Documents for Jammu and Kashmir: Security Council Resolutions," Security Council Report, accessed April 8, 2026, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un_documents_type/security-council-resolutions/?ctype=Jammu%20and%20Kashmir&cbtype=jammu-and-kashmir.

⁶ Article 2 (7) of the UN Charter states: 'Nothing contained in the present Charter shall authorize the United Nations to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state or shall require the Members to submit such matters to settlement under the present Charter'.

⁷ For example Resolution no. 122/1957 dated 24 January 1957, begins with the statement: '*Having heard statements from representatives of the Governments of India and Pakistan concerning the dispute over the State of Jammu and Kashmir.*' It is further stated in the same Resolution: '*the final disposition of the State of Jammu and Kashmir will be made in accordance with the will of the people expressed through the democratic method of a free and impartial plebiscite conducted under the auspices of the United Nations*'.

⁸ Which lays down that: '*Purposes of the United Nations are to develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace.*'

⁹ Legal Consequences of the Separation of the Chagos Archipelago from Mauritius in 1965, Advisory Opinion, I.C.J. Reports 2019, p. 95, Pr # 155. The ICJ decision throws light on the customary international law status of the right to self-determination. An electronic copy of the opinion is available at < <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/169/169-20190225-ADV-01-00-EN.pdf>>.

¹⁰ "Kashmir at the UN," Permanent Mission of Pakistan to the United Nations, accessed April 9, 2026, <https://pakun.org/kashmir-at-the-un>.

Compliance by India with the UNSC resolutions, however, has been flouted when it comes to the Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK). This is evident from India's dogged refusal to demilitarise the region and introduce a stricter administrative and military oversight.¹¹ Such conduct by India reflects a significant gap between the legal framework and ground realities. Further exacerbating this gap are governance practices undertaken in the IIOJK, including draconian legal regimes and gross human rights violations. India reframes the issue as an internal matter.¹² This is anomalous in the presence of the binding UNSC resolutions. They simply frame it as an issue of International Law. Organisations like the Human Rights Watch¹³ and Amnesty International,¹⁴ have further highlighted the gravity of the issue and forced the world to realise that this territorial dispute morphed into a human rights tragedy long ago.

The greatest oppression on the people of the IIOJK was committed on 5th August 2019, when India unconstitutionally abrogated Article 370 and 35A of the Indian Constitution without obtaining the prior acceptance of the legislative assembly of the IIOJK as required under the Indian Constitution. Thus, the only shield protecting the people of the IIOJK from a negative demographic shift was taken away by stripping the people off their autonomy. Dispute over territorial sovereignty and violation of human rights has now been transformed into a movement aimed at diluting the Muslim

¹¹ Zamir Ahmed Awan, "The Kashmir Dispute: A Forgotten Promise of Self-Determination," *Modern Diplomacy*, February 4, 2025, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2025/02/04/the-kashmir-dispute-a-forgotten-promise-of-self-determination/>.

¹² 'Kashmir India's internal matter, others should refrain from commenting': India responds to EU-Pakistan statement' available at < <https://www.india.com/news/india/kashmir-indias-internal-matter-others-should-refrain-from-commenting-india-responds-to-eu-pakistan-statement-european-union-kaja-kallas-islamabad-shehbaz-sharif-asim-munir-8434093/>>.

¹³ "India: Repression Persists in Jammu and Kashmir," Human Rights Watch, July 31, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/07/31/india-repression-persists-jammu-and-kashmir>.

¹⁴ Amnesty International, *India: "We are Being Punished By The Law" – Three Years of Abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu & Kashmir*, Index no. ASA 20/5959/2022 (September 2, 2022), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa20/5959/2022/en/>.

majority of the region.¹⁵ This step exposed India's blatant disregard for International Law, posing serious threats to international as well as regional stability.

The Indian machinations are part of a much bigger ideological and hegemonic agenda. The increasing prominence of *Hindutva* ideology¹⁶ has influenced the Indian domestic policy as well as the IIOJK policy. Rooted in the writings of V.D. Savarkar¹⁷ and advanced through organisations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)¹⁸ and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP),¹⁹ *Hindutva* promotes a majoritarian concept of the Indian national identity.²⁰ Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the State has passed various laws that further the *Hindutva* agenda in the IIOJK. The change in the citizenship, domicile, land, civil service, and policing laws have marginalised the IIOJK people, favoured non-local settlers,²¹ and

¹⁵ Maham Naweed and Iqra Bano Sohail, "Indian Steps of August 5, 2019, under International Law," in *The Kashmir Question in a Changing World – Beyond August 2019* (Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, [2025]).

¹⁶ *Hindutva* is a political ideology that seeks to define Indian culture and identity primarily through the lens of Hindu values.

¹⁷ Savarkar's book '*Hindutva*' written in 1920 is available online at <https://archive.org/details/ginz_hindutva-by-v.-d.-savarkar-1923-bombay-veer-savarkar-prakashan>.

¹⁸ RSS was founded in 1925 is an Indian right wing *Hindutva* volunteer paramilitary organisation.

¹⁹ The origins of BJP lie in the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, which was founded in 1951 by the Indian politician Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, after he left the Hindu Mahasabha to form a party as the political wing of the RSS.

²⁰ Farooq, Muhammad. "The Ideological Roots of India's Political Shift: RSS, *Hindutva*, and Nationalism." *Hilal Magazine*, February 2025. <https://www.hilal.gov.pk/view-article.php?i=9720>.

²¹ 'Clear threat: Kashmiris on India top court upholding removal of autonomy: *For the residents, fears of demographic change triggered by Modi government's 2019 move are slowly becoming a reality*', available at <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/12/clear-threat-kashmiris-on-india-top-court-upholding-removal-of-autonomy>>.

consolidated central control.²² This is aimed at a “religio-cultural hegemony of the Hindu values” in India.²³

These sinister developments pose existential threats to the rights of the IIOJK people and also to the integrity of the principles of International Law, especially the fundamental principles of self-determination and the prohibition on the acquisition of territory through force.²⁴ The Jammu and Kashmir dispute, therefore, continues to be a combustible international legal problem. It is crucial for Pakistan to keep highlighting the Indian violations of the UNSC resolutions and the deteriorating Human Rights situation in the IIOJK.

International Law Violations

United Nations Security Council Resolutions

The UNSC has adopted numerous resolutions pertaining to the Jammu and Kashmir dispute.²⁵ The resolutions repeatedly emphasise the disputed status of the territory and the importance of the right to self-determination to be determined by way of a plebiscite under the UN auspices. To fully appreciate the scope of the violations of these resolutions made by India, it is necessary to examine the key resolutions individually:

²² Iqra Bano Sohail, “Hindutva in Kashmir: The Post-Article 370 Legal Framework,” *IPRI Policy Paper* (Islamabad Policy Research Institute, 2026) <https://ipripak.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/HINDUTVA-IN-KASHMIR-THE-POST-ARTICLE-370-LEGAL-FRAMEWORK-for-print.pdf>.

²³ Dr. Raashid Wali Janjua, “Godse’s India,” *The News International*, May 17, 2022, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/958345-godse-s-india>.

²⁴ In the 2024 Advisory Opinion on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, the ICJ held that Israel’s continued presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (including East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza) is unlawful. The Court ruled that prolonged occupation, settlement expansion, and infrastructure construction have resulted in *de facto* annexation, violating the fundamental prohibition on acquiring territory by force. An electronic copy of the opinion is available at <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/186/186-20240719-jud-01-00-en.pdf>.

²⁵ “UN Documents for Jammu and Kashmir: Security Council Resolutions,” Security Council Report, accessed April 8, 2026, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un_documents_type/security-council-resolutions/?ctype=Jammu%20and%20Kashmir&cbtype=jammu-and-kashmir.

Resolution 39 (1948)²⁶

The UNSC Resolution 39 (1948) created the United Nations Commission of India and Pakistan (the UNCIP) to investigate and mediate the conflict, thus confirming the international nature of the dispute. India has repeatedly framed the issue as an “internal matter” and on this score has refused to engage meaningfully in an international mediation.²⁷

Resolution 47 (1948)²⁸

The UNSC Resolution 47 (1948) established the foundational plan to resolve the Jammu and Kashmir dispute. It included a programme for ceasefire between India and Pakistan, demilitarisation of the State of Jammu and Kashmir, and holding a free and fair plebiscite under the UN supervision. On the contrary, India has gradually intensified military and administrative control over the region,²⁹ which directly contravenes the spirit of the plan and the resolution.

Resolution 51 (1948)³⁰

This UNSC Resolution reasserted the role of the UNCIP and highlighted the significance of the demilitarisation before moving towards a plebiscite. The use of draconian security measures to repress political expressions,³¹ and expanding military control by India from time to time violated the resolution.

²⁶ United Nations Security Council, Resolution 39 (1948), S/RES/39 (1948), January 20, 1948.

²⁷ Hamza Rehman, Tayba Anwar, and Rizwan Haider, “Abrogation of Article 370: Impacts on India Pakistan Relations,” *Journal of Development and Social Sciences* 6, no. 1 (2025).

²⁸ United Nations Security Council, Resolution 47 (1948), S/RES/47 (1948), April 21, 1948.

²⁹ United Nations Security Council, Resolution 39 (1948), S/RES/39 (1948), January 20, 1948.

³⁰ United Nations Security Council, Resolution 51 (1948), S/RES/51 (1948), June 3, 1948.

³¹ Fahad Shah, “What It’s Like Inside Kashmir When All Communication With the Outside World Is Cut Off,” *Time*, August 16, 2019.

Resolution 80 (1950)³²

The UNSC Resolution 80 (1950) reiterated the need for a plebiscite and called for progressive troop reductions by both the parties. The facts that India did not take any meaningful step to cut down its military presence and subsequently annexed the IIOJK as a Union administrative territory have effectively spoiled the circumstances of a fair plebiscite.³³

Resolution 91 (1951)³⁴

The UNSC Resolution 91 (1951) highlighted that any decision made by the so-called ‘Jammu and Kashmir Constituent Assembly’ pertaining to the final status of the territory would be inconsequential.³⁵ The position of India, which is based on the erroneous framing of the issue as a matter internal to the Indian jurisdiction and, therefore, governed by the internal constitutional processes,³⁶ is in direct opposition to this resolution.

Resolution 96 (1951)³⁷

This UNSC Resolution highlights the importance of a free and impartial plebiscite once again. The governance practices in India such as limitations

³² United Nations Security Council, Resolution 80 (1950), S/RES/80 (1950), March 14, 1950.

³³ United Nations Security Council, Resolution 39 (1948), S/RES/39 (1948), January 20, 1948.

³⁴ United Nations Security Council, Resolution 91 (1951), S/RES/91 (1951), March 30, 1951.

³⁵ Resolution 91/1951 inter alia stated: *"Observing that All Jammu and Kashmir National Conference adopted a resolution recommending the convening of a Constituent Assembly for the purpose of determining the "future shape and affiliations of the State of Jammu and Kashmir"; observing further from statements of responsible authorities that action is proposed to convene such a Constituent Assembly and that the area from which such a Constituent Assembly would be elected is only a part of the whole territory of Jammu and Kashmir". It was later declared in the resolution that: [UNSC affirms] that the convening of a Constituent Assembly as recommended by the General Council of the "All Jammu and Kashmir National Conference" and any action that Assembly might attempt to take to determine the future shape and affiliation of the entire State or any part thereof would not constitute a disposition of the State in accordance with the above principle [i.e. plebiscite under the UN auspices]".*

³⁶ Muhammad Shafique, "The Question of Kashmir under Article 370 and Post-370 Era: A Critical Reappraisal," *Pakistan Vision* 25, no. 2 (December 2024)

³⁷ United Nations Security Council, Resolution 96 (1951), S/RES/96 (1951), November 10, 1951.

on political participation and civil liberties³⁸ have made the possibility of a plebiscite highly unlikely.

Resolution 98 (1952)³⁹

The UNSC Resolution 98 (1952) called for the reduction of military forces to the minimum, required for maintaining law and order. The prolonged and widespread presence of the Indian military in the IIOJK, backed by draconian legal frameworks, goes beyond this threshold and contributes to a highly militarised environment, not suitable for holding a free and fair plebiscite.

Resolution 126 (1957)⁴⁰

The UNSC Resolution 126 (1957) highlighted the importance of complying with the established UN mechanisms. On ground, however, India's resistance to international monitoring, including limitations placed on the UN engagements,⁴¹ undermines efforts at oversight and de-escalation envisaged by this resolution.

Overall the Indian conduct such as militarisation, curtailment of political rights, marginalisation of the UN apparatus, and dependence on the unilateral legal and administrative practices are all evidence of a long term violation of these commitments by India. The repeated recognition of the status of the dispute by the UN and other international actors⁴² reflects that Jammu and Kashmir is an outstanding international issue that can only be resolved by the accepted principles of International Law.

³⁸ Fahad Shah, "What It's Like Inside Kashmir When All Communication With the Outside World Is Cut Off," *Time*, August 16, 2019.

³⁹ United Nations Security Council, Resolution 98 (1952), S/RES/98 (1952), December 23, 1952.

⁴⁰ United Nations Security Council, Resolution 126 (1957), S/RES/126 (1957), December 2, 1957

⁴¹ OHCHR, "UN Rights Experts Urge India to End Communications Shutdown in Kashmir," August 16, 2019.

⁴² OIC, "OIC General Secretariat Condemns Continuation of Delimitation Exercises in Indian Occupied Jammu and Kashmir," May 16, 2022.

Violation of International Human Rights Law

As mentioned earlier, despite numerous UNSC resolutions affirming the disputed status of the State of Jammu and Kashmir and the right of its people to self-determination, the Indian officials have consistently framed the issue as an “internal matter,” thereby rejecting the applicability of the International Law and external scrutiny.⁴³ India’s conduct in the IIOJK has resulted in the widespread and systematic violations of the international human rights laws,⁴⁴ as documented by the UN bodies, international NGOs, and independent observers. These violations are in direct contravention of India’s obligations under several core international treaties, with specific articles routinely breached.

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966 (ICCPR)

India is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). India signed the treaty in 1979, and ratified it in the same year. India, as a State Party to the ICCPR, is obligated to respect and ensure the civil and political rights of all persons within its territory and subject to its jurisdiction. In the IIOJK, which is under the Indian occupation has an extensive documentation of arbitrary detentions, particularly under the Jammu and Kashmir Public Safety Act 1978, constituting a violation of Article 9 of the ICCPR i.e. right to liberty and security.⁴⁵ The persistent imposition of curfews, and severe restrictions on the movement are in breach of Article 12 of the ICCPR i.e., freedom of movement.⁴⁶ The systematic suppression of media, frequent internet shutdowns, and censorship of journalists violate Article 19 of the ICCPR i.e., freedom of

⁴³ National Assembly of Pakistan. "Kashmir Issue in a Nutshell." <https://na.gov.pk/en/print.php?content.php&id=84>.

⁴⁴ Human Rights Watch. "India: Repression Persists in Jammu and Kashmir." July 31, 2024. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/07/31/india-repression-persists-jammu-and-kashmir>.

⁴⁵ “Everyone has the right to liberty and security of person. No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention. No one shall be deprived of his liberty except on such grounds and in accordance with such procedure as are established by law.”

⁴⁶ “Everyone lawfully within the territory of a State shall, within that territory, have the right to liberty of movement and freedom to choose his residence.”

expression,⁴⁷ while bans on public gatherings and the use of force against peaceful protesters contravene Article 21 of the ICCPR i.e., right of peaceful assembly.⁴⁸ Moreover, the ongoing denial of the IIOJK's right to self-determination, as enshrined in Article 1 of the ICCPR, and the documented instances of the extrajudicial killings and an excessive use of force, in violation of Article 6 of the ICCPR (right to life), further underscore India's disregard for its treaty obligations. Reports of torture and ill-treatment in detention constitute breach of Article 7 of the ICCPR i.e., prohibition of torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment.

Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment 1984 (CAT)

Although India has signed but not ratified the CAT, the prohibition of torture is a *jus cogens*⁴⁹ norm of International Law.⁵⁰ Numerous credible reports by the UN, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International have documented the use of torture and ill-treatment in detention facilities in the IIOJK, including beatings, electric shocks, and psychological abuse.⁵¹ These practices violate Article 2 and Article 16 of the CAT i.e., obligation to prevent acts of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment not amounting to torture.

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women 1979 (CEDAW)

India's obligations under the CEDAW require it to eliminate discrimination against women in all forms. In the IIOJK, women have been subjected to

⁴⁷“Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice.”

⁴⁸ “The right of peaceful assembly shall be recognized”

⁴⁹ *Jus cogens* (Latin for "compelling law") refers to a foundational, is a rule so fundamental that it binds all states and permits no exceptions or opposing agreements.

⁵⁰ Prosecutor v. Anto Furundžija, Case No. IT-95-17/1-T, Judgment, December 10, 1998, par. 144, International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, Trial Chamber II.

⁵¹ Human Rights Watch, "Kashmir: UN Reports Serious Abuses," July 10, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/10/kashmir-un-reports-serious-abuses>.

sexual violence, harassment, and intimidation by security forces, in violation of Article 2 of the CEDAW which condemns discrimination against women.⁵² The imposition of curfews and military operations have severely restricted women's access to healthcare, in contravention of Article 12 of the CEDAW which calls for the elimination of discrimination in healthcare.

Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 (CRC)

Children in the IIOJK have been disproportionately affected by the ongoing conflict and military occupation. The use of pellet guns by the Indian security forces has resulted in the permanent injuries and fatalities among children,⁵³ violating Article 6 of the CRC i.e., right to life, survival, and development. The closure of schools, military presence near educational institutions and restrictions on the movement have denied children their right to education pursuant to Article 28 of the CRC. Arbitrary detention and ill-treatment of the minors, as documented by the human rights organisations, breach Article 37 of the CRC which reiterates prohibition of torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and arbitrary detention of the children.⁵⁴

International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination 1965 (ICERD)

India's actions in the IIOJK, particularly targeting of the local Muslims through arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial killings, and the implementation of new domicile laws aimed at altering the demographic composition of the region, constitute violations of Article 2 of the ICERD (obligation to eliminate racial discrimination) and Article 5 of the ICERD (guarantee of equality before the law, including rights to security, expression, assembly, and property). Since January 1989 to September 30, 2016, a total estimated

⁵² Research Society of International Law, "Sexual Violence in Indian Occupied Kashmir," *RSIL*, 2022. <https://rsilpak.org/2022/sexual-violence-in-indian-occupied-kashmir/>.

⁵³ "Injured baby refuels India Kashmir pellet gun debate," *BBC News*, December 7, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-46368231>

⁵⁴ "Mass Blindings in Kashmir: The Horrors of Pellet Guns," *Kashmir Awareness*, <https://kashmirawareness.org/mass-blindings-in-kashmir-the-horrors-of-pellet-guns/>.

number of 94,548 IIOJK people have been killed by the Indian security forces.⁵⁵ A detailed account of the Indian atrocities from January 1989 to September 2016, as documented by the Special Committee of the Parliament on Kashmir and shared by the National Assembly of Pakistan⁵⁶ on its website is presented below:

Table 7: Indian Atrocities in IIOJK (Jan. 1989-Sep.2016)

Timeline	Description	Figures
1989-2016	Number of Kashmiris brutally tortured	200,000
1989-2016	Psychological/ Mental Health Issues	92%
	Women	55%
1989-2016	Depression patients	64%
1989-2016	Anxiety patients	100,000+
1989-2016	Kashmiris who witnessed explosions	65%
1989-2016	Damage to personal properties	39%
1989-2016	Cross-border firing	85%
1989-2016	Kashmiris frisked by Indian Armed Forces	87%
1989-2016	Sense of insecurity among Kashmiris	48%
1989-2016	Number of crackdowns witnessed by Kashmiris	99%
1989-2016	Torture and Detention	75%

Source: National Assembly of Pakistan, “Draconian Laws in Indian Occupied Kashmir”.

Violations of International Humanitarian Law

The situation in the IIOJK after the abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution raises profound concerns under International Humanitarian Law (IHL), particularly the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, which

⁵⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Young Parliamentarians Forum and Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research, “Genesis of Kashmir Dispute and Humanitarian Crisis”, (presented at Genesis of Kashmir Dispute and Humanitarian Crisis Seminar, Islamabad, October 27, 2016).

⁵⁶ National Assembly of Pakistan, “Draconian Laws in Indian Occupied Kashmir,” accessed September 1, 2020, <http://www.na.gov.pk/en/content.php?id=90>.

governs the protection of the civilians in times of an armed conflict and occupation.

Applicability of the Fourth Geneva Convention⁵⁷

IIOJK's status as a disputed territory, recognised by multiple UNSC resolutions, and the heavy presence of the Indian security forces, support the legal characterisation of India as an occupying power in the IIOJK. The Fourth Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (1949) (the *Geneva Convention*) thus applies, imposing clear obligations on India regarding the treatment of the IIOJK population.⁵⁸

Prohibition on Altering Demographic Character (Article 49 of the Geneva Convention)

Article 49 of the Geneva Convention explicitly prohibits the occupying power from deporting or transferring parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies. Since August 2019, India has issued over 350,000 domicile certificates to non-residents,⁵⁹ amended land and property laws to allow non-Kashmiris to acquire property, and removed protections for permanent residents.⁶⁰ These measures are a deliberate attempt to alter the demographic composition of the IIOJK, in flagrant violation of Article 49 of the Geneva Convention, which states:

“The Occupying Power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies.”

⁵⁷ Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War. Geneva, August 12, 1949, UN Treaty Series, vol. 75, no. 973.

⁵⁸ Imran Jan, “Kashmir and the Fourth Geneva Convention,” *The Express Tribune*, August 7, 2019, accessed June 23, 2026, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2033987/kashmir-fourth-geneva-convention>.

⁵⁹ “IIOJK: Over 350,000 domicile certificates issued to non-Kashmiris since 2019.” *Radio Pakistan*, April 9, 2025. <https://radio.gov.pk/09-04-2025/iiojk-over-350000-domicile-certificates-issued-to-non-kashmiris-since-2019>.

⁶⁰ Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, 2019.

Such actions are not only unlawful under IHL, but also undermine the right of the IIOJK people to self-determination and integrity of the plebiscite process mandated by the United Nations.

Collective Punishment, Use of Force, and Other War Crimes

India's actions in the IIOJK since August 2019 have included the imposition of prolonged curfews, communication blackouts, and severe restrictions on the movement and access to essential services. The use of pellet guns against civilians, including children, has resulted in thousands of injuries and permanent disabilities.⁶¹ These practices amount to collective punishment, which is strictly prohibited under Article 33 of the Geneva Convention.⁶² Further, Article 27 of the Geneva Convention requires that protected persons "*shall at all times be humanely treated, and shall be protected especially against all acts of violence or threats thereof and against insults and public curiosity.*" Reports of arbitrary detentions, torture, and denial of access to religious sites, such as the closure of the Jamia Masjid in Srinagar for Eid prayers,⁶³ provide clear violations of this provision. A facet of this brutality is the unlawful detention and subsequent life imprisonment of Kashmiri activist Aasiya Andrabi along with her two associates, Sofi Fehmeeda, a wheel-chair bound 36-year old and 61-year old Nahida Nasreen, both of whom were awarded 30 years in jail. These three women were convicted under the draconian Unlawful Activities Prevention Act 1967 (the UAPA) and other provisions of the Indian Penal Code 1860 (Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita since 2024).⁶⁴

⁶¹ "The right of peaceful assembly shall be recognized."

⁶² "Collective penalties and likewise all measures of intimidation or of terrorism are prohibited."

⁶³ "Authorities close Jamia Masjid in Srinagar, don't allow special prayers on Laylatul Qadr." *KMS News*, March 27, 2025. <https://kmsnews.org/kms/2025/03/27/authorities-close-jamia-masjid-in-srinagar-dont-allow-special-prayers-on-layla-tul-qadr.html>.

⁶⁴ "Three life terms for Kashmir's Aasiya Andrabi fit India's 'broader pattern'," *Al Jazeera*, April 9, 2026, accessed June 23, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/4/9/three-life-terms-for-kashmirs-aasiya-andrabi-fit-indias-broader-pattern>.

Furthermore, Article 32 of the Geneva Convention prohibits “*taking any measure of such a character as to cause the physical suffering or extermination of protected persons in their hands (including torture and other forms of brutality.)*” Documented cases of torture, extrajudicial killings, and the discovery of mass graves further illustrate the grave breaches of the Geneva Convention by the Indian forces. India is involved in committing genocide and crimes against humanity in the IIOJK, former being a specific intent crime whilst latter is one of general intent. Though the jurisdiction of International Court of Justice (ICJ) is often disputed between India and Pakistan, it is worth mentioning that by virtue of Article IX of the Genocide Convention 1948, the ICJ has universal and mandatory jurisdiction to try cases involving genocide. In this regard non-party states can also request investigations before the Human Rights Council and International Criminal Court (ICC).

Recommendations

Frame the IIOJK as Occupied Territory

Pakistan should insist that the Indian actions of 5th August 2019, be treated under the International Law of Occupation. Use of force to annex or amend the status of an occupied territory is prohibited in International Law. India’s abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution amounts to an attempted annexation of the IIOJK.

Article 47 of the Geneva Convention expressly forbids an occupying power from changing the institutions or laws of the occupied territory by annexation. By publicly declaring the IIOJK as an occupied territory, Pakistan can invoke India’s obligations under the Geneva Convention and The Hague Regulations,⁶⁵ as well as the UN Charter’s prohibition on the acquisition of territory by the use of force. This characterisation highlights

⁶⁵ Convention (IV) respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land and its annex: Regulations concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land, *The Hague*, 18 October 1907.

the fact that any unilateral changes are illegal and India has to comply with the occupation-specific protections for the IIOJK's people.

Enact a Domestic Accountability Law and Investigate

Pakistan should establish a legal mechanism at home to investigate war crimes and crimes against humanity in the IIOJK by India. Pakistan could enact legislation that establishes a tribunal or commission that has the mandate to collect and evaluate evidence of atrocities. The law must outline the evidentiary procedures (such as allowing video testimony by witnesses) and documentation maintenance. Building an admissible dossier of facts such as the statement of the victims, forensic reports, and intercepted communications would enable Pakistan to establish a record that is legal and authentic. This national investigation would not only show Pakistan's adherence to IHL (by pursuing accountability), but also would form the foundation of any subsequent trials or international prosecutions. Alternatively, the Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) government may introduce an "IHL Violations Investigation Tribunal for the IIOJK," which will have powers to systematically record the crimes against humanity committed by the Indian forces. The tribunal must also have the authority of mutual legal assistance, compelling responses from perpetrators (the anticipated Indian refusal to cooperate would amount to adverse inference under the principles of procedural fairness, as observed in the proceedings of the international tribunals). This would bring legal clarity and position Pakistan as a proactive guardian of accountability.

Pursue International Legal and Diplomatic Recourse

Pakistan should actively utilise international organisations to hold India accountable for its illegal actions in the IIOJK. This involves taking the IIOJK issue at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) and the UNSC, the Human Rights Council, and bodies like the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

To maintain global attention on the issue, Pakistan can urge the UN for new measures, including asking the Human Rights Council to set up an

independent investigation commission. Pakistan can put pressure on India diplomatically by positioning India as a violator of its international legal obligations, e.g. the prohibition of forceful annexation in Article 2(4) of the UN Charter. Submission of the official petitions or communications to the UN treaty bodies will be an indication that the activities of India have global legal implications. Pakistan should petition punitive measures in the global forums through resolutions, debates, and special rapporteurs to highlight India's responsibilities under International Law.

Amend the Pakistan Penal Code for Universal Jurisdiction

The present legal framework of Pakistan lacks a specific offense of the genocide and any provision for the universal jurisdiction, limiting its ability to prosecute mass atrocities such as those alleged in the IIOJK. Pakistan can amend its Penal Code 1860 to include a definition of genocide, which is consistent with the Genocide Convention 1948 and the ICC standards, including the requirement of specific intent, and criminalise related acts such as incitement, complicity, and command responsibility. The reform must also create universal jurisdiction⁶⁶ whereby Pakistani courts are able to prosecute genocidal cases regardless of where they occur. Procedural mechanisms, including rules on evidence, witness protection, and trial procedures, should also be reinforced to deal with the trial of complicated international crime, along with substantive law.

Invoke the Genocide Framework for Consideration by ICJ

The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide 1948, defines genocide as the acts whose intent is to destroy a national, ethnic, racial or religious group in whole or in part. Pakistan could present the argument that the patterns of indiscriminate killing, mass disappearance and cultural oppression of the Kashmiri Muslims fulfill these elements. Based on this, Pakistan could request the concerned UN organs to review India's conduct. Article IX of the Genocide Convention 1948 provides the possibility to refer a dispute regarding the state responsibility

⁶⁶ The penal codes of Switzerland, Germany and Italy provide jurisdictional provision to that effect—universal jurisdiction.

for genocide to the ICJ at the request of any party. India and Pakistan are both parties to the Genocide Convention 1948, and theoretically an ICJ case could be commenced, but Article IX of the Genocide Convention 1948 is subject to a reservation by India, which makes it difficult to establish compulsory jurisdiction. However, Pakistan could insist that the UNSC direct the IIOJK situation to the ICJ to give an advisory opinion. At the minimum, making a narrative of genocide brings up the seriousness of the issue: Article VIII of the Geneva Convention 1948, permits any actor to request the competent organs of the United Nations to take action against genocide. Even if an ICJ case is not immediately realised, it is important to frame the discussion in the context of genocide and crimes against humanity to emphasise the fact that gross abuses are not to be overlooked.

Consider Reciprocal Legal-Political Measures

In response to India's above-mentioned constitutional changes, Pakistan could undertake a symbolic mirror action. For example, the Pakistani parliament could amend its Constitution to state that the entire former princely state of Jammu & Kashmir is a part of Pakistan. This would appeal to the historical accession principles and the preference of the Jammu and Kashmir people as justification. Alternatively, the AJK's legal framework can be amended to officially incorporate the IIOJK into the AJK's territory. Such actions would not have immediate force under the International Law, but they could be politically and legally-symbolic. By mirroring India's step of subsuming the IIOJK into its Union structure, Pakistan would have a way to highlight the disputed nature of the territory. The aim would be to reinforce Pakistan's claim over the IIOJK and signal that the status quo cannot simply be altered by one side's decree. In doing so, Pakistan would need to emphasise that its action is based on self-determination and the UNSC Resolutions, unlike India's unilateral fiat.

Engage the International Criminal Court

Pakistan must actively report the evidence of abuses taking place in the IIOJK to the ICC Prosecutor. Under Article 15 of the Rome Statute,⁶⁷ the ICC Prosecutor may initiate investigations “on the Prosecutor’s Own Motion” if there are reasonable grounds to believe a crime within the Court’s jurisdiction has occurred. Pakistan can send documented evidence suggesting war crimes or crimes against humanity committed in the IIOJK.

Although both India and Pakistan are not members of the ICC, Pakistan might make an Article 12(3) declaration accepting ICC jurisdiction over crimes on the IIOJK soil; this was the same move made by Palestine to confer a mandate to the ICC to adjudicate upon Israeli atrocities.⁶⁸ This would empower the ICC to take action even though India is not a member. Alternatively, Pakistan may request a UN Security Council referral under Article 13 (b) of the Rome Statute.⁶⁹ This is aimed at engaging the ICC as an alternative avenue for justice and keeping international scrutiny active.

⁶⁷ Rome Statute, 2187 UNTS 90. Available online at <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/2024-05/Rome-Statute-eng.pdf>.

⁶⁸ In 2009, the Palestinian Authority government lodged a declaration under Article 12(3) of the Rome Statute allowing the International Criminal Court’s jurisdiction retrospectively for “acts committed on the territory of Palestine since July 1, 2002”. Three years later, in April 2012, the ICC Prosecutor declined the possibility for Palestine to accept the Court’s jurisdiction due to the fact that Palestine could have not been considered a State for the purposes of the Rome Statute. Thereafter on 1 January 2015, the Government of Palestine lodged another declaration under Article 12(3) of the Rome Statute, accepting the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court (ICC) over alleged crimes committed “in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, since June 13, 2014”. This time, based on the United Nations General Assembly vote held on November 29, 2012, to admit Palestine as an Observer State to the UN, the ICC Prosecutor did accept the retrospective ad hoc jurisdiction over Palestinian territory and nationals: ‘Palestine and the Rome Statute’ available at <<https://www.pgaction.org/ilhr/rome-statute/palestine.html>>.

⁶⁹ Article 13 (b) states: ‘*The Court may exercise its jurisdiction with respect to a crime referred to in article 5 in accordance with the provisions of this Statute if a situation in which one or more of such crimes appears to have been committed is referred to the Prosecutor by the Security Council acting under Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations*’. An electronic copy of the Rome Statute is available at <<https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/2024-05/Rome-Statute-eng.pdf>>.

The involvement with the ICC can demonstrate that Pakistan is demanding legal responsibility in all the relevant forums.

Utilise International Human Rights Mechanisms

Human rights organisations could be urged by Pakistan to take action. This is to include both treaty-based systems and the UN political organs. For instance, the UN Human Rights Office's 2018 report explicitly called for an independent international investigation into human rights violations in the IIOJK. Pakistan may request the Human Rights Council to implement this direction (e.g. by establishing Commission of Inquiry or Fact-Finding Mission). At the same time, Pakistan can submit reports and file complaints under numerous human rights treaties. The ICCPR enshrines the right to self-determination (Art. 1) and requires effective remedies for rights violations. Pakistan can engage the ICCPR Committee and the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights⁷⁰ with shadow reports detailing violations of the rights of the people of the IIOJK. Pakistan can also complain under the ICERD that the IIOJK Muslims are being subjected to racial/religious discrimination. In both the situations, Pakistan can point out how the Indian policies (curfews, detentions, assembly restrictions) violate the fundamental human rights. Additionally, the referral to the UN special procedures (e.g. Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion,⁷¹ Special Rapporteur on minority issues,⁷² etc.,) may help in maintaining international attention on abuses. By methodically using these human rights forums, Pakistan ensures that the IIOJK is treated as a serious human rights crisis requiring accountability, reform and resolution.

⁷⁰ The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) is a United Nations body of 18 independent human rights experts responsible for monitoring how States parties implement the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 1966.

⁷¹ The UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression is an independent expert appointed by the UN Human Rights Council to monitor, investigate, and report on global violations of free speech and press freedom.

⁷² The UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues is an independent human rights expert appointed by the United Nations Human Rights Council to promote and protect the rights of national, ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities worldwide.

Leverage Petitions by Political Entities

A registered political party in the IIOJK could file a petition in the Supreme Court of India questioning the legality of the Indian actions. In this petition, it could be argued that the abrupt dissolution of the IIOJK's autonomy violates the IIOJK people's right to self-determination and their constitutional rights. By doing so the grievances of the IIOJK would be put on record. The ICCPR obliges the states to ensure that any person whose rights are violated "shall have an effective remedy" decided by the judicial or other competent authorities. Although the petition may be dismissed in an Indian court, the mere action of suing would highlight that the IIOJK people's political rights are being violated.

Conclusion

The Jammu and Kashmir dispute continues to present a challenge for the international conscience. This is not only a conflict between the two states over a territorial dispute, but also concerns the right of the people of IIOJK to self-determination, the legality of the unilateral constitutional amendments by India, the rights of civilians under International Humanitarian Law, and the maintenance of the human rights. The UNSC resolutions on the IIOJK, and the framework of the UN Charter and humanitarian law, show that the Jammu and Kashmir dispute possesses a clear international legal character, and cannot be confined to a domestic matter or settled by unilateral constitutional and administrative measures.

India's actions after 5th August 2019, including the erosion of autonomy, the strengthening of military and administrative control, and the legal changes that allow for demographic changes, not only exacerbate the dispute, but also are a cause for concern under the International Law. At the same time, the human cost of the conflict cannot be separated from legal considerations. The restrictions on the movement, arbitrary detentions, communication shutdowns, use of force against civilians, and reported abuses against women and children demonstrate that the Jammu and Kashmir dispute is also an ongoing humanitarian crisis.

Reframing the Jammu and Kashmir Dispute

The paper argues that the way to a sustainable peace is through law, not force; accountability, not impunity; and the right of the IIOJK people to control their political future, not unilateral diplomacy. For Pakistan this means continued diplomatic, legal and institutional engagement in the international fora. Ultimately, a just resolution demands adherence to the UNSC-mandated plebiscite, demilitarisation, and cessation of the unilateral territorial changes, restoring local voices and preserving the essence of the International Law. Pakistan's steadfast efforts in this regard will not only maintain regional peace and security, but will also uphold the supremacy of the International Law over expansionist ideologies. ■

Evolution of Bangladesh Foreign Policy: Regional Perspective

*Dr Mohammad Jasim Uddin**

Abstract

This paper argues that Bangladesh's foreign policy has evolved from a post-independence survivalist approach to a pragmatic, interest-driven regionalism, fundamentally reshaping its role in South Asia. Initially focused on securing international recognition and navigating Cold War bipolarity, Bangladesh has increasingly leveraged its geopolitical position to foster economic integration and regional stability. The study demonstrates this shift through its recalibrated relationships: transforming its foundational ties with India into a comprehensive economic partnership, managing complex security and humanitarian challenges with Myanmar through strategic prudence, and pursuing a pragmatic rapprochement with Pakistan based on mutual economic interests by ignoring historical grievances. Furthermore, expanding engagements with Nepal, Bhutan, and multilateral frameworks like SAARC highlight a proactive diplomatic strategy. Ultimately, the recent 'Bangladesh First' doctrine encapsulates this maturation, asserting that Bangladesh now engages its neighbours not out of necessity, but as a confident, autonomous actor prioritising sovereign equality and shared regional prosperity.

Keywords: SAARC, India, Pakistan, Bilateral, Regional, Multilateral.

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Introduction

Bangladesh emerged as a sovereign state in 1971. It was something big in the South Asian geography, though it had to earn international legitimacy amid the Cold War politics. Foreign policy principles of Bangladesh were defined in the foundational doctrine as “Friendship to all, malice towards none.” It has been a tenet of the foreign policy ever since.¹ After the year 1971, the major foreign policy objective for Bangladesh was to gain regional prominence and build a new image that was not related to Partition politics.

Necessary to such a development has been the pursuit of achieving a regional outlook beyond traditional power equations. To a nation that is sandwiched between the two, i.e., India and the complicated topography of Myanmar, regional factors can hardly be a choice but a strategic necessity. The then foreign policy was to have recognition of the neighbouring countries and the rest of the world.² This was particularly needed considering the fact that the new nation had to seek means of getting out of the bipolar world and seek a niche in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Regionalism in the foreign policy of the country has over the decades changed its character from seeking recognition to an active involvement in the regional arrangements such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and Bay of Bengal Initiative of Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).³

¹ A. Ahsan, “Bangladesh's Foreign Policy,” *Journal of International Relations* 6, no. 1 (1999): 15-28, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45064567>.

² Delwar Hossain and Md. Shariful Islam, “The Five Decades of Making, Unmaking and Remaking of Bangladesh Foreign Policy,” *The Journal of Bangladesh and Global Affairs* 1, no. 1 (May 2022), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/361112454_The_Five_Decades_of_Making_Unmaking_and_Remaking_of_Bangladesh_Foreign_Policy.

³ “Bangladesh Foreign Policy over last fifty years,” *The Asian Age*, November 25, 2020, <https://dailyasianage.com/news/248017/bangladesh-foreign-policy-over-last-fifty-years>.

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The change in Bangladesh foreign policy could be viewed through a stronger regionalism, which opted for a more developmental approach. From a basket case to a development miracle meant that the foreign policy objectives of Bangladesh have aligned more closely with its economic aspirations. This necessitated active participation of the country in the sub-regional connectivity programmes, while eyeing two major regions, South and Southeast Asia. The regional perspective, in other words, has been the one through which the country views its security and developmental aspirations, emphasising areas of cooperation like energy, water, and counter-terrorism.

In addition, the regional orientation has enabled Bangladesh to strike a delicate balance between the relations it has with the regional powers and a level of autonomous decision-making. The emphasis on the regional recognition during the initial period established a platform on which a policy favouring multilateralism and regional collaboration was developed. The policy has especially helped in dealing with the complex bilateral relationships in the areas of maritime border conflicts and water sharing through international laws and negotiations. The fact that Bangladesh concentrates on stability within the region has enabled it to become a predictable and responsible player within the broader Indo-Pacific region.

The focus on the regional recognition during the early years was not only limited to diplomatic protocol, but also to the need to have a buffer of security as well as an economic lifeline to a country that had just come out of a violent war. Although it was a matter of national pride, the Liberation War in 1971 had left the country with a shaky economy and an urgent demand for humanitarian assistance. The formative years, thus, witnessed a foreign policy mechanism that was oriented towards making the world, and more so, the neighbours appreciate the fact that Bangladesh was a viable sovereign country committed to peace. The focus on the regional recognition of the time was, thus, a prelude to a more advanced foreign policy that would later be referred to as a 'regional engagement.' Regional engagement was particularly pertinent in the subcontinent whereby there

was a necessity to establish the ties of the nation with its neighbours in a manner that were assertive and realistic given geographical and cultural similarities.

As the country emerged from the early independence period, its foreign policy began to reveal a more sophisticated understanding of power balances within the region. The move away from the survivalist approach and towards a more active form of regionalism was clearly driven by the recognition that the country's own prosperity was inextricably linked to the stability and growth of its neighbours. This led to an increased involvement with the regional bodies such as SAARC, in which Bangladesh was instrumental. By espousing the virtues of regionalism, Bangladesh hoped to give voice to the smaller states within the region, countering the power of the larger states. The move towards regionalism has allowed Bangladesh to find its place in the complex world of the Indo-Pacific region, acting as a 'bridge' between South and Southeast Asia.

This research study explores these regional dynamics, highlighting how Bangladesh has navigated its historical legacy to build a forward-looking foreign policy that is both pragmatic and principled. The newly-elected democratic government's "Bangladesh First" foreign policy, immediately after assuming power in February 2026, shows a clear move towards a more independent approach, while maintaining good relations with every nation, particularly its neighbours.⁴ The development of this policy serves as a testament to a nation's ability to adapt to a changing world order while maintaining its original ideals of peace and friendship. This regional approach, however, is not simply a part of Bangladesh's past; it is, in fact, the way in which a nation approaches its future in a more and more interconnected world.

⁴ "'Bangladesh First' to Guide Foreign Policy: FM," *Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha*, February 18, 2026, <https://www.bssnews.net/news/362140>.

Bangladesh-India Relations

The relationship with India is regarded as one of the most important pillars of Bangladesh's foreign policy. However, the relationship has evolved over the years from a primarily strategic alignment to a comprehensive partnership characterised by economic synergy and developmental cooperation. This can be best illustrated in the economic field whereby both parties have worked to develop the geographical position to create an economic advantage. The basis of this relationship was established as early as 1972 with the signing of the first Bilateral Trade Agreement,⁵ which has been renewed to fit the economic realities of the 21st century. Similarly, the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace signed on March 19, 1972, is a pillar in Indo-Bangladesh relations, notwithstanding reservations by some circles within Bangladesh.

Over the decades, the economic relationship has been institutionalised through various regional and bilateral frameworks. The South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) agreement, signed in 2004, provided Bangladesh with the preferential trade access to the Indian markets, particularly for its ready-made garments sector.⁶ This was a crucial step in addressing the trade imbalance between the two countries. More recently, the proposal for a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) represents a significant leap forward.⁷ The CEPA aims to go beyond traditional trade in goods to include services, investment, and digital commerce, thereby creating a more integrated economic ecosystem. By reducing non-tariff barriers and streamlining customs procedures, the CEPA is expected to

⁵ Asian Confluence, "India-Bangladesh Trade Relations: Emerging Trends, Challenges and Opportunities," chap. 4, accessed March 31, 2026, <https://www.asianconfluence.org/pdf/1691901253Chapter-4.pdf>.

⁶ Deepti Maurya, "India's Trade Agreements: Past, Present & Future," *The Geostrata*, July 25, 2025, <https://www.thegeostrata.com/post/india-s-trade-agreements-past-present-future>.

⁷ Doreen Chowdhury, "Understanding the Proposed Bangladesh-India Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA)," *Bilaterals.org*, September 5, 2022, <https://www.bilaterals.org/?understanding-the-proposed>.

significantly boost bilateral trade, which has already crossed the \$15 billion mark in recent years.⁸

Connectivity is yet another important transformative factor in the Bangladesh-India relationship. The re-establishment of rail and road connectivity, as existed before 1965, and the creation of a new connectivity infrastructure have enabled Bangladesh to play an important role as a connector between the mainland and the northeastern states of India. The Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) signed in 2015, was an important achievement, as it addressed the long-pending issues related to enclaves, and paved the way for better border management and infrastructure development.⁹ Moreover, the BBIN Motor Vehicle Agreement is an example of sub-regionalism in connectivity, facilitating the easy movement of goods and people among the sub-regions. The connectivity efforts are not only about the movement of goods and people; they are also about creating an economic zone where the regions can prosper and integrate with each other.

Energy cooperation is another important area of a re-calibrated relationship. The growing need for energy in Bangladesh has been met through a highly integrated power grid with India. The high-capacity interconnection through 765 KV lines at Katihar, Parbatipur, and Bornagar is a reflection of this cooperative approach. Currently, Bangladesh is importing over 1,100 MW power from India, and this is to be increased through joint ventures in thermal and renewable energy sectors. This “energy diplomacy” is also matched through cooperative approaches to water resource management, an area that is highly sensitive and important. The Ganges Water Sharing

⁸ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “India-Bangladesh Shared Vision for Future: Enhancing Connectivity, Commerce and Collaboration for Shared Prosperity,” June 22, 2024, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/37897/IndiaBangladesh+Shared+Vision+for+Future+Enhancing+Connectivity+Commerce+and+Collaboration+for+Shared+Prosperity>.

⁹ Riya Sinha and Niara Sareen, “India’s Limited Trade Connectivity with South Asia,” Brookings Institution, May 26, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/indias-limited-trade-connectivity-with-south-asia/>.

Treaty of 1996 was a landmark agreement, and the current talks for its extension, including the Teesta River issue, reflect a commitment to address complex issues through dialogue and cooperation.

This positive cooperation between the two nations is also visible in the people-to-people contacts. Bangladesh continues to be among the preferred destinations for Indian tourists, students, and medical patients. In order to strengthen this relationship, the governments have tried to ease the process of visas, and new facilities have been set up, including the launch of the E-Medical Visas and the inauguration of the Assistant High Commission in Rangpur. By concentrating on the areas of positive cooperation, Bangladesh and India have been able to re-calibrate their relationship and transform it into a coalition that is vital to the region.

Bangladesh-Myanmar Relations

Bangladesh-Myanmar relations are an integral part of Bangladesh's foreign policy in the region, which has been influenced by a distinctive amalgamation of security, maritime, and humanitarian issues. Being the only other country sharing a border besides India, Myanmar holds an important position in Bangladesh's "Look East" policy, which can provide access to Southeast Asia and the entire ASEAN region. The relations, which were established in 1972, after the early recognition of Bangladesh's independence, have been marked by a complex history.¹⁰ Despite the fact that the relations are marred by humanitarian crises, these have shown an incredible ability to settle disputes in a peaceful manner through International Law, particularly in the maritime and security spheres.

The settlement of the maritime boundary dispute has been a landmark achievement in Bangladesh-Myanmar relations. The overlapping claims in the Bay of Bengal were a major cause of tension between the two countries, which impacted energy exploration activities in the region. In 2012, the

¹⁰ "Bangladesh-Myanmar Relations and the Rohingya Challenge: Security and Diplomatic Implications," *Global Policy Institute*, October 19, 2025, <https://gpilondon.com/publications/bangladesh-myanmar-relations>.

International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) passed a historic verdict that demarcated the maritime boundary between Bangladesh and Myanmar.¹¹ The verdict gave 111,000 square kilometers of the disputed region to Bangladesh, including a 200-mile exclusive economic zone and rights to the continental shelf. The victory was a major achievement, not only because it gave Bangladesh sovereign rights to its maritime resources, but also because it marked a milestone in resolving territorial disputes between countries in the region. Since then, both countries have enjoyed a peaceful maritime boundary, being more focused on developing the “blue economy.”

Security cooperation along this 271-kilometer border has continued to be a cornerstone in their bilateral relations. Despite the odds presented by internal conflicts in Myanmar and subsequent movements,¹² dialogue was maintained by both countries to secure and stabilise the border situation. The 2017 ratification of border demarcation activities in the northern part of the Naf River, for instance, has been a remarkable development. This cooperation was further graduated by increasing focus on fighting transnational crimes like human-trafficking and drug-trafficking.

The humanitarian side is arguably the most visible and challenging part of the relationship. The influx of over a million Rohingya refugees into Bangladesh is creating a massive humanitarian crisis¹³ that requires international and bilateral engagement. The approach taken by Bangladesh can be characterised as maintaining a balance between humanitarian empathy and pragmatic foreign policy. Although Bangladesh has been

¹¹ Jared Bissinger, “The Maritime Boundary Dispute between Bangladesh and Myanmar: Motivations, Potential Solutions, and Implications,” *Asia Policy* 10 (July 2010): 37-42, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24905004>.

¹² Akkas Ahamed, Mohammad Alam Chowdhury, and Md. Sayedur Rahman, “Bangladesh-Myanmar Border Relations: A Study of Some Geopolitical and Economic Issues,” *European Scientific Journal* 16, no. 22 (August 2020): 320–351, <https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2020.v16n22p320>.

¹³ Omar Zahid, “Bangladesh-Myanmar Relations and the Rohingya Challenge: Security and Diplomatic Implications,” *Global Policy Institute*, October 19, 2025, <https://gpilondon.com/publications/bangladesh-myanmar-relations>.

accommodating the displaced, it still drives the agenda of sustainable and dignified repatriation. This is achieved through continued dialogue with the Myanmar government and other regional and international actors. The humanitarian perspective is not only relevant to Bangladesh as a domestic crisis; it is an integral part of its foreign policy, with an emphasis on the need for regional stability and the protection of human rights.

Moreover, the potential for economic and connectivity-driven collaboration is an important dimension of the relationship. The BMT trilateral highway and the potential for direct trade through borders is characterised by regional integration. While trade flows are still low, the geographical proximity and economic requirements make this a potentially significant area for cooperation. Through this focus on security, maritime, and humanitarian issues, Bangladesh has managed its relations with Myanmar with a degree of strategic patience and diplomatic skill. The objective is to develop a stable and cooperative relationship that contributes to the regional security and prosperity in the Bay of Bengal region.

Bangladesh-Pakistan Relations

The bilateral relationship between Bangladesh and Pakistan is rooted in a shared, but deeply contested historical experience. For around twenty-five years, the territory that is today Bangladesh constituted the eastern wing of a united Pakistan, bound by the common threads of religion. That union was, however, marked by profound structural asymmetry. These political, economic and cultural grievances culminated in the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent country. On December 16, 1971, the People's Republic of Bangladesh emerged as a sovereign nation, a day enshrined as the heart of Bangladesh's national identity.

The birth of Bangladesh did not offer favourable conditions for normalised relations with Pakistan. Islamabad initially refused to recognise the new state, and a diplomatic vacuum persisted for over two years. The initial major thaw was made in February 1974, when on the occasion of the Second OIC Summit in Lahore, Pakistan formally recognised Bangladesh's

sovereignty.¹⁴ Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto subsequently visited Dhaka in June 1974, and full-fledged resident diplomatic missions were established in January 1976, institutionalising bilateral contacts for the first time.¹⁵

What followed was a relationship characterised by both highs and lows, depending on the political orientation of the successive governments in Dhaka. Relations improved under the leadership of President Ziaur Rahman (1977-1981), and then Hussain Muhammad Ershad (1982-1990), as they sought to improve Bangladesh's relations with the Islamic nations and adopt a more non-aligned stance. Both the governments' fostered people-to-people and institutional linkages, and even facilitated modest defense cooperation, including Bangladesh's first military equipment purchase from Pakistan in 1980.¹⁶ The governments of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia (1991–1996 and 2001–2006) sustained this relatively constructive orientation, with the bilateral trade gradually expanding, and diplomatic exchanges maintained with reasonable regularity.

In comparison, the dispensation of Sheikh Hasina (2009-2024) was tough towards Pakistan. The prosecution of 1971 war crimes through Bangladesh's International Crimes Tribunal generated repeated Pakistani protests, direct air links were suspended in 2012, and high-level visits became virtually impossible for over a decade.¹⁷

The political transition of August 2024, when a student-led mass uprising ended the 15-year rule of Sheikh Hasina, fundamentally altered this

¹⁴ "Pakistan Formally Recognizes Bangladesh," *Pakistan Horizon* 27, no. 2 (1974): 130; and Moonis Ahmar, "Bangladesh-Pakistan Relations: From Conflict to Cooperation," *ASF Paper* (2003).

¹⁵ Ashish Shukla, "Pakistan-Bangladesh Relations: A Hostage to History," *Himalayan and Central Asian Studies* 19, nos. 1–2 (January–June 2015).

¹⁶ "History of Bangladesh-Pakistan Bilateral Relations of Fifty Two Years," *Perspective BD*, March 4, 2024, <https://www.perspectivebd.com/article/history-of-bangladesh-pakistan-bilateral-relations-of-fifty-two-years>.

¹⁷ Mahfuz Kabir, "Bangladesh's Foreign Policy: Continuity and Change," *BIISS Journal* 35, no. 3 (July 2014).

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calculus. The interim administration under Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus signalled a clear intent to recalibrate Bangladesh's foreign policy in the spirit of pragmatic engagement rooted in shared interests rather than historical grievance.¹⁸ The resulting diplomatic momentum has been both swift and substantive.

In November 2024, a Pakistani cargo vessel docked at Chittagong Port for the first time in decades, restoring direct maritime trade links.¹⁹ On the margins of the D-8 Summit in Cairo in December 2024, Chief Adviser Dr Muhammad Yunus and Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif held bilateral consultations, underscoring mutual intent at the highest levels.²⁰ They also held a meeting at the sidelines of the UNGA in September 2025, where Sharif invited Yunus to visit Pakistan.²¹

The most consequential milestone came in August 2025, when Pakistan's Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar visited Dhaka, which was the first high-profile interaction in thirteen years. The visit yielded six agreements and memoranda of understanding, spanning visa exemptions for the diplomatic passport holders, an accord on cultural exchange, Foreign Services Academy cooperation, a joint working group on trade and investment, a MoU between BISS and the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI), and a media cooperation agreement.²² The 9th Joint Economic Commission, convened in October 2025, which was the first in 20 years, further

¹⁸ "Bangladesh's Post-Hasina Foreign Policy Reset," *The Diplomat*, August 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/08/bangladeshs-post-hasina-foreign-policy-reset/>.

¹⁹ "Cargo Ship Sails Directly from Pakistan to Bangladesh for First Time in 53 Years," *DD News*, November 25, 2024, <https://ddnews.gov.in/en/cargo-ship-sails-directly-from-pakistan-to-bangladesh-for-first-time-in-53-years/>.

²⁰ "Dr Yunus Urges Pakistan to Resolve 1971 Issues for Stronger Ties," *Dhaka Tribune*, December 19, 2024, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/foreign-affairs/368577/dr-yunus-urges-pakistan-to-resolve-1971-issues-for>.

²¹ "Shehbaz Meets Yunus on UNGA Sidelines, Invites Him to Visit Pakistan," *The Daily Star*, September 25, 2015, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/shehbaz-meets-yunus-unga-sidelines-invites-him-visit-pakistan-3994271>.

²² "Six Agreements and MoUs Signed between Bangladesh and Pakistan," *Bangla Mirror News*, August 24, 2025, <https://banglamirrornews.com/2025/08/24/six-agreements-mous-signed-between-bangladesh-pakistan/>.

consolidated this momentum across agriculture, energy and pharmaceuticals sectors.²³

After a 14-year suspension, the resumption of Dhaka-Karachi flights in January 2026 by Biman Bangladesh Airlines, stands as a potent symbol of this renewed relationship.²⁴ Bilateral trade surged by 20 percent in fiscal year 2024-25, rising from approximately US\$ 712 million to US\$ 865 million.²⁵ These developments collectively reflect a maturing, interest-driven engagement.

Bangladesh's foreign policy engagements within South Asia extend well beyond its immediate neighbourhood of India and Myanmar. Its relationships with the states of Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Afghanistan have evolved considerably since independence, reflecting a consistent orientation towards economic cooperation, people-to-people connectivity and solidarity among developing nations. While each bilateral relationship carries its own distinct character and developmental arc, a common thread runs through these which shows Bangladesh's aspiration to serve as a cooperative partner for shared development, consistent with its foundational foreign policy principle of "Friendship to All, Malice to None."²⁶

Nepal represents one of Bangladesh's most promising yet historically underleveraged bilateral partnerships. Nepal established diplomatic relations with Bangladesh on April 8, 1972, among the earliest nations to

²³ "Bangladesh, Pakistan Agree to Strengthen Cooperation in Key Sectors," *New Age*, October 27, 2025, <https://www.newagebd.net/post/foreign%20affairs/280328/>.

²⁴ "Bangladesh, Pakistan Resume Direct Flights after 14-Year Hiatus," Anadolu Agency, January 29, 2026, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/bangladesh-pakistan-resume-direct-flights-after-14-year-hiatus/3814701>.

²⁵ "Bangladesh-Pakistan Relations: Reassessing the Past, Reimagining the Future," *The Daily Star*, August 24, 2025, <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/views/news/bangladesh-pakistan-relations-reassessing-the-past-reimagining-the-future-3969346>.

²⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, "Foreign Policy Framework," <https://www.mofa.gov.bd>.

recognise its independence.²⁷ In April 1976, the two countries signed foundational agreements on trade, transit and civil aviation, granting Nepal access to six points of entry through Bangladeshi territory. This was an early recognition of Bangladesh's potential as a transit corridor for landlocked neighbours.²⁸ Despite this promising foundation, the relationship remained modest in scope for several decades, constrained by limited direct connectivity and the structural dependence of both countries on the Indian transit routes.

It is in recent years that the partnership has gained genuine momentum. The landmark trilateral power trade agreement of October 2, 2024, enabling 40 megawatts of Nepali hydroelectricity to reach Bangladesh via the Indian grid, represents a qualitative leap in bilateral cooperation.²⁹ Both countries are simultaneously negotiating a Preferential Trade Agreement, and their most recent commerce secretary-level meeting in Kathmandu in April 2024, reaffirmed the commitment to connectivity under the BBIN Motor Vehicles Agreement framework.³⁰ Approximately 3,500 Nepalese students are currently enrolled in Bangladeshi universities, and nearly 50,000 Bangladeshi tourists visited Nepal in 2024, attesting to deepening people-to-people ties.³¹

Bhutan enjoys a distinguished place in Bangladesh's diplomatic memory. The Kingdom was the very first state in the world to recognise Bangladesh's independence, with a formal telegram dispatched by the king on December

²⁷ Embassy of Nepal, Dhaka, "Diplomatic Relations," <https://bd.nepalembassy.gov.np/pages/diplomatic-relations-16/>.

²⁸ "Nepal eyes transit access under five-decade-old agreement," *Bangladesh Pratidin*, January 12, 2026, <https://en.bd-pratidin.com/special/2026/01/12/54706>.

²⁹ "Nepal-Bangladesh Energy Trade: A New Chapter," *Indian Council of World Affairs*, November 2024, https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=11946&lid=7246.

³⁰ "Bangladesh, Nepal Stress Finalizing PTA," *Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha*, April 20, 2024, <https://www.bssnews.net/news/184731>.

³¹ "Nepal-Bangladesh Relations: From Historical Ties to New Economic Partnership," *Nepal Economic Forum*, 2025, <https://nepaleconomicforum.org/nepal-bangladesh-relations-from-historical-ties-to-new-economic-partnership/>.

16, 1971.³² Successive Bhutanese monarchs and prime ministers have since exchanged state visits to Dhaka, and the two countries have maintained consistently warm relations across all governments. The relationship underwent significant economic formalisation with the signing of Bangladesh's first-ever Preferential Trade Agreement in December 2020, which came into force in July 2022, and has already contributed to a near-doubling of bilateral trade.³³

Under the agreement, 100 Bangladeshi products enjoy duty-free access to the Bhutanese markets, while 34 Bhutanese products receive reciprocal concessions. During the visit of Bhutanese Prime Minister Dasho Tshering Tobgay to Dhaka in November 2025, both sides expressed intent to elevate the PTA into a full Free Trade Agreement. Bhutan has also expressed its interest in establishing a Special Economic Zone in Kurigram.³⁴

Sri Lanka represents a relationship with deep civilisational roots that has been gradually translated into structured modern cooperation. Both countries have been engaged in negotiations to finalise a Preferential Trade Agreement, building upon MoUs across youth development, agriculture, vocational qualifications, and healthcare that were signed during the 2021 bilateral summit.³⁵ In June 2025, a high-level business delegation from the Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry visited Colombo, engaging with over 150 Sri Lankan companies across trade and investment forums, with

³² Center for Bangladesh Genocide Research, "Recognition of Bangladesh in 1971: Accountability to History," CBGR Historical Milestones, archived March 22, 2017, accessed March 2026, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170322203048/http://www.cbgr1971.org/history/historical-milestones/77-recognition-of-bangladesh>.

³³ "Bangladesh-Bhutan Preferential Trade Agreement to Undergo Review," *South Asia Sub-regional Economic Cooperation* 2025, accessed June 11, 2026, <https://www.sasec.asia/index.php?page=news&nid=1663&url=ban-bhu-pta-review>.

³⁴ "Bhutan Wants to Transform PTA with Bangladesh into FTA," *The Daily Star*, November 22, 2025, <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/news/bhutan-wants-transform-pta-bangladesh-fta-4040836>.

³⁵ "Bangladesh, Sri Lanka Reiterate Aim to Boost Trade and Connectivity," *South Asia Sub-regional Economic Cooperation*, March 2021, accessed June 11, 2026, <https://www.sasec.asia/index.php?page=news&nid=1246&url=ban-sri-bangladesh50>.

pharmaceuticals, textiles, and healthcare identified as priority sectors for expansion.³⁶

The Maldives although a small country in terms of territory, is strategically relevant to Bangladesh as another Indian Ocean small state with similar problems of climate vulnerability and LDC graduation. The half-a-million population on the island is composed of Bangladeshi expatriates, who constitute approximately 20% of Maldives population. The two governments have shown interest in enhancing cooperation, especially in the areas of healthcare and trade. Maldives is interested in learning from Bangladesh on climate adaptation and development programmes.³⁷

Afghanistan presents the most complex dimension of Bangladesh's regional outreach. Bangladesh has maintained diplomatic relations with Afghanistan across successive Afghan governments, and Bangladeshi NGOs have sustained a long-standing people-to-people and institutional presence across health, education and livelihoods realms. Most prominently, the Bangladesh Rehabilitation Assistance Committee (BRAC) has been operating in Afghanistan since 2002.³⁸ Bangladesh has extended humanitarian assistance during Afghan crises, including earthquake relief in

³⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Sri Lanka, "Sri Lanka–Bangladesh Trade Relations Continue to Reach New Heights," June 19, 2025, <https://mfa.gov.lk/en/sri-lanka-bangladesh-trade-relations-continue-to-reach-new-heights/>.

³⁷ "Maldives Keen to Recruit Healthcare Workers from Bangladesh," *Dhaka Tribune*, April 1, 2026, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/foreign-affairs/406726/maldives-keen-to-recruit-healthcare-workers-from>; "Businessmen See Great Potential in Transshipping Bangladeshi Products via Maldives: Maldivian Envoy," *The Business Standard*, April 10, 2025, <https://www.tbsnews.net/economy/businessmen-see-great-potential-transshipping-bangladeshi-products-maldives-maldivian-envoy>; and "Dhaka–Malé to Collaborate on Climate Diplomacy, Ecotourism: Saber," *Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (BSS)*, June 26, 2024, <https://www.bssnews.net/news/196855>.

³⁸ BRAC, "Afghanistan," BRAC Global Impact, <https://www.brac.net/global-impact/afghanistan/>.

2025.³⁹ It has also offered technical and vocational training in fields such as disaster management and agriculture.⁴⁰

Bangladeshi exports to Afghanistan were to the tune of US\$ 10 million in fiscal year 2023-24, with analysts pointing to considerable untapped potential in pharmaceuticals, readymade garments, and processed food.⁴¹ Bangladesh's approach remains guided by humanitarian pragmatism and support for the Afghan people's long-term economic recovery, consistent with its broader commitment to peaceful regional engagement.

Bangladesh's bilateral relationships across this diverse set of South Asian states trace an encouraging trajectory. Going from modest post-independence foundations toward increasingly structured multi-sectoral partnerships, which reflect a foreign policy that is steadily growing in ambition, confidence and regional outreach.

Bangladesh's Engagement in South Asian Multilateralism

Bangladesh's multilateral engagement in South Asia reflects both a principled commitment to regional cooperation and a pragmatic recognition that durable development requires collective action. This conviction has deepened and diversified considerably over the course of the country's five decades of independent foreign policy.

As a founding member of the SAARC, Bangladesh has historically championed the institution as the primary vehicle for the South Asian integration. The inaugural SAARC Summit was hosted by Dhaka in December 1985, underscoring Bangladesh's foundational role in shaping

³⁹ "Bangladesh Sends Emergency Aid to Afghanistan Earthquake Victims," *The Daily Star*, September 5, 2025, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/news/bangladesh-sends-emergency-aid-afghanistan-earthquake-victims-3979276>.

⁴⁰ International Labour Organization, "Bangladesh Technical Education Board (BTEB) Collaboration with ILO Bangladesh," <https://www.ilo.org/meetings-and-events/bangladesh-technical-education-board/bteb-collaboration-ilo-bangladesh-and/>.

⁴¹ "Prospect of Expanding Afghanistan-Bangladesh Trade," *Rising BD*, May 15, 2025, <https://www.risingbd.com/english/interview/news/112377>.

the region's multilateral architecture.⁴² Bangladesh consistently invested diplomatic capital in SAARC's frameworks over the subsequent decades, from the SAFTA to cultural and people-to-people cooperation mechanisms. SAARC's operational momentum has been constrained by regional political dynamics, as no summit has been held since 2014. Yet, Bangladesh continues to advocate revitalisation of SAARC, and views an inclusive all-member dialogue as indispensable for region's long-term stability.⁴³

Bangladesh's engagement with the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) has grown markedly since 1997. Bangladesh hosts the permanent BIMSTEC Secretariat in Dhaka, underscoring its centrality to the Bay of Bengal sub-region. Bangladesh also currently holds the Chairmanship for 2025-26.⁴⁴ The 6th BIMSTEC Summit in Bangkok in April 2025 produced the Bangkok Vision 2030, a Maritime Transport Cooperation Agreement, and renewed commitments to economic integration across seven priority sectors.⁴⁵

Bangladesh's multilateral footprint has expanded to encompass the BBIN sub-regional connectivity initiative, the Developing-8 (D-8) grouping, and

⁴² South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, "SAARC Charter and History," <https://www.saarc-sec.org>.

⁴³ Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha, "Dhaka, Kathmandu Hold Identical Position to Revitalizing SAARC: Envoy," *BSS*, March 20, 2026, <https://www.bssnews.net/news/264953>; and "We Aim to Be a Key Bridge between SAARC, ASEAN," *The Daily Star*, September 25, 2025, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/we-aim-be-key-bridge-between-saarc-asean-399502>.

⁴⁴ East Asia Forum, "A Reinvigorated BIMSTEC Hopes to Avoid Regional Pitfalls," May 13, 2025, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2025/05/13/a-reinvigorated-bimstec-hopes-to-avoid-regional-pitfalls/>.

⁴⁵ "At BIMSTEC's Bangkok Summit, Leaders Pledge Economic Integration Amid Global Flux," *The Diplomat*, April 7, 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/04/at-bimstecs-bangkok-summit-leaders-pledge-economic-integration-amid-global-flux/>.

the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).⁴⁶ This expanding portfolio of memberships reflects an evolutionary foreign policy logic that as Bangladesh's economic weight and regional confidence have grown, so too has its investment in the institutional architecture.

Conclusion

The foreign policy of Bangladesh, seen through the regional prism, shows a country that is actively in the process of transition. It is no longer a country that is bound to the post-independence consolidation. It is now a state that is more diversified, assertive, and driven by interests in its interaction with the neighbourhood. "Friendship to All, Malice to None" has been the guiding ethos of successive governments, with only the scale and scope altering in different eras.

Bangladesh's foreign policy evolution culminates in a nuanced regional engagement, prominently featuring its indispensable ties with India and a pragmatic rapprochement with Pakistan. While robust economic and connectivity initiatives solidify the cornerstone relationship with India, the growing trade and institutional accords with Pakistan signify a strategic move for mutual benefit. Concurrently, enhanced energy cooperation and preferential trade with Nepal and Bhutan underscore Bangladesh's ambition as a regional transit hub. Furthermore, diplomatic engagements with Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Afghanistan, though varied in scope, collectively reflect a pan-regional vision. This comprehensive approach, leveraging multilateral platforms like BIMSTEC and SAARC, positions Bangladesh's regional architecture as a strategic asset, fostering stability and shared prosperity across South Asia.

This evolution has recently gained a new doctrinal anchor with the "Bangladesh First" foreign policy, declared by the BNP government in

⁴⁶ "Deepening Investment in Multilateralism: A Strategic Imperative for Bangladesh," *The Business Standard*, August 5, 2025, <https://www.tbsnews.net/thoughts/deepening-investment-multilateralism-strategic-imperative-bangladesh-1205086>.

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February 2026. Articulated by Foreign Minister Dr. Khalilur Rahman, this doctrine rests on five pillars: sovereign equality, respect for independence, non-intervention in domestic matters, maintenance of national honour, and mutual benefit. This framework, echoing the assertive yet unaligned internationalism of President Ziaur Rahman's era does not signify isolationism but a rebalanced involvement where all bilateral and multilateral relations are meticulously assessed through the lens of national interest and equitable partnership.⁴⁷

Overall, this trend points to a more active, self-confident, and intentionally invested Bangladesh in the overall wellbeing of South Asia than at any time in its independent history, poised to shape its destiny and contribute meaningfully to regional stability and prosperity.■

⁴⁷ “BNP-Led Government to Follow ‘Bangladesh First’ Doctrine, Says Foreign Minister,” *The Daily Star*, February 18, 2026, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/diplomacy/news/bangladesh-follow-ziaur-rahmans-foreign-policy-khalilur-4109316>.

From Engagement to Belonging: Students Participation to Withstand Alienation

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Abstract

In an era when universities serve both as spaces of learning and arenas of ideological contestations, understanding how social, psychological, and civic factors shape up students' belief systems has become increasingly vital. This study examines how student engagement, sense of belonging, civic participation, and democratic values interact towards reducing vulnerability to extremist ideologies at higher education institutions (HEIs). Based on survey data from 420 university students, structural equation modeling (SEM) has been employed to test a serial-parallel mediation model. The results demonstrate that the students who actively participate in campus life tend to develop stronger feelings of belonging, and have a greater sense of civic responsibility. These socialising experiences, in turn, foster deeper commitment to democratic values, ultimately decreasing susceptibility to radical thoughts. The findings emphatically highlight that inclusive, participatory, and value-oriented academic environments can strengthen democratic resilience and social harmony. The study may provide strategic insights for educators and policymakers aiming to design educational frameworks that counter ideological extremism through active engagement and social inclusion.

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Keywords: HEIs, Student Engagement, Belonging, Civic Cooptation, Democratic Values, Extremism.

Introduction

Universities, in a universal sense, are perceived as the venues of academic and civic and personal engagement, and even social wherewithal within the pervasive context of growing polarisation, misinformation, and extremism.¹ The notion of student engagement, has been contested within the HEIs over the years, and has gradually become a complex and dynamic paradigm defining the learning skills along with the socio-political transformation. As the global communities struggle to address matters such as youth radicalisation, loss of civic engagement, and developmental disengagement by pupils, researchers have been eagerly identifying the corresponding dynamics to ameliorate the malaise.² The classroom cannot be viewed as a place of mere instruction anymore; rather it is a focal point underpinning the identity politics within the larger context of belonging, where the struggle can potentially harness the positive forces over and above antagonism and militancy.³

The role of education in encouraging democratic resilience is a question that has been gaining more significance among the developing nations,

¹ UNESCO. 2017. Preventing Violent Extremism through Education: A Guide for Policy-Makers. Paris: UNESCO.

² James A. Banks, "Diversity, Group Identity, and Citizenship Education in a Global Age," *Educational Researcher* 37, no. 3 (2008): 129–39, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X08317501>; Jennifer A. Fredricks, Phyllis C. Blumenfeld, and Alison H. Paris, "School Engagement: Potential of the Concept, State of the Evidence," *Review of Educational Research* 74, no. 1 (2004): 59–109, <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543074001059>; Ratna Ghosh, Winnie Y. A. Chan, Andrea Manuel, and Meihua Dilimulati, "Can Education Counter Violent Religious Extremism?" *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 23, no. 2 (2017): 117–33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/11926422.2016.1165713>.

³ C. Barber, C. H. Clark, and J. Torney-Purta, "Learning Environments and School/Classroom Climate as Supports for Civic Reasoning, Discourse, and Engagement," in *Educating for Civic Reasoning and Discourse*, ed. C. A. Lee, G. White, and D. Whitman (Washington, DC: National Academy of Education, 2021), 273–318; Bryony Hoskins and Ruth Deakin Crick, "Competences for Learning to Learn and Active Citizenship," *European Journal of Education* 45, no. 1 (2010): 121–37; Ellen A. Skinner and Michael J. Belmont, "Motivation in the Classroom," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 85, no. 4 (1993): 571–81.

particularly in Pakistan. The schooling environment in the country is understandably very diverse, as it includes both the state and the private institutions, religious *madrassas*, and technical or vocational colleges. All these strands are anchored on different philosophies, pedagogies and resources, and these equally tend to bring out extreme differences. Learning in most mainstream schools and HEIs is significantly based on the rote learning, whereas the *madrassas* have different religious curricula that might provide little exposure to civic reasoning or debate.⁴ These structural and pedagogical separations may narrow the chances of dialogue, collaboration, and interaction between students of these different streams of education, which at times increase vulnerability to ideological exclusivity. Even though the policymakers and the agencies involved in national security are increasingly focusing on the preventive nature of the instruction in curbing extremism, the current frameworks have yet to do anything to incorporate the democratic practices in the day-to-day classroom setting.⁵ Placing the current investigation in this framework can produce insights that are not only based on the realities of Pakistan but may also be applicable to other postcolonial, politically heterogeneous societies.

There are several crucial gaps in the available research on association between educational outcomes and student involvement. The corpus of current study continues to concentrate on the impact of engagement on academic success or student retention but pays little attention to its civic and socio-political imperatives and consequences. Moreover, emotional involvement, especially the feeling of belonging and upholding democratic resilience has not been studied empirically in non-Western nations. What is also lacking is the fact that there are a very few studies that combine Engagement Theory, Social Identity Theory, and Democratic Citizenship frameworks into one

⁴ Imran Ahmad, *Developing Youth Resilience to Violent Extremism through Evidence-Based Policy and Practices of Curriculum Development: The Case of Pakistan Studies* (2023); R. H. Anwar, Umer Yahya, and S. Zaki, "Values Ingrained in Pakistan's Education System," in *Worldviews and Values in Higher Education: Teaching, Learning, Curricula, and Assessment* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing, 2024), 211–24.

⁵ A. Javed, N. Elahi, and B. Nawab, "Exploring the Dynamics of Radicalization in Pakistan," *SAGE Open* 15, no. 1 (2025).

explanatory unit. The study of these fields is especially significant for nations like Pakistan, where the institutions of democracy are not that strong yet, and ideological conflicts still influence educational and civic life.⁶

This study aims at analysing students' lived experiences and attitudes towards belonging, civic involvement, democracy and extremism in the universities within the Pakistani perspective. It does not directly assess institutional policies or campus practices, but investigates, in general, students' interpretations and experiences of these social and democratic concepts, while assessing the impact of these concepts on extremist tendencies. A quantitative approach is applied here to assess structural relationships between these variables (belonging, civic involvement, democracy, and extremist tendencies) with an empirical approach to understand the role of higher education in fostering democratic orientation and social cohesion. It further unites theoretical concepts including Engagement Theory, the Social Identity Theory, and the Democratic Citizenship views into a single interpretative framework, providing a more holistic view. The model is implemented in the Pakistani context, but its logic may have potential application in other socially heterogeneous education systems faced with similar situations. In this paper, higher education offers a background that can both de-radicalise extremist discourses and promote inclusive civic identities through defining engagement as a source of ideological resilience.

Literature and Theoretical Framework

Conceptualisation of the student engagement has developed over time to emerge as more than just an academic concept encompassing aspects of behavioural, cognitive, emotional, and even civic aspects, which impact the interface students have with learning communities both in and outside the classroom.⁷ The prior work provided a solid background on terminating

⁶ Tajfel, Henri, and John C. Turner. 1979, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict." In *the Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, edited by W. G. Austin and S. Worchel, 33–47. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.

⁷ James J. Appleton, Sandra L. Christenson, and Michael J. Furlong, "Student Engagement with School: Critical Conceptual and Methodological Issues of the Construct,"

engagement, as the psychological and physical effort students put into their studies.⁸ Steered through this paradigm, a study emphasised the significance of involvement in educationally purposive activities empowering learning into personally meaningful activities.⁹

Behavioural engagement often means apparent involvement of students in academic, extracurricular, and community-based activities that help them become members of institutional, as well as civic life.¹⁰ Cognitive engagement, on the other hand, is an indicator of the intensity of learning and the extent to which the students think critically, applying learning to actual social problems. Emotional involvement describes the emotional component of learning, the way the students feel their belonging, identification, as well as personal value within their learning community.¹¹ Significantly, in more recent times, the focus on civic engagement as an important aspect has featured in political engagements, dialogue, and service-learning opportunities enabling students to put democratic ideals into practice in their daily instruction.¹² This opinion is parallel to the ideas expressed by prior work about the idea of democracy being not only taught

Psychology in the Schools 45, no. 5 (2008): 369–86, <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.20303>; Sandra L. Christenson, Amy L. Reschly, and Cathy Wylie, eds., *Handbook of Research on Student Engagement* (New York: Springer, 2012); L. Hoek, A. Munniksma, and A. B. Dijkstra, “Students’ Attitudes towards Fundamental Democratic Values,” *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice* 20, no. 2 (2025): 280–300; George D. Kuh, “What Student Affairs Professionals Need to Know about Student Engagement,” *Journal of College Student Development* 50, no. 6 (2009): 683–706; L. Leach, “Enhancing Student Engagement in One Institution,” *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 40, no. 1 (2016): 23–47.

⁸ Alexander W. Astin, “Student Involvement: A Developmental Theory for Higher Education,” *Journal of College Student Personnel* 25, no. 4 (1984): 297–308.

⁹ Jennifer A. Fredricks, Phyllis C. Blumenfeld, and Alison H. Paris, “School Engagement: Potential of the Concept, State of the Evidence,” *Review of Educational Research* 74, no. 1 (2004): 59–109.

¹⁰ James E. Groccia, “What Is Student Engagement?” *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 2018, no. 154 (2018): 11–20.

¹¹ Karen F. Osterman, “Students’ Need for Belonging in the School Community,” *Review of Educational Research* 70, no. 3 (2000): 323–67.

¹² Nick Zepke, “Student Engagement in Neo-Liberal Times,” *Higher Education Research & Development* 37, no. 2 (2018): 433–46.

but realised in the educational spaces.¹³ The active involvement of students encompasses aspects of class participation, faculty and peer interaction, student societies, campus events as well as collaborative and other activities. Each type of engagement seems to have its defense mechanisms in minimising the chances of radicalisation, demonstrated by several empirical studies. The young students who perceive themselves to be excluded or having no sense of belonging in their social or educational setting are usually the most susceptible to the extremist forces.¹⁴ Behavioural engagement tends to divert student's energy to the positive community activities that help socialise the societal clusters.¹⁵ Cognitive engagement, in its turn, cultivates the practices of critical inquiry and media literacy, preparing learners with the critical and analytical skills to challenge misinformation and extremist narratives.¹⁶ Emotional connection allows developing a sense of belonging and recognition to institutions so that the students can withstand alienation that otherwise extremist movements tend to take advantage of.¹⁷ The civic engagement also strengthens the legitimacy of political participation and social advocacy, besides directing the voices of students into democratic spaces, instead of isolating ideologies and individuals.¹⁸ The example of the European programmes like the Aarhus Model in Denmark and the Education for Democratic Citizenship in the Netherlands also shows how an integrated engagement approach can instill democratic values and reduce the risk of extremism by several folds.¹⁹

¹³ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916).

¹⁴ Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan, eds., *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement* (London: Routledge, 2009).

¹⁵ Eric Gordon, Jessica Baldwin-Philippi, and Martina Balestra, "Why We Engage: How Theories of Human Behavior Contribute to Our Understanding of Civic Engagement in a Digital Era," *Berkman Center Research Publication* 21 (2013).

¹⁶ Julian McDougall, "Media Literacy versus Fake News: Critical Thinking, Resilience and Civic Engagement," *Media Studies* 10, no. 19 (2019): 29–45.

¹⁷ Antonio Ventriglio and Dinesh Bhugra, "Identity, Alienation, and Violent Radicalization," in *Evil, Terrorism and Psychiatry* (2019), 17–29.

¹⁸ A. Benevento, "The Necessity to Recognize Processes of Radicalization from a Socio-Cultural Perspective," *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science* 57, no. 4 (2023): 1418–34, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12124-021-09620-0>.

¹⁹ G. Bronsard, A. Cherney, and F. Vermeulen, "Editorial: Radicalization among Adolescents," *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 13 (2022),

The latest developments in the education technology have expanded the possibilities of a meaningful interface with the students. Digital leadership platforms and AI-powered personalised learning systems are the tools that are currently used to promote participation, collaboration, and civic engagement.²⁰ Similarly, strategies including “Public Sphere Pedagogy” that relates classroom education to the civic discussion aspects in the real world, can enhance the sense of civil dialogue and informed debate instead of volatile bickering. Even with such developments, there are still a number of critical gaps in the available literature. To a large extent, the existing studies in settings like Pakistani HEIs, continue to focus on academic performance paying little attention to the civic and socio-political aspects of the activities.²¹ Importance of the emotional involvement, especially quest for identity, is also not fully investigated in the non-Western and post-colonial contexts, where identity, exclusion, and political polarisation tend to overlap with the pathways to radicalisation.²² It is particularly this lacuna that is observable in the studies conducted in the developing nations, where the educational system is dedicated to very specific cultural and institutional brackets.

In this study, belonging is defined as students' sense of acceptance, inclusion and emotional connection in the university context. Civic engagement refers to the engagement in the activities that relate to social, community and civic involvement that foster collective responsibility. Engagement is defined as an active involvement of the students in the academic activities, social and

<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2022.917557>; P. Mutsaers, S. Demir, and M. van Meijeren, Preventing Radicalization and Polarization (Platform JEP, 2019).

²⁰ Rasha Khamis, “AI-Powered Learning Experience Platforms: Investigating Personalized Learning in the Workplace” (2024), accessed on May 31, 2026, chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://gupea.ub.gu.se/server/api/core/bitstreams/8fa3ef95-036a-432b-adbe-0ccfa29318ad/content.

²¹ Adaobiagu Obiagu and Sandra Ajaps, “Civic Engagement in Nigeria: A New Sociopolitical Development Perspective,” *International Journal of Social Sciences and Educational Studies* 9, no. 1 (2022): 128–147.

²² Carl H. D. Steinmetz, “Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism with Roots in (Neo) Colonization,” *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal* 11, no. 7 (2024).

institutional life at the institutions. Extremist thinking is defined as attitudes that underlay intolerance, exclusion, anti-democratic and radical behaviours. Adapted items from previously known scales were used to measure these constructs.

Social Identity Theory holds that belonging to social groupings gives people a feeling of identity and self-worth. According to the idea, social categorisation frequently produces divisions between in-groups and out-groups, which can result in partiality for one's own group and exclusion of others. Cultural, ethnic, linguistic, regional, ideological, or organisational affiliations can all influence a student's identity in an academic context. Therefore, depending on the characteristics of the institutional culture and intergroup connections, social identity may serve as both an integrating and a dividing factor.

Such difficulties can be observed especially in Pakistan, where educational inequalities have existed since time immemorial, and where a strong emphasis on memorisation has contributed to an increasing sense of alienation among the youth. The lack of civic and peace-related education also makes people more vulnerable to extremist discourses.²³ Studies indicate that the curriculum frequently reinforces social and cultural prejudices, and teacher preparation programmes seldom include elements of conflict resolution or peace building.²⁴ Additionally, the slow decline of humanities and social science education has made it harder for the people to think critically and talk about the dialogue, tolerance and democracy. The National Counter-Terrorism Authority recognises the strategic importance of education in counter-extremism initiatives; nonetheless, the corresponding policy frameworks have yet to be implemented as comprehensive strategies in schools and universities.

²³ Ahmed, Zahid Shahab, and Rizwana Shahzad, "The role of peace education in countering violent extremism in Pakistan: An assessment of non-governmental efforts." *Conflict, Security & Development* 21, no. 3 (2021): 199-222.

²⁴ Mazibuko, Francina Lethiwe, and Lucia Zithobile Ngidi. "Implementing Multicultural Education to Foster Peace in Schools." *Eurasian Journal of Social Sciences* 12, no. 1 (2024): 1-12.

The method of Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), which permits an appropriate assessment of the directional connections among the important variables of a research, is used to examine the integrated framework presented in this paper.²⁵ The study looks at several facets of involvement, which, when combined, provide a sense of belonging, strengthen democracy, and raise resistance against the inclinations for extreme behaviour. It is based on the research conducted on 420 university students. Hence, the study may both add to the corpus of theory and provide useful advice to the educators and the policymakers in Pakistan, and other postcolonial countries, who wish to enhance the culture of dialogue and democracy in the higher education. The following hypotheses, which are schematically shown in Figure 1, form the basis of the proposed investigation:

- H1: The increase in the rates of student engagement will improve the sense of belonging among them.
- H2: Involvement of the students is expected to contribute to a higher level of civic activity and community-based projects.
- H3: More involved students are also more likely to support and exercise democratic values.
- H4: It is expected that a greater sense of belonging would encourage internalisation of the democratic values among students.
- H5: Active civic participation will enhance adherence to the democratic norms and values.
- H6: Student vulnerability to extremism is expected to be decreased by the ratification of democratic values.
- H7: It implies that a sense of belonging, civic participation, and democratic ideals will help students feel less likely to become extremists.

²⁵ Kline, Rex B, Principles and practice of structural equation modeling. Guilford publications, 2023.

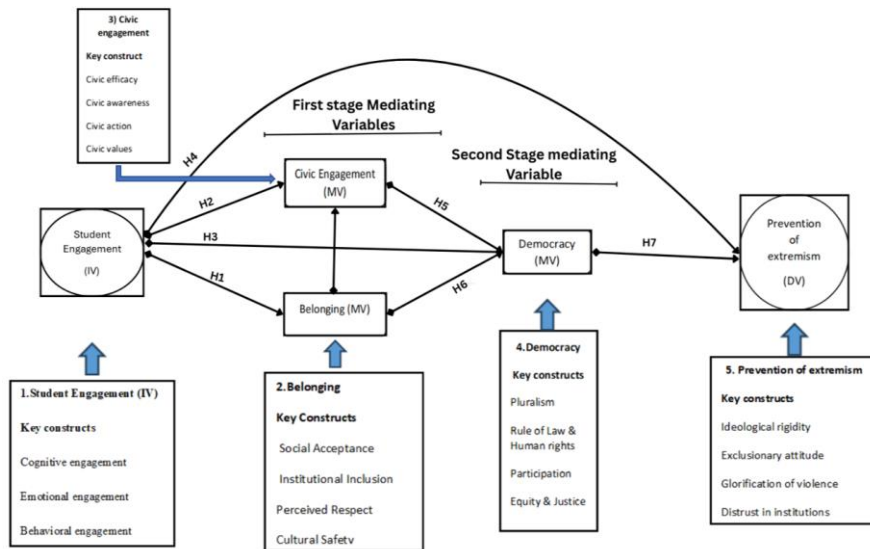


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

The quantitative-based, cross-sectional research design that builds on the positivist paradigm in gaining a more appropriate insight into the correlation between student engagement, belonging, civic involvement, democratic ideals, and resistance to the extremist inclinations could be the proposed application process since the technique makes it possible to examine these existing relationships simultaneously in nature, which aligns with the models suggested in the research of educational and civic engagement.²⁶ With the help of the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), the paper constructs and tests a serial-parallel mediating model, which is a Democratic Citizenship Education, Social Identity Theory, Engagement Theory, and the push-pull view of radicalisation. This model examines the relationship between the various degrees of the

²⁶ Joseph F. Hair, Jeffrey J. Risher, Marko Sarstedt, and Christian M. Ringle, "When to Use and How to Report the Results of PLS-SEM," *European Business Review* 31, no. 1 (2019): 2–24.

participation and sense of belonging, civic engagement and support of the democratic ideals among students, and the impact of the center of mediation processes among the students in rejecting radical orientations. In this instance, the dependent outcome is extreme sentiments; the independent construct is student participation; and the mediating factors are civic engagement, sense of belonging, and the democratic principles.

In the sampling method of enquiry, representatives of a wide range of academic fields, such as engineering, medicine, literature, public policy, international relations, political science, psychology, Pakistan studies, information technology, law, business administration, media studies, and library and management sciences of the public sector universities in Islamabad were used. The concentration on the public universities only served to capture the diversity and the statistical consistency, and enough space to undertake an analysis. These metropolitan universities have students of diverse socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds, providing a microenvironment of the national higher education setting. A basic random sampling method was used in this research to harness sufficient representation among the faculties and levels of study. Using the sampling formula by scholars, 420 students were first selected though the final valid sample involved 400 students (147 males and 254 females) after the screening and filtering of the incomplete and invalid responses. They included a total of 302 undergraduates, 87 Masters and 12 doctoral students whose age varied between 16 and 36 years.

A standardised, personally administered survey with two sections -- demographic information and standard measures evaluating the study's primary categories, such as student participation, feeling of belonging, civic engagement, democratic principles, and prevention of extremism -- was used to collect the data. A five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), was used to score each item.

Student Engagement: This concept was measured by means of the Student Engagement Scale to measure behavioural, emotional, and cognitive

engagement.²⁷ The scale is very reliable within the internal field of education-related research, and also it is congruent with the three-part model of involvement used in the prior research.²⁸

Similarly, in order to measure the sense of belonging, Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) Scale was used among the participants²⁹ to identify attitude towards safety, respect, feeling of belonging, and emotional attachment to the academic community. The PSSM, as a conceptual framework, is very theoretical and has been well-approved by teenagers and young adults. This tool measures both behavioural and attitudinal dimensions of the political and civic engagement. Numerous studies in the realm of higher education have employed CES, and it has consistently demonstrated excellent levels of internal consistency.

The students were also evaluated based on their promotion of democratic values as measured by the Democratic Values Attitude Scale, which was used to assess the level of tolerance towards diversity and pluralism, as well as equality and participatory decision-making, and resistance against discrimination or authoritarianism.³⁰ The local experts have been going through the items to make them culturally and contextually relevant to the Pakistani higher education context. Clarity and appropriateness were checked by a pilot test. The validity of the construct was confirmed with the help of Confirmatory Factor Analysis ($\chi^2/df = X.XX$, CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.045), and no items were dropped.

²⁷ S. Gunuc and A. Kuzu, "Student Engagement Scale: Development, Reliability and Validity," *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 40, no. 4 (2015): 587–610.

²⁸ Jennifer A. Fredricks, Phyllis C. Blumenfeld, and Alison H. Paris, "School Engagement: Potential of the Concept, State of the Evidence," *Review of Educational Research* 74, no. 1 (2004): 59–109, <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543074001059>.

²⁹ Carol Goodenow, "The Psychological Sense of School Membership among Adolescents," *Psychology in the Schools* 30, no. 1 (1993): 79–90.

³⁰ L. Hoek, A. Munniksma, and A. B. Dijkstra, "Students' Attitudes towards Fundamental Democratic Values," *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice* 20, no. 2 (2025): 280–300.

The attitude towards extremism has been investigated with the help of an adapted form of the Political Mobilisation and Radicalism Scale that was used in the earlier studies.³¹ It gauges the following aspects of attitudes: ideological tolerance, political activism, and rejection of extremism based on violence. Three items that had factor loading of less than 0.50 were eliminated in the pre-testing. The 12-item final version had a good psychometric performance, and the CFA results showed that it fits well ($\chi^2/df = X.XX$, CFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.042) and with high internal reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$).

Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted using SmartPLS 4's Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), a variance-based technique that is particularly suitable when complex, multivariate, and predictive models based.³² Analysis of the measurement and structural model was conducted in two phases. The internal consistency reliability of the measurement model was checked with the help of Cronbach's alpha (α), composite reliability (CR), and rhoA; a value of over 0.70 was regarded as sufficient. The Fornell-Larcker criteria and the Heterotrait-Mono Trait ratio (HTMT) with the acceptable values of less than 0.85 were used to assess the discriminant validity, while the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) with an acceptable value of over 0.50 was used to determine the convergent validity. The Multicollinearity was verified by the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values that was at values of below the conservative value of 3.3. Path coefficients in the structural model were obtained through a bootstrapping process with 5000 resamples, where t-values and confidence intervals were estimated to show statistical significance. The path effect sizes (f^2) were computed in accordance with the guidelines presented by Cohen, as 0.02-

³¹ Sophia Moskalenko and Clark McCauley, "Measuring Political Mobilization," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 21, no. 2 (2009): 239–60.

³² Joseph F. Hair, Jeffrey J. Risher, Marko Sarstedt, and Christian M. Ringle, "When to Use and How to Report the Results of PLS-SEM," *European Business Review* 31, no. 1 (2019): 2–24; Marko Sarstedt, Joseph F. Hair, and Christian M. Ringle, "PLS-SEM: Indeed a Silver Bullet," *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice* 31, no. 3 (2023): 261–75.

0.14 is a small effect, 0.15-0.34 a medium effect, and larger than 0.35 a large effect. Lastly, the overall model fit was considered as a universal measure of sufficiency and explanatory power.

Analysis and Results

Measurement Model

To determine the psychometric strength of the latent factors, student involvement (behavioural, emotional, and cognitive), feeling of belonging, civic engagement, democratic principles, and extremist attitudes, SmartPLS is oriented towards a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The outcome of the analysis showed that all the indicators observed carried a high loading on their respective latent factor, which means that the standardised loading was found to be above 0.70. This outcome supports the adequacy of item depiction of their corresponding constructs, hence confirming a high level of indicator reliability and content validity. Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE) are the three main measures that have been taken into consideration to guarantee convergent validity. Every Cronbach's alpha and CR value was far higher than the suggested cut-off of 0.70, indicating strong internal consistency. In the same way, each of the AVE scores exceeds 0.50, which led to the fact that all the constructs accounted for an appropriate level of variance through their indicators.³³ All these results combined establish that the measurement model has reached reasonable reliability and convergent validity, and it is possible to proceed to the next structural analysis.

Table 1: Reliability and Validity of Constructs

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_a	Composite Reliability	AVE
Belonging	.793	.793	.879	.707
Civic Engagement	.806	.809	.873	.632

³³ Joseph F. Hair, Jeffrey J. Risher, Marko Sarstedt, and Christian M. Ringle, “When to Use and How to Report the Results of PLS-SEM,” *European Business Review* 31, no. 1 (2019): 2–24.

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Democracy	.854	.864	.902	.698
Extremism	.962	.973	.970	.867
Student Engagement	.939	.944	.947	.579

Note: Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.70$, CR > 0.70 , and AVE > 0.50 , indicating acceptable reliability and convergent validity.

The Fornell-Larcker criteria was used to determine discriminant validity, ensuring that each notion was empirically distinct. In accordance with Table 2, the square root of the mean variance extracted (AVE) of each latent variable (indicated on the diagonal) was larger than its association with the other constructs, indicating appropriate discriminant validity. There was a minimal overlap between the sense of belonging (AVE = 0.841) and student involvement (correlation = 0.762 and AVE = 0.761). Nevertheless, such closeness is conceptually justifiable since the two constructs are conceptually interrelated in the learning environment -- the stronger the connection that the students have with the institution, the greater the level of engagement that they are likely to portray. Although this was associated, the difference between the two constructs was still statistically and theoretically acceptable to this study.

Table 2: Fornell–Larcker Criterion

Construct	Belonging	Civic Eng.	Democracy	Extremism	Student Eng.
Belonging	0.841				
Civic Engagement	0.468	0.795			
Democracy	0.490	0.631	0.835		
Extremism	-0.279	-0.240	-0.393	0.931	
Student Engagement	0.762	0.551	0.468	-0.265	0.761

Note: The square root of AVE is represented by bold diagonal numbers. When each construct's square root of AVE is greater than its correlations with other components, discriminant validity is established.

The biggest recorded value of HTMT (0.871) was between the sense of belonging and student engagement, which slightly surpassed the more conservative standard of 0.85. This value is, however, acceptable in the study of behaviour and social science research, where the moderate amount of conceptual overlap is theoretically acceptable because of the interrelated nature of these constructs. Comprehensively, the outcomes of the HTMT supported the discriminant validity, which has been determined with the help of the Fornell-Larcker criterion.

Table 3: Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) Ratios

Construct	Belonging	Civic Eng.	Democracy	Extremism	Student Eng.
Belonging					
Civic Engagement	.582				
Democracy	.595	.753			
Extremism	.316	.267	.431		
Student Engagement	.871	.636	.520	.265	

Note: HTMT < 0.85 indicates strict discriminant validity; values < 0.90 are acceptable in social sciences. The highest observed HTMT value = 0.871 (Belonging–Student Engagement), which is acceptable given the theoretical overlap.

General model fit indicators were used in determining the overall fitness of the measurement and structural models under the PLS-SEM approach. The standardised root means square residual (SRMR) of both the saturated (0.06) and estimated (0.06) models, as summarised in Table 4, was fairly less than the accepted cut-off of 0.08, which is an indication of strong model fit.³⁴

³⁴ Joseph F. Hair, Jeffrey J. Risher, Marko Sarstedt, and Christian M. Ringle, “When to Use and How to Report the Results of PLS-SEM,” *European Business Review* 31, no. 1 (2019): 2–24.

Table 4: Model Fit Indices

Index	Saturated Model	Estimated Model	Recommended Threshold
SRMR	.06	0.06	< 0.08
d_ULS	1.760	1.783	–
d_G	.852	0.851	–
Chi-Square	1952.4	1943.6	–
NFI	.794	0.795	≥ 0.70 (exploratory)

Note. SRMR < 0.08 indicates acceptable model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). NFI ≥ 0.70 is acceptable for exploratory PLS-SEM studies.

Results showed that all constructs were found to be satisfactorily reliable in addition to having high convergent and discriminant validity. Moreover, the overall fit of the model was satisfactory, which points to the fact that the measurement structure was able to reflect the theoretical dimensions underlying it. Therefore, the measurement model was assumed to be strong and fit to proceed to the next step of analysis, which was the testing of the hypothesised structural relations between the study variables.

Results of the Structural Model

In SmartPLS, the structural model analysis was conducted to test the hypothesised correlations among the study's factors (see Figure 2). The model was assessed by determining the explanatory capacity (R^2) of the model, the size of effect sizes (f^2), and the direct and indirect path coefficients. All these analyses helped to gain in-depth insight into the interaction of student engagement, sense of belonging, civic engagement, and democratic values to influence attitudes towards extremism.

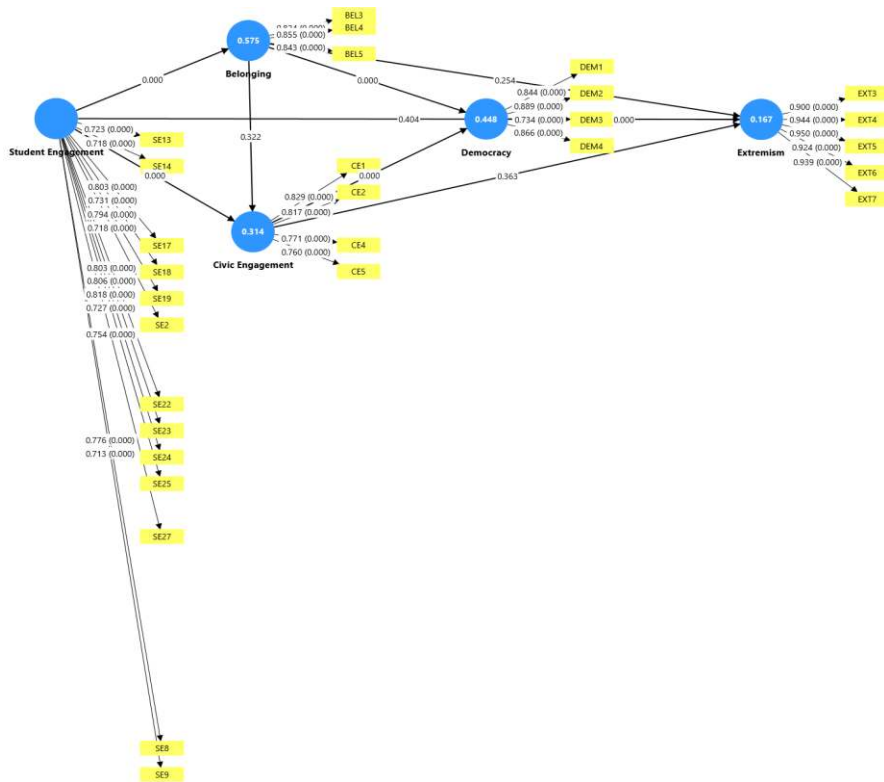


Figure 2: Structural Model

The findings of the coefficient determination (R^2) revealed that a significant amount of variance was in the outcome variables that was explained by the structural model (Table 5). Sense of belonging was significantly related to student engagement ($R^2 = 0.559$), which means that a greater portion of its variance (more than fifty percent) was predicted by the mentioned predictor. Both student engagement and belonging had a moderate effect on civic engagement ($R^2 = 0.316$) and democratic values ($R^2 = 0.449$). Conversely, the model accounted for less value of variance in the extremism ($R^2 = 0.176$), which suggests that although the democratic values and other constructs related to them are attributed to the reduction of the extremist attitudes, other factors may not have been accounted for, but may influence attitudes.

Table 5: Coefficient of Determination (R²)

Construct	R²	R² Adjusted
Belonging	.559	.558
Civic Engagement	.316	.314
Democracy	.449	.445
Extremism	.176	.172

Note: According to Hair et al. (2019), R2 values of 0.25, 0.50, and 0.75 are commonly classified as weak, moderate, and considerable, respectively.

Effect Sizes (f²)

The results of the effect size analysis (Table 6) showed that there was a notable impact of student engagement on belonging ($f^2 = 1.268$), which is a very large effect, and a moderate effect on civic engagement ($f^2 = 0.462$). The role of belonging to democracy was minimal but significant ($f^2 = 0.051$), but civic engagement had a substantial influence on democracy ($f^2 = 0.333$). Democratic values, in turn, had a moderate effect on extremism ($f^2 = 0.126$). All in all, these results indicate that student engagement is the most prevailing and powerful construct in the structural model.

Table 6: Effect Sizes (f²)

	Belonging	Civic Engagement	Democracy	Extremism
Belonging	—	—	.051	—
Civic Engagement	—	—	.333	—
Democracy	—	—	—	.126
Extremism	—	—	—	—
Student Engagement	1.268	.462	.000	.009

Note: f^2 values of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 correspond to tiny, medium, and high effect sizes (Cohen, 1988).

Direct Path Coefficients

Table 7 is a summary of the verdicts of the theorised structural paths. Interaction with the students showed a good and significant positive relationship with belonging (b = .762, p <.001) and civic engagement (b =.474, p <.001). Belonging also had a considerable positive predictive value in terms of civic engagement (b =.468, p =.001) and democratic values (b =.249, p =.001), but the correlation with the extremism was not significant (b = -.077, p =.281). On the same note, civic engagement has a favourable and substantial effect on democracy (b =.515, p =.001), though this was not evident in the case of extremism (b =.066, p =.367). Conversely, the presence of the democratic values was strongly negatively related to extremism (b = -.363, p < .001), which is reflective of the democratic values as a buffer to the extremist tendencies. The association between the student engagement and extremism was not significant, and so, the effect did not take place in the form of a direct relationship, but instead, it followed through mediating variables.

Table 7: Direct Path Coefficients

Path	β (O)	M	SD	t	p
Belonging → Civic Engagement	.468	.470	.065	7.207	.000***
Belonging → Democracy	.249	.246	.067	3.700	.000***
Belonging → Extremism	-.077	-.075	.072	1.079	0.281
Civic Engagement → Democracy	.515	.517	.069	7.432	.000***
Civic Engagement → Extremism	.066	.071	.073	0.902	0.367
Democracy → Extremism	-.363	-.370	.062	5.859	.000***
Student Engagement → Belonging	.762	.764	.031	24.215	.000***
Student Engagement → Civic Engagement	.474	.470	.109	4.333	.000***
Student Engagement → Extremism	-.071	-.074	.077	0.915	.0360

Note. β = standardized path coefficient. ***p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05.

The results of the structural model show several significant relationships between the student engagement, feeling connected, civic engagement, democratic orientation, and extremism. First, the statistical analysis revealed that the students' engagement had a significant positive effect on the belonging ($\beta = .762$, $t = 24.215$, $p < .001$), meaning that the more students were involved in learning and institutional activities, the stronger their feelings of belonging and inclusion in their educational environment. This is the highest correlation in the model and indicates that the engagement serves as a basic mechanism to encourage psychological and social integration among students.

Students who feel accepted, valued and connected to their institutions are more likely to be involved in the collective and civic activities. This has implications for the students' psychological bonding with educational institutions that can foster increased social responsibility and involvement in their communities.

However, direct effect of belonging on extremism was not significant ($\beta = -.077$, $p = .281$) and the direct effect of civic engagement on extremism was not too significant ($\beta = .066$, $p = .367$). The findings suggest that simply belonging and civic involvement is not enough to directly reduce extremist tendencies unless these factors help foster democratic values. In other words, democracy can serve as a critical mediating mechanism between social integration and civic participation, and attitudes towards extremism. The associations with extremism for student engagement were weak and negative ($\beta = -.071$); however, this association was also comparatively small. This suggests that if individuals' attitudes to extremism are not sufficiently challenged by their education, then it is necessary to include aspects of democratic learning, inclusive institutional culture and meaningful civic socialisation.

Indirect Effects

As stated in Table 8, belonging had an indirect negative effect on extremism via the democratic values ($b = -.104$, $p < .001$), but its indirect correlation

via its civic engagement was not significant. The civic engagement also decreased the inclination to extremism by positively influencing democracy ($b = -.188, p < .001$). Furthermore, the indirect impact of student engagement on the democratic values became possible due to the sequential influence of belonging and civic engagement ($b = .476, p < .001$). Notably, the direct effect of student engagement on extremism was not significant, but the indirect effect through the democracy was significant and negative ($b = -.198, p = .002$), and the reason is that democracy served as a significant mediating variable that prevents the extremist orientations.

Table 8: Indirect Effects

Path	β (O)	M	SD	t	p
Belonging → Democracy	.056	.062	.060	0.933	0.351
Belonging → Extremism	-.104	-.105	.028	3.760	.000***
Civic Engagement → Extremism	-.188	-.193	.047	4.007	.000***
Student Engagement → Civic Engagement	.082	.088	.084	0.975	0.330
Student Engagement → Democracy	.476	.475	.047	10.191	.000***
Student Engagement → Extremism	-.198	-.196	.064	3.101	0.002**

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Specific Indirect Effects

Additionally, the specific indirect effects, which are mediating processes, were examined (see Table 9). The findings showed that belonging indirectly had a lesser effect on attitudinal extremism, mainly mediated by democratic values ($b = -.091, p = .001$), but the indirect value of the civic engagement was not statistically significant. However, the long chains of relations between the variables were observed not to be significant, implying that

democracy was the key mediating factor between engagement and the rejection of extremism.

Table 9: Specific Indirect Effects

Path	β	M	SD	t	p
Belonging → Civic Engagement → Democracy	.056	.062	.060	0.933	0.351
Belonging → Democracy → Extremism	.091	.090	.027	3.367	.001**
Belonging → Civic Engagement → Extremism	.007	.009	.015	0.496	.620
Civic Engagement → Democracy → Extremism	.188	.193	.047	4.007	.000***
Student Engagement → Belonging → Civic Engagement	.082	.088	.084	0.975	0.330
Student Engagement → Civic Engagement → Democracy	.245	.242	.057	4.298	.000***
Student Engagement → Belonging → Democracy	.188	.186	.049	3.871	.000***
Student Engagement → Civic Engagement → Extremism	.032	.034	.037	0.868	.386
Student Engagement → Belonging → Extremism	.062	.061	.055	1.127	.260
Student Engagement → Belonging → Civic Engagement → Democracy → Extremism	.015	.018	.018	0.842	.400
Belonging → Civic Engagement → Democracy → Extremism	.020	.023	.024	0.861	.389

Student Engagement → Belonging → Civic Engagement → Extremism	.005	.007	.011	0.487	.626
Student Engagement → Civic Engagement → Democracy → Extremism	.089	.090	.029	3.112	.002**
Student Engagement → Belonging → Civic Engagement → Democracy	.042	.048	.046	0.914	.361
Student Engagement → Belonging → Democracy → Extremism	.069	.068	.020	3.494	.000***

Note: β represents the standardized indirect impact. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

The mediation analysis demonstrates that the main mechanism between the relationship of the student engagement, belonging, and civic engagement with lower extremism is through the process of mediation, which is democracy. Conversely, democracy (institutional belonging) was found to mediate the relationship between belonging and extremist tendencies ($\beta = .091$, $t = 3.367$, $p = .001$). Likewise, civic involvement was found to have a significant positive effect on extremism ($\beta = .188$, $t = 4.007$, $p < .001$) with a positive direction, indicating that democracy is an important factor in reducing radical attitudes. More complex sequential mediation paths, however, were statistically not significant and indicate that democracy continues to be the most important mediating variable in the explanation of the lower extremist tendencies among the students.

The structural model puts emphasis on the student engagement as the most important source of both belonging and civic participation, which, when combined with each other, foster democratic orientations in the students. Democracy was found to be the most powerful mediating variable in alleviating extremist tendencies, and the indirect impact of belonging, civic engagement, and engagement with the school in general. Interestingly, the

linear relationships of belonging, civic engagement, and engagement itself with extremism were not significant. This trend shows that extremism can be curbed more effectively by instilling democracy into the core of individuals instead of the outer participation or shallow social inclusion.

Discussion

The results of this research can be used to yield useful data concerning how student engagement brings about the sense of belonging, civic actions, and democracy, which mitigate the chances of extremist thinking among higher education students. The engagement appears to have a protective influence rather than a direct one, through a cascade of participants of layered socio-emotional and normative processes, which together, when integrated, assists in building ideological resilience.

The paper determined that the correlation between the sense of belonging and student engagement is statistically significant and strong. This finding confirms the hypothesis that the sense of belonging is an active process to be developed in the habit of academic practices and activities rather than a passive process (Strayhorn, 2019). When viewed through the prism of the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), engagement is the indicator of belonging and recognition within the institutional community, which intensifies emotional attachments and group identification.

Civic engagement was also found to have a strong positive correlation with the student engagement which means that the academic and campus-related activities tend to be more active outside of the university and are available to more students to participate in more general civic and community activities. This result is in line with Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) opinion that active and justice-oriented citizenship is formed in the process of shared and experience-based learning in the community places.³⁵

³⁵ Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne, "What Kind of Citizen?" *American Educational Research Journal* 41, no. 2 (2004): 237–69.

The mediation outcomes also provide more insight into relationships among variables. Even though the engagement of the students did not directly lead to extremism, it showed a large total indirect influence ($b = -0.198$, $p = 0.002$), meaning that it had a total influence without the need to be mediated by the variables of belonging, civic engagement, and democratic values.

The explained variance on extremism prevention was small ($R^2 = 0.176$) indicating that despite the fact that the model explains important pathways; a lot of the variance in the ideological vulnerability of the students is not explained by the model. This highlights the extended social and institutional forces, i.e., influences of peer group, digital media exposure, family and community environments, political environment and differences in access to educational opportunities-influencing the inclination or resistance of the students to extremist ideologies. Therefore, although the engagement-based mechanisms offer important information about the existing preventive dynamics, they are merely a part of a bigger picture of social, structural, and contextual forces that shape ideological resilience.

The findings of the mediation show that democracy is the most important intervening factor in decreasing the extreme tendency of the students. While student engagement, belonging and civic participation will be valuable development experiences, their anti-extremism impacts mainly when democratic values and norms are encouraged. It shows that HEIs need to go beyond the traditional academic engagement and actively encourage the development of a democratic culture, inclusive participation, critical dialogue and civic education as integral parts of wider efforts to increase social cohesion and counteract radicalisation.

The results can also be interpreted as part of the general context of university student behaviours and dynamics. Low institutional belonging, decreased civic involvement and low democratic engagement can be linked not only to the ideological inclination towards extremism, but also to negative and confrontational student behaviour. In certain educational institutions, these acts can be embodied in the form of aggression, intolerance or violent

cultural or behavioural conflicts, which are not of religious or ethnic origin. The study, therefore, recommends that if one can foster environments on campus that are conducive to inclusivity, that the students have some positive engagement and that there is some dialogue that is democratic, then perhaps one can help to decrease extremist attitudes and even larger facets of non-democratic student hostility.

The results can also be understood in the light of the general controversy over the student unions in the Pakistani universities. Student unions have always been seen as forums for civic engagement, democratic debate, leadership training and collective representation. There are some scholarly and public voices that suggest that the dismantling or elimination of student unions took away opportunities for students to be involved in a structured way in democracy and in positive participation on campus. The results of this study indicate that promoting the sense of belonging to the institution, civic involvement, and democratic participation in the campus context can contribute to the development of more inclusive and peaceful campus spaces. The present study did not look directly at the influence of students' unions, however, this aspect is an important one and should be explored in future studies.

The findings imply that belonging and student identity should not be seen solely as positive and integrative concepts. In university settings, strong group identification can lead to polarisation, exclusion, and antagonism when students identify themselves largely in opposition to other groups. This mirrors the more general principles of Social Identity Theory involving in-group favouring and out-group discrimination. The study emphasises the importance of inclusive campus environments and democratic engagement methods that promote collaboration and communication among varied student groups.

Conclusion

The study emphatically derives that the interconnected and multiple mechanisms in which student involvement, sense of belonging, civic

engagement, and democratic values intersect creating resilience to extremist ideologies in the colleges and the universities. The engagement of students -- emotionally, behaviourally, and cognitively -- is a prerequisite that triggers this process of development. Engagement leads to the long-run ideological resilience by fostering a feeling of belonging, active involvement, and internalising the democratic values.³⁶ Similar to the earlier studies, the findings demonstrate that the mitigating effects on the extremist intentions are not the outcome of the engagement but are developed within more social, emotional, and normative processes, which follow sequential and parallel routes.³⁷

Belonging is an important socio-emotional ground that strengthens the relationship of the students with both the academic and social spheres.³⁸ This feeling of connectedness, when directed at democratic principles, makes one less vulnerable to the extremist discourses, which is in line with the Social Identity Theory, according to which strong in-group identification leads to cohesion and weak out-groups.³⁹ Another process, which links both the active involvement and normative commitments, is civic engagement. The engagement in the governance, advocacy, and service to the society increases the sense of commitment among the students for pluralism, tolerance, and citizenship. Among the variables considered, democratic values were the most powerful and the closest to the protective measure against extremist temptation, which again refers to the activity of the

³⁶ Jennifer A. Fredricks, Phyllis C. Blumenfeld, and Alison H. Paris, "School Engagement: Potential of the Concept, State of the Evidence," *Review of Educational Research* 74, no. 1 (2004): 59–109, <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543074001059>.

³⁷ Ratna Ghosh, Winnie Y. A. Chan, Andrea Manuel, and Meihua Dilimulati, "Can Education Counter Violent Religious Extremism?" *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 23, no. 2 (2017): 117–33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/11926422.2016.1165713>; Jal Mehta and Scott Davies, "We Must Reinvigorate the Sociology of Education," *Contexts* 17, no. 2 (2018): 80.

³⁸ Terrell L. Strayhorn, *College Students' Sense of Belonging*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2019).

³⁹ Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict," in *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, ed. W. G. Austin and S. Worchel (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1979), 33–47

normative component in the shape of the ideological fortitude that is fixed on the democratic educational traditions.

These findings and their implications for the higher education policy and practice are significant and practical. The multidimensional strategies fostering participation, affiliation, and civic participation should be introduced in the universities to foster a democratic culture and mitigate the risks of radicalisation. One of those is the faculty development programmes, which can be oriented in the field of inclusive pedagogy, collaborative learning, and facilitation of critical dialogues. Experiential learning and democratic norms may be reinforced through peer-led programmes such as student councils, the existence of debate clubs, social justice projects, and the mentorship schemes. Moreover, the emotional safety, inclusion and connectedness of the students can be increased by the institutional support systems like counseling services, diversity offices, and intergroup dialogue platforms. When these strategies are combined on academic, social, and governance fronts, the universities will be able to develop a system where ideological resilience is developed actively as opposed to passively.

This study also highlights the fact that the prevention of extremism in the universities is not to do with surveillance or ideological policing, but is an exercise of developing emotional, behavioural, and normative abilities among the students. It is an engagement that fosters a sense of belonging, which in turn fosters civic participation, and they strengthen democratic ideals. When these conditions are deliberately cultivated, it is possible to produce graduates of higher education who are critically reflective, socially responsible, and democratically oriented and also prepared to resist the extremist influences and be useful to diverse and inclusive societies.

The study does not explicitly measure institutional policies, campus practices, or the objective environment of the university, but rather students' perceptions and attitudes. Thus, the findings are based on the perceived experiences, and not on any verifiable institutional circumstances. Moving forward, future studies could take a qualitative or mixed-methods approach

to explore the actual ways in which universities create and support a sense of belonging and civic engagement while promoting democratic culture. Future studies may build upon this model, including qualitative designs, to understand the lived experiences of belonging and civic identity in the students, and test moderating variables, including exposure to the diversity, political context, or type of institution. These extensions would offer deeper insight into the capacity of the higher education to build a more democratic resilience while preventing vulnerability from the extremist ideologies more systematically. ■

The Impact of Disenfranchised Grief: Policy Needs for Psycho-Social Interventions in Pakistan

Batool Azra* & Dr Saima Masoom Ali**

Abstract

The quietest losses are often the most enduring. One such loss is called "Disenfranchised Grief." Suicide-related deaths are particularly prone to disenfranchisement due to moral and legal nuances. From a thanatological perspective, deaths are not mourned equally. Religious, social, cultural, and legal frameworks shape which deaths are considered valid to grieve. From a social-constructivist perspective, social interactions influence meaning-making by validating or invalidating the loss, with the latter contributing to disenfranchised grief. These phenomena play a huge role in sweeping suicide-related deaths under the rug in regions such as Tharparkar, where suicide cases are disproportionately high. This study used a mixed-methods design and used the Urdu version of Diner's Satisfaction with Life Scale. Participants were aged 18-30 years from Mithi, Umerkot, and Kunri. The findings revealed that poverty, family and relationship issues, stress and depression, lack of awareness, and social pressures were key factors behind high suicide rates. Using the data collected and input from community leaders in Tharparkar, psycho-social interventions were developed and delivered across ten intervention sites. This study highlights policy recommendations, including

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reforms to address the systemic marginalization of minorities. It also addresses suicide not just as a public health concern but also as a profoundly disenfranchised loss that needs immediate attention.

Keywords: Disenfranchised Grief, Young Adults, Social Meaning-Making, Suicide, Psychology, Tharparkar, Thanatology.

Introduction

Perhaps one of the most difficult emotional challenges for humans is dealing with a loss. Although there is a general universal understanding of the pain and distress experienced through grief, every individual's grieving experiences are unique and distinctive. A number of factors play a role in influencing this variability in grief, such as the nature of an individual's relationship with the deceased person, the socio-cultural landscape, and an individual's coping mechanism of dealing with the losses. Grief can be described as a universal reaction to bereavement that humans across all cultures experience. The responses to a loss are varied and broad. These can range between physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual experiences.¹ Different cultures across the world express these emotions through a wide variety of observable behaviours, some of which may be collectively shared and recognised across different cultures. These shared expressions of grief play a role in helping members of these societies categorise grief as either being “normal” or “abnormal” reaction. When acute grief lingers and becomes chronic, it turns into ‘complicated grief.’ Complicated grief often has a very deep and lasting effects on the individual’s well-being.² Prolonged grief not only negatively affects functioning, productivity, and social participation,³ it also has significant implications for public health systems and social policy due to its impact on

¹ Robert Gross, *The Psychology of Grief*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2018), <https://doi-org.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/10.4324/9781315110127>.

² M. Katherine Shear, Naomi Simon, Mary Wall, Sidney Zisook, Robert Neimeyer, Nan Duan, et al., “Complicated Grief and Related Bereavement Issues for DSM-5,” *Depression and Anxiety* 28, no. 2 (2011): 103–117, <https://doi.org/10.1002/da.20780>.

³ Mette Kjaergaard Nielsen et al., “Exploring Functional Impairment in Light of Prolonged Grief Disorder: A Prospective, Population-Based Cohort Study,” *Frontiers in Psychiatry* (December 9, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2020.537674>.

interpersonal framework that communities operate on. Certain forms of grief, particularly the ones that are shaped by morality, stigma, cultural judgments, or structural marginalisation, often end up going unrecognised and minimised. Young adults, in particular, experience these challenges in a much heightened form. They have to endure a wide variety of personal, social, academic, and systemic challenges that result in both vulnerability to suicide and the burden of grieving a loved one's death. Thus, it is crucial to recognise grief not only as an individual's private emotional experience but as a family, community, and national mental health concern. Grief cannot be fully understood from the perspective of one person's individual psychological experience, but rather in the light of socio-cultural landscapes, geographical locations, historical practices, and structural inequalities.⁴ It is only through this recognition that this issue will have success in being translated into effective policy reforms. Building on this understanding of bereavement as a socially-embedded concern, there is a growing need for prevention-based interventions that can translate into action at the community level. This study examines community-based psychosocial intervention efforts to combat suicide rates in Tharparkar, as an endeavour to emphasise prevention-based mental health work as suicide cases in Tharparkar are disproportionately high.⁵ While there is existing data documenting suicide and mental health concerns, far less attention has been directed towards prevention-oriented, community-embedded interventions. The research fills this gap by understanding lived experiences, identifying predisposing factors, and providing culturally relevant psycho-social interventions.

Disenfranchised Grief

In addition to the above commonly understood forms of grief, another significant form of grief that is often overlooked in many societies is the

⁴ Darcy L. Harris, Tashel C. Bordere, and Lisa McLean, eds., *Handbook of Social Justice in Loss and Grief: Exploring Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion* (New York: Routledge, 2026).

⁵ S. Tunio, G. Shoukat, and M. A. Khan, "Sociological Analysis of Suicide among Female: A Study of Nangarparkar, District Tharparkar, Sindh," *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal* 3, no. 2 (2019): 106–114.

“disenfranchisement” of grief. This is a nuance in the grieving experience that is often neglected and under-researched. Dr. Kenneth Doka worked on the concept of “Disenfranchised Grief” and described it as a form of grief that is not openly validated or acknowledged, socially accepted, and allowed to be publicly mourned.⁶ This type of grief results in extreme feelings of isolation due to its invisibility, as people around often fail to acknowledge this type of grief, resulting in an increased difficulty and challenge in the mourning experience. This is the particular form of grief that society at large fails to recognise as a legitimate and reasonable loss.⁷ Some examples of how a grief may become disenfranchised are: a person who is experiencing grief after the death of a partner in a relationship that the society does not officially recognise, such as an ex-spouse, a romantic partner in a homosexual relationship, or the death of an unmarried partner. These types of relationships are often not seen as a valid relationship by the society, which often leads to the invalidation of the grieving experiences. Another common example of disenfranchised grief is the inability of the society to fully understand the grieving of an individual who is considered incapable of fully experiencing an emotion such as that of grief. For example, a person with a learning disability, a very young child, an elderly person, etc., may be misunderstood as not being fully capable of mourning a loss and, therefore, the people around them may assume that they are not emotionally impacted by the loss in the same manner as others.⁸ Disenfranchised grief emerges from the society's failure to recognise the emotional depth of an individual's grieving or mourning experience.

⁶ Kenneth J. Doka, ed., *Disenfranchised Grief: Recognizing Hidden Sorrow* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989).

⁷ Céline Blin and Cheryl Jonas-Simpson, “Disenfranchised Grief among Bereaved Youth,” in *Understanding Child and Adolescent Grief*, 1st ed., ed. Cathy Arnold (New York: Routledge, 2017), 34–46, <https://doi-org.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/10.4324/9781315164250>.

⁸ BC Centre for Palliative Care, *Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Grief & Bereavement: Literature Review Report* (New Westminster, BC: BC Centre for Palliative Care, 2023).

From a Thanatological Lens – Stigmatised Deaths

Disenfranchised grief is also often a result of the circumstance surrounding a death. Society associates stigma and shame with certain conditions such as AIDS or drug abuse that may not receive the similar level of sympathy, understanding, and validation from the people. Another very common disenfranchisement of grief arises after a death that occurred due to suicide. Mourners of such forms of death are often targeted with social shame, which adds a layer of difficulty to publicly mourn the loss of a loved one. This can be observed in a much heightened expression within the societies where suicide is viewed as a criminal act or a failure of morality. In many Eastern countries such as Pakistan, suicide is considered illegal and is often condemned,⁹ which results in an additional challenge for those who have lost a loved one to suicide and, therefore, are unable to express their grief openly. As reported by United for Global Mental Health (2022), suicide is still treated as a criminal offense in 20 countries, which becomes a reason of difficulty in openly grieving a stigmatised loss.¹⁰

From a thanatological perspective, each death is followed by a different kind of mourning. It is unique and distinctive and is often shaped by social, cultural, religious, legal, and moral judgments that dictate which deaths are considered valid to grieve. These notions also shape “how” the dead person is viewed. Thanatological perspective focuses on understanding the meanings that are often associated with the death and the grief that follows.¹¹ It not only provides a framework to understand the meanings associated with grief, but it also highlights how social and cultural nuances can hinder the mourning process and lead to disenfranchisement of grief. From a thanatological perspective, deaths are often labeled as either “good deaths”

⁹ Muhammad M. Khan and Adnan A. Hyder, “Suicides in the Developing World: Case Study from Pakistan,” *Suicide & Life-Threatening Behavior* 36, no. 1 (2006): 76–81, <https://doi.org/10.1521/suli.2006.36.1.76>.

¹⁰ “Suicide Decriminalisation,” United for Global Mental Health, July 4, 2022, <https://unitedgmh.org/knowledge-hub/suicide-decriminalisation/>.

¹¹ Luciana M. Fonseca and Ines Testoni, “The Emergence of Thanatology and Current Practice in Death Education,” *OMEGA – Journal of Death and Dying* 64, no. 2 (2012): 157–169, <https://doi.org/10.2190/OM.64.2.d>.

or “bad deaths.” This distinction is based on social and moral judgment that subsequently cause a sense of shame and an associated stigma for individuals who are left behind to grieve. In the intervention phase of this project, the authors conducted workshops to address the aforementioned sociocultural constructs with an endeavour to create a safe and nonjudgmental space that validated grief and mitigated associated stigma. These workshops were focused on the topics of suicide awareness, identifying signs and symptoms of suicide behaviours and responding to crisis. These workshops also aimed to equip participants with the strategies to respond compassionately to losses that are commonly viewed as invalid or shameful. Participants were taught to recognise warning signs of suicide by noticing changes in patterns, such as visible hopelessness, withdrawal, or mood shifts, rather than relying on a single indicator. Participants also practiced active listening skills by listening without interrupting and learning to use simple verbal and nonverbal cues, for example, nodding and maintaining eye contact, to show presence. Emphasis was placed on validating the other person's feelings, paraphrasing what the other person has shared, asking gentle, open-ended questions, and avoiding judgment about the cause of death. For instance, “suicide is such a selfish act / it is such a sin,” dismissive responses, or the need to immediately fix the situation. The workshops also addressed how to respond to disenfranchised grief by acknowledging the loss openly, avoiding using minimising statements or “at least” statements (for example, “at least, you still have other family members alive”), and reinforcing that all grief is valid, even when others around may not recognise it.

From a Social-Constructivist Lens

From a social constructionist perspective, a society's perception and judgments play a significant role that translate into grieving and mourning processes. From this lens, grieving often occurs in a complicated social context where the meaning of grief made by an individual is shaped by other people's judgments of how they view a particular kind of death and the overall socio-cultural ways of policing how an individual is naturally

expressing their grief.¹² In other words, to what extent does an individual's grieving process conform to the socially acceptable norms? These social layers of grief can sometimes encourage the mourners' "meaning-making" attempts by either validating the loss or honouring the deceased, or invalidating it.¹³ The latter leads to disenfranchisement of the grief. In particular, the people who have lost a loved one to a stigmatised death, such as a death by suicide. For a mourner who has responded to the loss in a manner that does not comply with the larger cultural norms or practices, social interactions can be particularly detrimental because the mourner's grieving process is not consistent with cultural expectations, therefore, becoming a ground for disapproving, hypercritical, or judgmental interactions. These kinds of mourners are also often more likely to experience avoidance, discomfort, or rejection in their social world. Therefore, social interactions in the context of meaning-making can either be validating or invalidating,¹⁴ which subsequently supports a mourner's attempt to either make sense of the loss and live their life in the light of it, or contribute to complicating their efforts to form a fully functional life around their grief.

Suicides in Tharparkar, Pakistan

Suicide refers to death caused by self-directed injurious behaviour with the intent to die, whereas a suicide attempt involves non-fatal, self-directed, potentially injurious behaviour undertaken with the intent to die as a result of the behaviour. A suicide attempt might not result in injury. Suicidal

¹² Robert A. Neimeyer, Dennis Klass, and Michael R. Dennis, "A Social Constructionist Account of Grief: Loss and the Narration of Meaning," *Death Studies* 38, no. 6–10 (2014): 485–498, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2014.913454>.

¹³ Robert A. Neimeyer and John R. Jordan, "Disenfranchisement as Empathic Failure: Grief Therapy and the Co-Construction of Meaning," in *Disenfranchised Grief: New Directions, Challenges, and Strategies for Practice*, ed. Kenneth J. Doka (Champaign, IL: Research Press, 2002), 95–117.

¹⁴ Benjamin W. Bellet, Jason M. Holland, and Robert A. Neimeyer, "The Social Meaning in Life Events Scale (SMILES): A Preliminary Psychometric Evaluation in a Bereaved Sample," *Death Studies* 43, no. 2 (2018): 103–112, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2018.1456008>.

ideation refers to thinking about, considering, or planning suicide.¹⁵ Rates of suicide have increased in recent years, particularly among marginalised groups. Marginalised communities, peoples or populations are groups and communities that experience discrimination and social, political, and economic exclusion because of unequal power relationships. A recent analysis in the United States (2018-2023) shows that suicide rates have increased significantly among Black, Hispanic, and other minority groups.¹⁶ The World Health Organisation notes that suicide rates are especially high among vulnerable groups experiencing discrimination and marginalisation.¹⁷ In Tharparkar, both Muslims and Hindus are committing suicides, with a higher incidence among the Scheduled Castes Hindus.¹⁸ Ninety percent of Hindus in Pakistan are poor, marginalised, and largely from scheduled castes, with limited socioeconomic power and neglected by the society.¹⁹

What could be the socio-economic and emotional concerns causing the spurt in the rates of suicide in one of the poorest and least-developed districts of Pakistan such as, Tharparkar? It is commonly referred to as “The Thar Desert,” and the people have been facing a wide variety of mental, social, emotional, and economic problems for a very long time. It is imperative that due attention be paid to the mental illness concerns that are often being exacerbated to suicidality in the area. Tharparkar region has been experiencing significant mental health challenges, particularly related to

¹⁵ National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), “Suicide,” *NIMH Health Topics*, accessed January 31, 2026, <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/suicide>.

¹⁶ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), *Notes from the Field: Differences in Suicide Rates, by Race and Ethnicity and Age Group — United States, 2018–2023*, MMWR (2025), <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/74/wr/mm7435a2.htm>.

¹⁷ World Health Organization, *Suicide* fact sheet (March 25, 2025), <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/suicide>.

¹⁸ “Study Stresses Need for Targeted Campaigns, Stronger Community Support to Improve Mental Well-Being in Tharparkar,” *The News International*, January 3, 2025, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1268087-study-stresses-need-for-targeted-campaigns-stronger-community-support-to-improve-mental-well-being-in-tharparkar>.

¹⁹ Minority Rights Group International, *Violence and Discrimination Against Women of Religious Minority Backgrounds in Pakistan* (2024), <https://minorityrights.org/app/uploads/2024/01/creid-intersections-series-violence-and-discrimination-against-women-of-religious-minority-backgrounds-in-pakistan.pdf>.

poverty, social issues, misconceptions around mental health, and increasing suicides.²⁰ According to the WHO report, “Preventing Suicide: A Global Imperative” (2014),²¹ an estimated 0.8 million people die by suicide every year, i.e., every 40 seconds, a person dies by suicide somewhere in the world. The development of suicide risk in an individual is multifaceted.²² It may involve genetic, psychological, clinical, and/or social factors. Elevated rates of suicidality could be related to exacerbating factors, also including the loss of family links and community support, socioeconomic difficulties, marginalisation, racism, loss of religious affiliation, inequality in education, cultural clashes with parents, lost hopes and identification, etc. A study identified family attachment, bonding, and family functioning as important predictors of suicidal behaviour, highlighting that disturbances in these domains may contribute to vulnerability.²³ Another study reveals that suicide risks are linked to differences in socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and access to resources.²⁴

Pakistan continues to fight the silent battle of suicide problem. It is one of the countries where suicide completion and attempts go repeatedly unreported. A study reports that Pakistan has not been able to formulate a systematic suicide surveillance system and, therefore, mostly relies on police data which is “gross underestimation of actual rates.”²⁵ Since completed and attempted suicide acts are illegal in the country, and are socially and religiously condemned as well, it makes it difficult for

²⁰ Faiza Ilyas, “Poverty, Mental Illnesses Fueling Suicides in Tharparkar: Experts,” *Dawn*, January 3, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1882689>.

²¹ World Health Organization, *Preventing Suicide: A Global Imperative* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2014).

²² Gustavo Turecki et al., “Suicide and Suicide Risk,” *Nature Reviews Disease Primers* 5, article 74 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41572-019-0121-0>.

²³ X. Alvarez-Subiela et al., “Family Factors Related to Suicidal Behavior in Adolescents,” *Journal of Affective Disorders* (2022).

²⁴ S. W. Perry et al., “Achieving Health Equity in US Suicides: A Narrative Review and Commentary,” *BMC Public Health* (2022).

²⁵ Mark J. D. Jordans, Anne Kaufman, Natassia F. Brenman, Ramesh P. Adhikari, Nagendra P. Luitel, Wietse A. Tol, and Ivan Komproe, “Suicide in South Asia: a scoping review,” *BMC Psychiatry* 14 (2014): 358, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-014-0358-9>.

researchers to tap into the right numbers.²⁶ The Sindh Mental Health Authority (SMHA) has reported a total of 79 cases of suicides in Tharparkar, during the period of year 2016 to 2020. The SMHA conducted a study on psychological autopsy of registered suicide cases at Tharparkar in collaboration with reputable medical and behavioural sciences institutions.²⁷ Out of the thirty-three (n = 33) registered cases of suicide identified for psychological autopsy, 21 cases were females and 12 were males. Fourteen females and 9 males belonged to Hindu religion. Moreover, 12 victims were single including 7 males and 5 females. Two females were divorced and 2 were engaged. With these statistics, it is evident that the area of Tharparkar needs immense work in terms of providing emotional and psychosocial support to address mental well-being issues and reduce suicide rates. These statistics from the SMHA are reflective of the suicide ‘completion.’ However, the suicide contemplation, suicide attempt, the suicide contagion phenomenon, etc., is all yet to be accounted for. It is also important to study what makes people more susceptible and vulnerable to suicide, i.e., the predisposing factors. Therefore, the objectives of this study were to (i) tap into one of the predisposing factors (ii) find the reasons from residents about causes of suicide in their region, and (iii) disseminate relevant psycho-social interventions for capacity-building.

²⁶ Muhammad M. Khan and Adnan A. Hyder, “Suicides in the Developing World: Case Study from Pakistan,” *Suicide & Life-Threatening Behavior* 36, no. 1 (2006): 76–81, <https://doi.org/10.1521/suli.2006.36.1.76>.

²⁷ “Psychological Autopsy Report of Suicide Cases in Tharparkar Released,” *Sindh Courier*, July 2021, <https://sindhcourier.com/psychological-autopsy-report-of-suicide-cases-in-tharparkar-released/>.

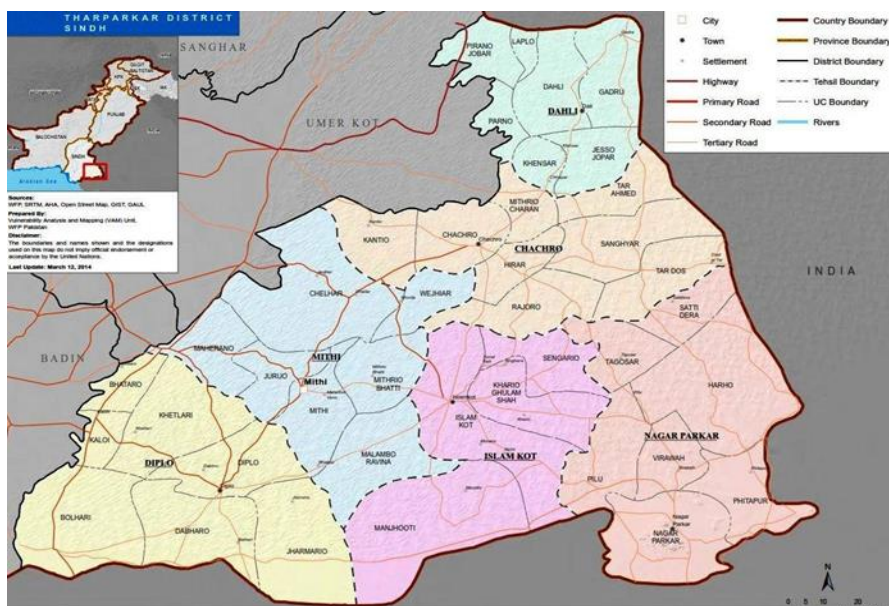


Illustration-I: Detailed Map of the Tharparkar District in Sindh, Pakistan.

Source: WFP, SRTM, AHA, Open Street Map, GIST, GAUL.

Disenfranchised Grief in Tharparkar

As a result of moral, religious, and legal condemnation of suicide, there is heightened hesitation amongst individuals to openly mourn the deaths resulting from suicide. People refrain from discussing these losses, hence leaving no support socially or emotionally for community members who are directly impacted by the death. Despite their reluctance, some individuals of this region agreed to speak (for this study) with the intention to help address this problem. During several visits to different towns and villages within Tharparkar, the authors also visited Hilario Pir Village to meet a bereaved father of an individual who died by suicide, belonging to Hindu Meghwar community who was a lecturer at a college in Mithi. His father, who was a principal of a local school, was reluctant to discuss his son's death, only mentioning that his son was a good child who passed away. His father was also accompanied by his teacher, who described the deceased as a quiet

student who socialised minimally with peers or community members and, overall, was a reserved individual. Throughout his career, he was transferred to various locations and struggled to build connections with communities. The teacher also expressed his satisfaction that education in this region has come a long way; however, social and emotional skills should also be part of the curriculum, alongside academic achievement. Conversations like these, amongst many others, prompted the authors to discover predisposing factors leading to suicide and mental well-being concerns and subsequently disseminate tailored psycho-social interventions in the community. In conversation with the authors, Senator Dr Karim Khawaja, Chairman of SMHA, shared challenges the *Tharis* face in their everyday life.

The authors also visited Nagarparkar, located at the southeastern part of Tharparkar. In another conversation with Dr Keenpal Das, a Consultant Psychiatrist and Assistant Professor, Psychiatry Department at Dr. Ruth K.M Pfau Civil Hospital and Dow University of Health Sciences (DUHS) Karachi, as well as a native of Tharparkar, the authors received insights into the languages, culture, and belief systems that informed author's efforts to remain culturally competent during their interactions with local communities, and to design psycho-social interventions that are embedded within the region's unique sociocultural landscape.

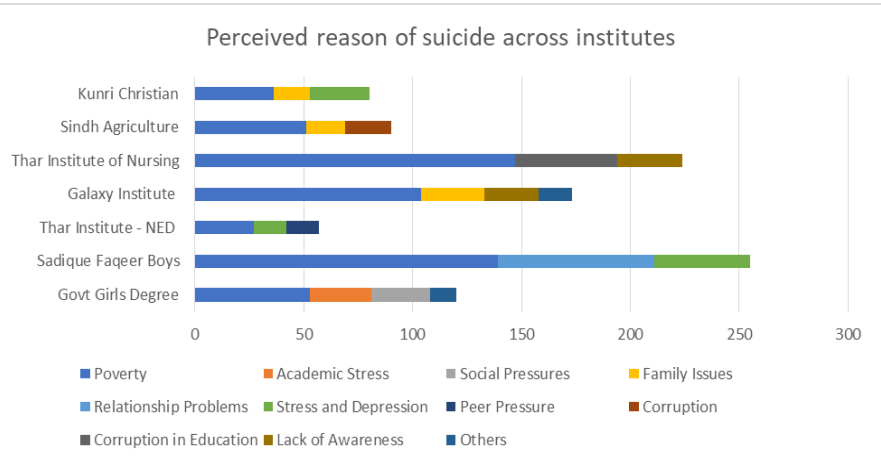
Demographic Information

The first phase of study consisted of a total of 432 participants from three institutions in Mithi: Government Girls Degree College (120), Sadique Faqeer Government Boys Degree College (255), Thar Institute of Engineering, Sciences, and Technology at NED University (57), accounting for 27.8%, 59%, and 13.2% of this sample, respectively. The participants were between the ages of 14 to 30 years old. The majority average age was 18 years. This age range highlights a focus on emerging adults. The authors considered this age group critical to understand young adults' mental health in the region. Young adults are often faced with a wide variety of challenges with very little support in place to address these challenges. Their reactions to loss can be nuanced and are often influenced by the factors that make

their grieving process different from the other age groups. At times, family responsibilities, financial burdens, academic pressures, and social expressions lead to the suppressed expression of pain and loss.²⁸

The second phase of this study consisted of 567 participants from four institutes in Umerkot and Kunri: Thar Institute of Nursing & Allied Health (224), Sindh Agriculture University (90), Galaxy College and Coaching (173), Kunri Christian Hospital (80), and accounting for 39.5%, 15.9%, 30.5%, and 14.1% of this sample, respectively.

Insight into Life Satisfaction and Perceived Contributors to Increased Suicide Rates



²⁸ *Psychosocial Intervention to Reduce Suicide Rates in Tharparkar*, " Tharparkar Project, Lovable App, accessed February 10, 2026, <https://tharparkar-project.lovable.app/#findings>.

Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) by Ed Diener²⁹ was used to measure life satisfaction. The Urdu version³⁰ was administered for this study with all relevant permissions acquired from the translating authors as well as informed consents obtained from the participants. This scale has favourable psychometric properties,³¹ including high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha \approx 0.80-0.83$) and acceptable test-retest reliability. In the scale, five statements are presented: Q1. "In most ways, my life is close to my ideal." Q2. "The conditions of my life are excellent." Q3. "I am satisfied with my life." Q4. "So far, I have gotten the important things I want in life." Q5. "If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing." In addition to the above, the authors also added a qualitative question ("Three reasons which I feel are responsible for increased suicide rates") to better understand the factors that exacerbate mental health concerns to suicidality. This question gives an insight into the participants' perceived reasons that may contribute to an increase in suicide rates in this region. Answers revealed a total score of 23.02 (SD = 5.08) in Mithi and a mean total score of 23.11 (SD = 6.37) in Umerkot and Kunri. For the comparison of gender, females had slightly higher satisfaction (mean = 23.60) than males (mean = 22.70) in Mithi. Both groups reported similar levels of overall life satisfaction in Umerkot and Kunri (females = mean 23.09, males = mean 23.11). The qualitative section helped in understanding the problems perceived to contribute to high suicide rates in Tharparkar. At Government Girls Degree College, the most frequently mentioned issue was poverty (53 instances), followed by academic stress (pressure to select specific career: 28 instances) and social pressures and family issues (forced marriages and lack of social rights for girls: 27 instances).

²⁹ Ed D. Diener, Robert A. Emmons, R. J. Larsen, and S. Griffin, "The Satisfaction With Life Scale," *Journal of Personality Assessment* 49, no. 1 (1985): 71-75, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa4901_13.

³⁰ Ed Diener, Robert A. Emmons, Randy J. Larsen, and Sharon Griffin, *Satisfaction With Life Scale (Urdu version)*, trans. M. Mussaffa Butt, Aamna Ghani, and Shahrukh Khan (Lahore: Department of Psychology, GC University, 2014), accessed May 4, 2026, https://eddiener.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/SWLS_Urdu-2.pdf.

³¹ Nadia Barki, Fahad Riaz Choudhry, and Khadeeja Munawar, "The Satisfaction With Life Scale: Psychometric Properties in Pakistani Population," *Medical Journal of the Islamic Republic of Iran* 34 (2020): 159, <https://doi.org/10.47176/mjiri.34.159>.

At Sadique Faqueer Government Boys Degree College, the leading problem was poverty (139 instances), with relationship problems (72 instances) and stress and depression (44 instances) also significant. For Thar Institute of Engineering, Sciences, and Technology NED University, results revealed that poverty was the most predominant reason (27 instances), along with the peer pressure and stress and depression (15 instances each).

For Galaxy Institute Umerkot, poverty was the most frequently mentioned issue (104 instances) followed by family issues (29) and lack of awareness (25). For Thar Institute of Nursing and Allied Health Sciences, the most frequently mentioned issue was poverty (147 instances), followed by corruption in education (47 instances) and lack of awareness (30 instances). For Sindh Agriculture University, the most frequently mentioned issue was poverty (51 instances), followed by corruption (21 instances) and family issues (18 instances).

Lastly, for Kunri Christian Hospital, the most frequently mentioned issue was poverty (36 instances), followed by stress and depression (27 instances), along with the family issues (17 instances).

Psycho-Social Interventions for Young Adults

Psychosocial interventions were designed and implemented as an effort to focus on prevention-based mental health work. A series of workshops titled "Navigating Crises: Recognising Suicidal Behaviour and Providing Essential Support" were conducted with participants, with the goal to increase participants' awareness and understanding around suicide, recognising disenfranchisement of grief when responding to people who have experienced a loss of a loved one to suicide, identifying any signs and symptoms of suicidal behaviour, responding appropriately during situations of crisis, and being able to provide a safe, non-judgmental space to community members around them who find it challenging to deal with the

thoughts of suicide. Interventions included “My safety plan,”³² “Attitude of gratitude,”³³ and shifting focus from hopelessness to hope), “Social support system and significance of bonds,” “Individual protective factors & personal strengths,” and “Emotion regulation” (5–4–3–2–1 sensory grounding technique, rainbow breathing and progressive muscle relaxation). These interventions were disseminated in one healthcare facility (Kunri Christian hospital), six educational institutions (Government Girls Degree College, Sadique Boys Degree College, Thar Institute of Engineering Sciences and Technology at NED University, Sindh Agricultural University, Thar Institute of Nursing & Allied Health Sciences, and Galaxy Coaching Centre). Three villages (Helario Pir Village, Dhabi Bheel Village, and Bughar Village) and neighbouring rural settlements such as Bughar and Bheel communities were selected due to extreme infrastructure deprivation, with Dhabi Bheel particularly representing a predominantly Hindu-Sindhi Bheel population, therefore enabling a focus on minority experiences. The goal of engaging directly with these communities was to provide simple grounding techniques (the 5-4-3-2-1 sensory method³⁴ and the grounding chair³⁵), and basic socio-emotional literacy (emotion labelling³⁶ and progressive muscle relaxation)³⁷ to support stress regulation and emotional well-being. The goal of engaging with the educational and healthcare

³² Kids Help Phone, “Safety Planning Guide: 20+ Resources for Youth,” published March 29, 2023, last modified June 11, 2025, <https://kidshelpphone.ca/get-info/safety-planning-guide-20-resources-for-youth/>.

³³ Greater Good Science Center, “Gratitude Journal,” University of California, Berkeley, accessed April 4, 2026, https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/gratitude_journal.

³⁴ Trauma Research UK, “The 5–4–3–2–1 Grounding Technique,” accessed May 4, 2026, <https://traumaresearchuk.org/the-54321-grounding-technique/>.

³⁵ University Health Network, Krembil Brain Institute, *Grounding Exercises* (Toronto: UHN, n.d.), PDF, https://www.uhn.ca/Krembil/Clinics/Movement_Disorders/Documents/Grounding-Exercises.pdf.

³⁶ Matthew D. Lieberman et al., “Putting Feelings Into Words,” *Psychological Science* 18, no. 5 (2007): 421–428.

³⁷ Cleveland Clinic, “Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR): Benefits and How to Do It,” accessed May 4, 2026, <https://health.clevelandclinic.org/progressive-muscle-relaxation-pmr/>.

facilities was to equip community stakeholders, particularly nurses/healthcare staff and educators, as they are often the first point of contact.

Educators are well positioned to recognise changes in the student behaviour, and nurses/healthcare staff can play a vital role in identifying early signs of patient's distress. Having the knowledge and capacity to effectively identify these early signs can enable individuals to provide support from a prevention-centered approach. Some significant elements that were covered in these sessions included easy, simple, in-the-moment grounding techniques (sensory grounding exercises, breathing exercises, progressive muscle relaxation exercises), strategies of active listening and effective communication, and practical guidelines on major dos and don'ts of providing support to individuals who are vulnerable or at risk. In order to evaluate effectiveness of these sessions, a pre- and post-assessment was conducted to measure any changes in the participants' understanding or attitude towards recognising suicide and responding to it. An improved awareness and overall preparedness of participants was seen based on the results of a questionnaire about basic understanding of suicide. This form contained questions on suicide, its risk factors, warning signs, suicidal behaviours, and appropriate responses to suicide intentions, which the participants were requested to fill out before and after the workshops. Identical items were used at both time points and scores calculated as the total number of correct responses out of 10.

A modest improvement in mean knowledge scores was observed, increasing from 6.1 to 6.9 after the workshop. Role-play exercises were also conducted in which participants enacted scenarios of the disclosure of suicidal intent. Following the workshop, an improvement was observed in the communication style, with participants demonstrating a greater use of the taught strategies, i.e., active listening skills, open-ended questions, non-judgmental and non-minimising statements. It is important to note that throughout these trainings, the authors communicated a clear distinction that the participants were not acting as mental health professionals. Skills such

as recognising different forms of grief including disenfranchised grief, recognising suicidal behaviour and intent, identifying coping and protective factors, responding to crisis, are all valuable skills that support individuals in becoming more mindful, supportive, and engaged members of their communities.

While it is important to have these skills to provide essential first response support, it is also equally important to recognise the limitation. Therefore, participants were also provided with the resources such as telephone helplines and mental health supports, to use as an essential next step after providing first response support.

Policy Recommendations

The survey that was conducted by SMHA in Tharparkar had found stigma, misconceptions about mental health, lack of access to appropriate care, financial burdens, and a lack of community support,³⁸ which suggests that the existing health policies and services are not sufficient, and are unable to meet the mental health needs of the population. The findings of the present study provide evidence for the significance and urgency of national and provincial mental health policies. A call for action for five major policy reforms is, therefore, proposed to address the structural neglect, service gaps, and mental health disparities affecting residents in Tharparkar.

Mandatory National Policy for Social-Emotional Learning as a part of the Curriculum

It is recommended that psychoeducation be incorporated into the education curriculum with a focus on building mental health literacy and social-emotional skills. By doing this, young adults would be more self-aware and able to recognise early signs of distress, while also becoming valuable sources of support for those around them. Most Western countries formally

³⁸ M. Waqar Bhatti, "Survey Reveals Stigma Barrier to Mental Health Care in Tharparkar," *The News*, December 12, 2024, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1260694-survey-reveals-stigma-barrier-to-mental-health-care-in-Tharparkar>.

recognise Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) or equivalent emotional/social competencies in their education frameworks. For example, Canada integrates SEL into its curricular expectations for student health and well-being,³⁹ Australia embeds SEL in its educational framework that all schools must teach,⁴⁰ and in the United States, many states have adopted formal K-12 SEL standards or competencies.⁴¹

Many educational systems globally are now placing importance on suicide risk screenings and development of the mental health safety plans.⁴² Strengthened social-emotional skills from a young age can contribute to improved emotional regulation during periods of distress. Collectively, these outcomes have the potential not only to reduce suicidal behaviours but also to decrease the stigma and the disenfranchised grief that follows after these stigmatised deaths.

Addressing Systemic Neglect of Minorities

The majority of suicide-related deaths in Tharparkar over recent years have been among the Hindu community. This highlights the vulnerability of Hindus in this region and suggests structural neglect.⁴³ The Hindu population continues to face neglect and marginalisation by the authorities, resulting in severe socioeconomic crisis. Marginalisation often becomes a reason of poor health outcomes and risky behaviours, which indicate a need

³⁹ Ontario Ministry of Education, *Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Skills*, Health and Physical Education Grades 1–8 (Ontario Ministry of Education), accessed February 4, 2026, <https://www.ontario.ca/document/health-and-physical-education-grades-1-8/social-emotional-learning-sel-skills>.

⁴⁰ Australian Curriculum, *Personal and Social Capability (Version 8.4)*, Australian Curriculum, accessed February 4, 2026, <https://v8.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/general-capabilities/personal-and-social-capability/>.

⁴¹ Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), “SEL Policy at the State Level,” last updated 2025, <https://casel.org/systemic-implementation/sel-policy-at-the-state-level/>.

⁴² Terri A. Erbacher, Jonathan B. Singer, and Scott Poland, *Suicide in Schools: A Practitioner’s Guide to Multi-level Prevention, Assessment, Intervention, and Postvention* (New York: Routledge, 2023).

⁴³ “Suicide Cases Among Minority Hindus Rise Alarmingly in Pakistan’s Sindh Province,” *Investing.com* (March 19, 2025), <https://in.investing.com/news/world-news/suicide-cases-among-minority-hindus-rise-alarmingly-in-pakistans-sindh-province-4729584>.

for policy interventions in place. It is, therefore, recommended that targeted welfare schemes and social inclusion strategies be introduced and implemented. Culturally sensitive mental health services should be prioritised. This can be done by training the local mental health workers in the specific needs of minority population. Public health monitoring by the government should focus on minority-focused mental health indicators. One of the many effective ways to bridge this gap of neglect is to allocate a funding amount solely for providing culturally competent care and introduce accountability measures to ensure that the said interventions are, in fact, reaching these vulnerable marginalised segments of the population.

Recruit Local Talent

Pakistan has a long history of poverty, unemployment, and income inequalities resulting in the socio-economic despair.⁴⁴ In Tharparkar, young people are left unemployed despite having professional degrees in the areas of study such as electrical engineering, mining, petroleum and gas. Most skilled and semi-skilled jobs are often given to outsiders that leaves locals with security guards jobs, construction workers, and drivers.⁴⁵ It is important to have a policy that mandates hiring quotas of local residents to ensure equity access to employment opportunities and also empower the community. This policy should operate on the goal of building and retaining local talent. Additionally, it will be helpful to put together a provincial and national database to ensure that due attention is paid towards any possible worker shortages, particularly in rural areas.⁴⁶

Mandating Mental-Health Training for Frontline Staff

As noted above, frontline staff can play a vital role in identifying factors of vulnerability and risk. Equipping these frontline staff members, such as

⁴⁴ Islamabad Policy Research Institute, “*Grand National Dialogue*,” IPRI, July 23, 2024, <https://ipripak.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/GND-COMplete-INNER-PAGES-FULL-22-JULY-1.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Alizeh Kohari, “*The Mystifying Rise of Suicide in Pakistan’s Thar Desert*,” *Al Jazeera*, June 19, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/longform/2022/6/19/the-mystifying-rise-of-suicide-in-pakistans-thar-desert>.

⁴⁶ Islamabad Policy Research Institute, “*Grand National Dialogue*,”...

educators and nurses can prove to be an extremely effective first line of prevention, particularly in the regions that are already low in resources and support. Introducing a mandatory training during the hiring of frontline staff can promote preparedness to respond to basic wellbeing concerns, such as support with emotion regulation, communicating in a culturally appropriate language that reduces mental health stigma, and being aware of resources available to the local community.

Prevention-based Mental Health Policy

There is no doubt around the significance and importance of treatment interventions. However, in the light of the alarming mental health issues, it is recommended that policy frameworks move beyond a treatment-centered approach and also simultaneously focus on interventions that emphasise early identification and early intervention for suicide. Policy frameworks should focus on establishing mobile mental health units, obligating routine mental health screenings, introducing tele-counseling services in all the local and regional languages to bridge the gap in access to mental health supports. The Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives of Pakistan has recently established a mental health planning and coordination unit in 2025, with an aim to launch mental health as a national priority.⁴⁷ Adding prevention-based psycho-social capacity building in such mental health strategies would prove to be a significant step in responding to mental health concerns that contribute to suicidality.

The Road Ahead

Despite facing several challenges of financial, political, health, and socio-economic nature, it will be inaccurate to label Tharparkar's growth as stagnant. The region has come a long way, and although significant challenges remain on many fronts, there have been several notable achievements that indicate a pathway of gradual yet meaningful change. The initiatives over the past two decades have resulted in significant

⁴⁷ Ministry of Planning, Development & Special Initiatives, *Mental Health Strategic Planning & Coordination Unit* page, MHPSS Pakistan, accessed January 30, 2026, <https://mhpss.pk/>.

improvements in the social and physical infrastructures of Tharparkar. Such improvements have had a positive effect in reducing poverty.

One such initiative is the development of coal-based power projects in the Islamkot taluka, where Sindh Engro Coal Mining Company (SECMC) projects have created thousands of employment opportunities for men and women. In addition to this, a policy principle of SECMC ensures that a majority of jobs requiring low or manual skills are reserved for residents of Tharparkar. Many young adults of the region have been provided with technical education and training skills. Women in the villages have also been trained to become drivers of large dumpster trucks that carry coal from deep pit mines to the surface. These initiative are intended to empower both men and women alike.

Over the past few years, the construction of new, high quality metaled roads connecting far-flung corners of Tharparkar such as Nagarparkar with other urban centres, have not only aided in travelers from outside but have enabled the mobility of many residents to migrate annually or seasonally to the barrage-irrigated parts of Sindh to work as peasants on farms and orchards. Women and men from the Kohli and Bheel castes in particular are widely respected and employed in the barrage-irrigated parts of Sindh to boost agricultural crops. When rainfall occurs in Tharparkar such families, either wholly or partly, return to their respective villages in order to plant seeds on their own land and to cultivate crops.

Another valuable area in the agricultural landscape is Kasbo in Nagarparkar Taluka, close to the Pakistan-India border. This area produces such large volumes of onions that Nagarparkar is able to export them to places in Punjab like Gujranwala, Gujrat, etc and enables residents of Tharparkar to earn incomes from it.

Some of the castes of Hindus, in particular the Meghwar caste, symbolises the significant improvements and changes that are taking place in the Hindu communities of Tharparkar. By moving away from their historic association

with the leather trade, Meghwars are among those Hindus in Tharparkar who are becoming increasingly successful as lawyers, teachers, engineers, architects, traders, businessmen, managers, judges, etc., and are excelling in their respective professions.

To build further and gain more in-depth knowledge of social, cultural, economic, and psychological nuances within the region, future studies should focus on reaching out to non-governmental organisations and community-based entities that work at the grass-roots level, and whose members include women and men who are directly affected by instances of suicide, or who have personally known individuals affected by such tragedies. One example of such an NGO is Baanhn Beli that is particularly active in Nagarparkar Taluka, with an additional office in Mithi, and members across many regions. Several other organisations operating at different scales can also be reached out, as this is particularly effective when people with years of expertise, who are also often speakers of multiple local languages, are able to connect with local communities.

Conclusion

Disenfranchised grief, particularly in the context of suicide, represents an invisible burden among young adults. The present study on Tharparkar depicted that while overall life satisfaction was found moderate, the complex psycho-social landscape has many layers and multidimensional stressors that lead to heightened emotional distress. Poverty came out as the most frequently mentioned issue in all the institutions. However, it is interlinked with the psychosocial nuances, such as issues in the family, forced marriages, lack of awareness, deprivation of social rights, and mental health challenges including stress and depression. These findings reveal that while economic hardship is, indeed, a significant factor, it does not fully capture many other vulnerabilities that contribute to the risks of suicide. These intersecting trajectories create complex conditions where grief also becomes disenfranchised and leaves bereaved individuals with no social support. Most importantly, attention needs to be given towards the Hindu minority groups in this region, who are the most vulnerable to mental health

risks and have been reported to have the highest number of deaths by suicide. The community workshops and the psychosocial interventions of this study were designed to address some of these nuanced challenges. These interventions aimed to build awareness, equip community leaders with practical skills, and help in creating safer spaces for early intervention. This paper concludes that a critical need for mental health policy should move beyond treatment-centered approach, and focus on a prevention-focused, community-centered strategy to address this dilemma. Policy interventions will play a huge role in mitigating the risks of suicide and in addressing the silent weight of subsequent disenfranchised grief.■

Mediation Diplomacy and Reconfiguration of Global Governance: Global South Agency and China's IOMed Initiative

Muhammad Mubeen, Sohail Ahmad** & Fasiha Maqsood****

Abstract

Global governance is increasingly characterised by the institutional fragmentation and loss of trust in the institutions. In the context of declining confidence in the existing adversarial dispute settlement structures, a growing demand from the Global South for more inclusive and flexible mechanisms of cooperation has led to the emergence of Mediation Diplomacy as a mode of international conflict management. This article examines China's International Organisation for Mediation (IOMed), established in May 2025, as an institutional innovation within the evolving architecture of global governance. Drawing explicitly on Liberal Institutionalism, this article argues that IOMed neither challenges nor rejects the liberal international order. Rather, it introduces new instruments that lower transaction costs, enhance informational sharing, and provide developing states with more institutional choices to adjust the liberal international order. In this article, a qualitative case-study approach is employed to analyse the institutional design, normative foundations, and diplomatic positioning of the IOMed, using official documents, policy statements, and a comparative assessment with the existing dispute settlement mechanisms, including the ICJ and international arbitration

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regimes. Based on the study of the institutional framework, we notice that the emergence of IOMed results from China's intention to influence global governance norms and the Global South's need for sovereignty-sensitive, non-coercive, dialogue-oriented dispute resolution. The article shows how Global South agency works through, rather than against, liberal institutional logics, while also recognising risks of neutrality, power imbalance, and talk-shop behaviour. IOMed is, therefore, treated as a significant but untested experiment in Mediation Diplomacy and institutional pluralism.

Keywords: Mediation Diplomacy; Global Governance; Liberal Institutionalism; Global South Agency; China; International Dispute Settlement; Institutional Pluralism; IOMed.

Introduction

The world has been experiencing a transformation in global governance over the past five decades -- shaped by institutional fragmentation, declining trust in adjudicative dispute settlement, and growing criticism from developing states that existing institutions often remain costly, slow, and unequal in practice.¹ Multilateral bodies like the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the World Trade Organisation's Dispute Settlement Mechanism (WTO-DSM) have instead gradually exposed their structural ineffectiveness.² The WTO Appellate Body's dysfunction since 2019 represents a structural failure; International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID) tribunals have faced sustained criticism for systematic bias toward capital-exporting states; and ICJ enforcement remains contingent on the Security Council action. These difficulties are developing in tandem with the growing competition among

¹ Amitav Acharya, "Thinking Beyond a Polarized World: Why Multiplexity Matters," *International Affairs* 102, no. 2 (March 2026): 507; and Michael Zürn, "Charting Global Futures: A Configurative Perspective on International Order," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 19, no. 1 (2026): 45.

² Kenneth W. Abbott et al., "The Concept of Legalization," *International Organization* 54, no. 3 (2000): 402; P. A. Aidonjio, "Legal Implications of the P5 Veto Power on the Enforcement of ICJ Judgments and its Impact on the Credibility of the UN Security Council," *Sinergi International Journal of Law* 4, no. 1 (2026): 47; and Ralf Havertz, "The Crisis of the WTO Appellate Body and the Current Trajectory of Neoliberalism," *Frontiers in Political Science* 8, no. 1 (2026): 3.

great powers and a waning consensus regarding the authority of the West's institutions.³ For many developing states, the system often operates as a mechanism of Western power capture. Procedural rigidity is evident in lengthy litigation, expensive legal representation, inconsistent enforcement, veto politics in the UN Security Council, and asymmetrical bargaining power in the investor-state arbitration.⁴

The post-October 2023 landscape, compounded by President Trump administration's unilateral foreign policy shifts in 2025, has signaled a drastic fracturing of the old-world order and further exposed the limits of existing multilateral and legal mechanisms. Therefore, considering the more recent multi-front escalations involving Iran, alongside aggressive Western posturing towards Venezuela and Cuba, the focus requires a shift from Western-centric frameworks to the Global South as the primary theatre of geopolitical repositioning.⁵ The search for non-coercive and dialogue-based mechanisms reflects broader Global South demands for sovereign equality and institutional pluralism.⁶

Against this background, through the Convention on the Establishment of the International Organisation for Mediation, IOMed was formally established in Hong Kong on 30th May 2025⁷ – an attempt to institutionalise mediation through a treaty-based intergovernmental organisation. Therefore, mediation diplomacy -- which long predates modern adjudicative bodies as a form of informal diplomacy -- has re-emerged as an important

³ Zürn, "Charting Global Futures," 48.

⁴ G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 45; and Karen J. Alter, *The New Terrain of International Law: Courts, Politics, Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 67.

⁵ Paul B. Rich, "US Empire and Gray Zone Conflict in the Middle East: From the Cold War to Trump I and II," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 37, no. 1 (2026): 15.

⁶ Zürn, "Charting Global Futures," 43.

⁷ Convention on the Establishment of the International Organization for Mediation, May 30, 2025, art. 1, https://www.iomed.int/files/English_text_of_the_IOMed_Convention.pdf; Kanis Leung, "China Forms New Global Mediation Group with Dozens of Countries," *Associated Press*, May 30, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/hong-kong-wang-yi-mediation-legal-2ef92852a2b13528e3e44be7cada1531>.

mode of international conflict management. Its mandate covers state-to-state disputes, disputes between states and foreign nationals, and transnational commercial disputes. Unlike courts, it does not impose judgments.

This article argues that IOMed should be understood as a reform-oriented case of the institutional layering that expands the menu of the dispute-settlement mechanisms available to the states within a changing liberal international order. The primary research question is: How does China's IOMed interact with the rest of the world? What does it tell us about the reconfiguration of global governance, and what will it look like if it is a success? Within a liberal institutional framework, what would be the meaning of the Global South agency?

The term 'Global South' is used carefully in this article. It is not based on the assumption that all the developing states will lack the capacity to provide for their own development. Those will have a similar opinion, a common interest, or a common degree of support for the China-led institutions. Instead, Global South agencies are seen as a patterned, though not equal, demand for increased procedural voice, decreased lack of respect towards others, lower wages, and less respect in the global governance. This distinction is significant because it allows us to distinguish between the IOMed's early membership, which demonstrates support from a few developing countries, as well as hesitation from others. The institution should, therefore, be studied as a selective coalition rather than as a universal representative of the developing world. It conceptualises mediation diplomacy as an institutionalised, but not necessarily legalised, form of cooperative order.

Viewed through a Liberal Institutional lens, IOMed emerges as a functionally compatible instance of regime layering that extends cooperative logic into domains where adjudicative mechanisms have historically underperformed. By promoting procedural flexibility and political accessibility alongside existing dispute settlement regimes, IOMed

advances institutional pluralism through layering rather than displacement, offering a theoretically grounded case study for how mediation diplomacy may deepen inter-state cooperation in an increasingly multipolar global order. The paper proceeds by reviewing the literature, explaining the methodology, and comparing IOMed with existing dispute settlement mechanisms, and then discussing its opportunities and limits.

Literature Review

Global Governance in Crisis: Fragmentation and Institutional Change

The current international architecture of global governance is generally seen as being in a state of serious legitimacy and operational crisis, as the disintegration of liberal hegemony and the weaponisation of economic dependencies prompt a fragmented transition toward decentralised, power-based regional architecture.⁸ A system of institutions that provided a backbone for international multilateralism after World War-II is finding it increasingly difficult to cope with a changing balance of power and a rising degree of normative contestation. This state of affairs is formulated by Hale, Held, and Young (2013) as a state of institutional gridlock.⁹ Acharya (2017) sees that a hegemonic order led by America has developed into what he calls a ‘multiplex world.’¹⁰

What this has created is a loss of faith in the Western-dominated institutional sites such as the UN Security Council, the WTO Appellate Body, and investment-state arbitration regimes that are now often perceived to be politically circumscribed, normatively exclusionary, and discriminatorily

⁸ Glenn Diesen, *The Ukraine War & the Eurasian World Order* (Deadwood, SD: SCB Distributors, 2024), 2; Joseph E. Stiglitz and Dani Rodrik, “Rethinking Global Governance: Cooperation in a World of Power,” in *The New Global Economic Order*, ed. Lili Yan Ing and Dani Rodrik (London: Routledge, 2025), 36.

⁹ Thomas Hale, David Held, and Kevin Young, *Gridlock: Why Global Cooperation Is Failing When We Need It Most* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 2-3.

¹⁰ Amitav Acharya, “After Liberal Hegemony: The Advent of a Multiplex World Order,” *Ethics & International Affairs* 31, no. 3 (2017): 272.

applied.¹¹ The world of global governance today can be seen to be a more fractured than stratified world, with a focus on the institutional layering and a lack of faith in the adjudicative and enforcement-based institutions.¹² Instead, this fragmentation has provided opportunities for new forms of institutional experimentation and alternative modes of governance. In the eyes of the Liberal Institutionalists, institutional proliferation may be a rational reaction to these weaknesses. New institutions may create overlaps, but they can also provide flexibility, resilience, and institutional choice. IOMed should, therefore, be assessed not simply as fragmentation, but as a possible form of institutional layering.¹³

Global South Agency and Norm Contestation

Recent International Relations scholarship challenges the older image of the Global South as a passive rule-taker. Instead, emerging powers and developing states are increasingly recognised as active agents in norm formation, institutional design, and governance reform. This has largely been brought about because of broader structural transformations associated with multipolarity and what Stuenkel (2017) describes as a “post-Western international order.”¹⁴

The Global IR paradigm outlined by Acharya and his colleagues highlights that the transition toward a post-Western world represents a structural reversion to a historically standard ‘Global Multiplex’ defined by deep

¹¹ Andrew Hurrell, *On Global Order: Power, Values, and the Constitution of International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 72-74; Alter, *The New Terrain*, 335-37.

¹² Michael Zürn, *A Theory of Global Governance: Authority, Legitimacy, and Contestation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 231-37; Frank Biermann et al., “The Fragmentation of Global Governance Architectures: A Framework for Analysis,” *Global Environmental Politics* 9, no. 4 (November 2009): 19-21

¹³ Robert O. Keohane and David G. Victor, “The Regime Complex for Climate Change,” *Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 1 (2011): 15-16.

¹⁴ Oliver Stuenkel, *Post-Western World: How Emerging Powers Are Remaking Global Order* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2016), 2.

pluralism and decentered regional authority.¹⁵ Contemporary global governance mechanisms perpetuate structural double standards that systematically marginalise the normative and institutional innovations of the Global South.¹⁶

This contestation also aligns with the decolonial scholarship criticising Eurocentric structures in the global governance.¹⁷ By adopting a bottom-up approach to diplomacy, many postcolonial societies expand the definition of mediation beyond formal, adversarial adjudication to include community and religious intermediaries focused on restoring relational harmony.¹⁸ This institutional preference has increasingly materialised in South-South projects such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the BRICS New Development Bank (NDB), and, more recently, the IOMed. Membership in these institutions indicates neither antipathy toward liberal cooperation nor dissatisfaction, but rather demands for other forms of institution-building that are more in consonance with capacity limitations and developmental concerns. Viewed through a liberal institutionalist lens, this wave of institution-building reflects an exercise of agency tailored to local capacity constraints and developmental realities, ultimately diversifying and strengthening, rather than weakening the broader architecture of the global governance.¹⁹

¹⁵ Amitav Acharya, Antoni Esteveadeordal, and Louis W. Goodman, "Multipolar or Multiplex? Interaction Capacity, Global Cooperation and World Order," *International Affairs* 99, no. 6 (November 2023): 2342.

¹⁶ Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, *The Making of Global International Relations: A Study in Disciplinary History* (London: Routledge, 2024), 78; Acharya, *The Once and Future World Order*, 142.

¹⁷ Walter D. Mignolo, "Delinking, Decoloniality and De-Westernization," *The Thinker* 104, no. 3 (Special Issue 2025): 56.

¹⁸ Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 114; Ching-Fu Lin, "Pluralizing Dispute Resolution: The Global South and the Construction of Alternative Diplomatic Platforms," *Harvard International Law Journal* 66, no. 2 (2025): 311.

¹⁹ Amitav Acharya, "Decolonizing Global Governance: From Universal Hegemony to Multiplex Pluralism," *Global Governance* 32, no. 1 (2026): 14.

Mediation Diplomacy and the Way of Non-Coercive Dispute Resolution

Mediation is an informal process in which a third party helps people to communicate and compromise, but does not make a final decision for them. It is a subject that has been studied extensively in conflict and peace studies, but not as an institution of global governance. Classical mediation scholarship defines mediation as a voluntary, non-binding process in which a third party facilitates communication and compromise without imposing a solution.²⁰ Empirical research has demonstrated that mediation can be effective in de-escalating conflicts precisely because it does not require the legitimacy and enforceability that adjudication demands.²¹ Non-Western traditions ground this further: Johnston's work on China's strategic culture of persuasion and relational stability,²² and Acharya's analysis of ASEAN's consensus-based diplomacy, point to institutional logics beyond Western legalism.²³

Mediation can influence larger order-constitutive processes, as shown by history. The preference for consultation and consensus of the ASEAN, foreseeing a diplomatic process, the mediation practices in Africa, and the Saudi-Iran rapprochement in 2023, facilitated by the Chinese mediation, illustrate that mediation can ease escalation, maintain political face, and open diplomatic windows that are closed for adjudication or politically unacceptable. With rising levels of complexity and politics in conflict, there is a growing consensus that dialogue-mediated processes may be more applicable than rigid and adversarial legal processes.²⁴

²⁰ Jacob Bercovitch and Richard Dean Wells Jackson, *Conflict Resolution in the Twenty-First Century: Principles, Methods, and Approaches* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 68.

²¹ J. Michael Greig and Paul F. Diehl, *International Mediation* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2012), 109-10.

²² Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 61-63.

²³ Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2014), 29-31.

²⁴ Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela R. Aall, eds., *Herding Cats: Multiparty Mediation in a Complex World* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1999), 19-23.

These are also examples of the boundaries of mediation. Mediation alone often does not address the underlying political sources of conflict and can create avenues and lessen escalation. The success of its implementation relies on the parties' willingness to make compromises, the mediator's credibility, and the availability of incentives for parties to follow. That is why the paper does say that the IOMed codifies a practice which has been adopted by the states where alternative, law-based arrangements are either not available, are expensive, and/or carry political risk. It is possible for it to be shaped by pressures from stronger states, unequal resources, and/or a sponsor's interests. The IOMed is, therefore, not a proof of Global South autonomy, but rather an institutional format in which the politics of consent, sovereignty, and institutional choice can be seen.

China, Institutional Innovation, and Liberal Cooperation

China's growing role in global governance is interpreted through competing frameworks. Realist accounts treat Chinese-led institutions as instruments of hegemonic revisionism intended to erode Western dominance.²⁵ Liberal Institutionalist accounts stress China's sustained engagement with rules-based interaction and its use of institutions to stabilise cooperation.²⁶ This article follows the latter view but extends it in two directions. First, it focuses on the institutional innovation rather than substitution: IOMed is not intended to replace the ICJ or WTO-DSM but to complement them. Second, it explores mediation diplomacy as an under-theorised domain of institutional leadership. Alter's work on parallel institutions as evolutionary solutions to governance deficits,²⁷ and Abbott and Snidal's modular institutional design framework, support this interpretation.²⁸ Three lacunae motivate the article: mediation as a standing institution is rarely theorised;

²⁵ John J. Mearsheimer, "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order," *International Security* 43, no. 4 (Spring 2019): 45-48.

²⁶ Mearsheimer, "Bound to Fail," 46; Alastair Iain Johnston, "China in a World of Orders: Rethinking Compliance and Challenge in Beijing's International Relations," *International Security* 44, no. 2 (2019): 16.

²⁷ Alter, *The New Terrain*, 3-7.

²⁸ Kenneth W. Abbott and Duncan Snidal, "Strengthening International Regulation through Transnational New Governance: Overcoming the Orchestration Deficit," *Vanderbilt Journal of Transnational Law* 42, no. 4 (2009): 521-23.

Chinese-led initiatives are routinely assessed through realist assumptions before their functional design is examined; and Global South agency remains under-integrated in the Liberal Institutional analysis. This article addresses all three through the case of IOMed.

Liberal Institutionalism and the Limits of Adjudication

Liberal Institutionalism, as the core analytical lens, holds that states can achieve durable cooperation in an anarchic international system through institutions that lower transaction costs, reduce informational asymmetries, enhance legitimacy, and expand institutional choice.²⁹ Significantly, this framework does not favour adjudication as the only valid institutional arrangement. Rather, as Axelrod and Keohane demonstrated, collaboration can be persistent through repeated interaction, shadow-of-the-future dynamics, and reputational effects, none of which require binding application. Therefore, liberal institutionalists acknowledge that there is no centralised authority in the international politics but contend that cooperation is both feasible and logical when states acknowledge shared interests and expect to engage with one another regularly.³⁰

The ICJ, the WTO, and international arbitration regimes were all intended to promote information sharing, mitigate uncertainty, and provide a stable foundation for interstate interactions, which aligns with the institutionalist theories of international relations.³¹ However, during recent decades, institutional strain within the liberal international order has become acute. Developing states increasingly perceive the ICJ, the WTO Appellate Body,

²⁹ Adela Toscano-Valle et al., “Can the Rational Design of International Institutions Solve Cooperation Problems? Insights from a Systematic Literature Review,” *Sustainability* 14, no. 13 (2022): 7866.

³⁰ Robert Axelrod and Robert O. Keohane, “Achieving Cooperation under Anarchy: Strategies and Institutions,” *World Politics* 38, no. 1 (1985): 226.

³¹ Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 88; Kenneth W. Abbott et al., “The Concept of Legalization,” *International Organization* 54, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 401-404.

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and investor-state arbitration regimes as financially prohibitive, procedurally rigid, and ideologically Eurocentric.³²

From a liberal institutionalist standpoint, these deficits reflect the existence of problems within the legitimacy and functionality of the prevailing governance architecture and call for institutional diversification rather than the abandonment of cooperation.³³ This moment calls for an institutional diversification and reconfiguration of global governance, where states are increasingly looking for alternative institutional forms more adaptable and appropriate to modern political realities, rather than a sign of demise of multilateralism.³⁴ There would be different institutions needed for different cooperation challenges, which would range from highly formalised judicial institutions to more flexible, non-binding ones.

Mediation Diplomacy as Adaptive Liberal Institutionalism

Mediation diplomacy is best understood within this framework as an adaptive institutional response: it preserves the cooperative logic of Liberal Institutionalism, voluntarism, consent, information exchange, and legitimacy, while dispensing with the legalisation and enforcement architecture that generates political resistance. Mediation minimises the political and reputational costs of the adjudication process, enables states to address conflicts without establishing adverse precedent, and fosters cooperative problem-solving in situations where the political context is critical. Even non-binding outcomes may influence state behaviour through reputational effects. In contexts of increased regime complexity and institutional pluralism, mediation represents institutional layering rather than institutional rupture.³⁵ The establishment of the IOMed marks a significant step in this direction: it institutionalises mediation within a multilateral, treaty-based framework, transforming what has been an

³² Zürn, *A Theory of Global Governance*, 155; Amitav Acharya, *The End of American World Order*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 87–89.

³³ Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan*, 281; Zürn, *A Theory of Global Governance*, 225.

³⁴ Keohane and Victor, “Regime Complex for Climate Change,” 19.

³⁵ Karen J. Alter and Sophie Meunier, “The Politics of International Regime Complexity,” *Perspectives on Politics* 7, no. 1 (March 2009): 16.

occasional diplomatic practice into a structured mechanism available to the states on a standing basis.

Findings: IOMed -- Origins, Design, and Institutional Logic

Origins and Membership

The IOMed was formally established in Hong Kong on May 30, 2025, when thirty-three states signed the Convention on the Establishment of the International Organisation for Mediation. Representatives from eighty-five countries attended, with membership drawn predominantly from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The absence of major Western powers (US, UK, France, Germany) is analytically significant: it confirms that IOMed's primary constituency is the Global South, and that its institutional design reflects Global South normative preferences rather than a universal consensus; the AIIB and the BRICS followed similar trajectories before gradually expanding their reach. The meaningful question is whether IOMed's institutional design can generate enough legitimacy and functional value to attract a broader affiliation over time.

Joining patterns confirm a demand-driven dynamic. Membership weighted heavily toward Asia, Africa, and Latin America implies that the IOMed reflects Global South values of sovereignty sensitivity, developmental concern, and preference for political dialogue over judicial confrontation, rather than externally imposed preferences. The IOMed should, therefore, be studied as a selective coalition of the like-minded states rather than a universal representative of the developing world.

China's path towards this founding moment was gradual and thoughtful. It moved from informal mediation of infrastructure disputes under the BRI framework toward the formal institutionalisation of mediation as a multilateral practice. Key precedents include China's facilitation of the Saudi Arabia-Iran normalisation in March 2023; debt renegotiation mediations for BRI projects in Sri Lanka, Zambia and Pakistan; and China's

role as a venue for Iran-US indirect communications in 2025, with Oman serving as an intermediary.

Institutional Design

The IOMed's mandate includes three categories of disputes: state-to-state, state-foreign investor, and transnational commercial. The procedural framework emphasises voluntary consent, neutrality, confidentiality, and flexibility in the mediator selection. Mediated settlements acquire legal effect only when parties accept them and incorporate them into relevant domestic legal frameworks. By removing the element of compulsion that adjudicative bodies impose, IOMed also eradicates a major source of political resistance that has driven the states away from existing mechanisms. The states that would refuse adjudication precisely because it is compulsory may accept mediation because it is voluntary, and the resulting dialogue, even when it does not produce a formal settlement, can lower rigidities, advance information flows, and lay the groundwork for eventual resolution. In this sense, IOMed's non-binding character is not a design flaw but its core functional contribution.

There is an important distinction between institutionalisation and legalisation. IOMed is more institutionalised than informal diplomatic mediation in that it possesses a founding convention, an organisational structure, and defined procedures. It is, however, less legalised than courts, because authority rests on consent, and compliance is voluntary. This distinction situates IOMed within a broader range of institutional forms recognised by the Liberal Institutionalism as favourable to collaboration under specific political conditions.

Comparative Institutional Analysis

The comparative institutional analysis analogises IOMed with the current dispute settlement mechanisms -- the ICJ and WTO-DSM -- about their key institutional variables. This mixed qualitative strategy enables a theoretically grounded assessment of the IOMed's institutional logic while

situating it within broader debates on cooperation, power relations, and institutional pluralism in contemporary global governance. Table 1 presents the results of qualitative and interpretive coding, drawing on each institution’s founding documents to identify recurring language on common variables.

Table 1: Comparative Institutional Design: IOMed, ICJ, and WTO-DSM

Variable	IOMed	ICJ	WTO-DSM
Nature of Consent	Full voluntary mediation based on party consent; no compulsory jurisdiction (Art. 24)	Optional; State consent to jurisdiction required (Art. 36)	Compulsory for WTO members upon accession (Art. 2)
Enforcement Power	Non-binding - relies on voluntary compliance (Art. 41)	Moderate enforcement: ICJ cannot compel compliance; the UNSC rarely acts; though binding judgments, but enforcement depends on state compliance (Art. 59)	Strong enforcement; binding rulings; authorised suspension of concessions, but enforcement is affected by Appellate Body paralysis (Art. 21)
Financial/Political Cost	Low: no legal fees mandated; consent-based process (Arts. 30 & 37)	Very high legal cost: extensive legal representation; public proceedings (Art. 64)	High technical/legal cost: panel/Appellate Body process; litigation costs; politically sensitive (Art. 22)

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Legalisation/ Binding Outcomes	Low to moderate - non-binding unless parties incorporate into domestic law - process-based (Arts. 40 & 57)	Binding judgments; High Legal adjudication; enforcement via UN Charter Art. 94 (Art. 59)	High Binding rulings; enforcement via rule-based trade adjudication (Art. 22)
Main legitimacy claim / Sovereignty Sensitivity	High sovereign sensitivity - non-interference principle - dialogue, flexibility (Art. 4)	Moderate: sovereignty recognised, but the court can adjudicate Rule of law and judicial authority (Arts. 61-63)	Low: Members commit to the binding DSM upon joining Predictability of trade rules (Art. 21)
Dispute Scope	State-state, state-investor, commercial (Art. 24)	State-state only (Art. 34)	Trade disputes among member states (Art. 2)
Confidentiality	Highly confidential proceedings (Art. 33)	Limited: proceedings are generally public (Art. 46)	Limited: panel reports eventually published (Art. 14)
Main Risk	Talk-shop perception and sponsor influence	Non-compliance; selective jurisdiction	Institutional paralysis; power asymmetry
Institutional Sponsor	China / Global South	UN (Western-initiated, universal)	Multilateral (US-led in design)

Source: Authors' compilation from the IOMed Convention (2025), ICJ Statute, and WTO Dispute Settlement Understanding.³⁶

³⁶ *IOMed Convention 2025; Statute of the International Court of Justice*, June 26, 1945, ch. II, art. 38(1), 59 Stat. 1055, https://legal.un.org/avl/pdf/ha/sicj/icj_statute_e.pdf; *Understanding on Rules and Procedures Governing the Settlement of Disputes*, Apr. 15, 1994, Marrakesh Agreement Establishing the World Trade Organization, Annex 2, 1869 U.N.T.S. 401, https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/dispu_e/dsu_e.htm.

The patterns indicate that IOMed occupies a unique institutional status which was marked by the highest voluntary consent, low binding power, and low financial and reputational costs. Financial, political and procedural entry barriers are systematically lowered by IOMed where ICJ and WTO-DSM impose high entry barriers. The comparative analysis also confirms that IOMed is not the duplication of other bodies, but is filling governance gaps that other bodies have not addressed in the past. Three important conclusions are drawn.

First, IOMed generally conforms to the expectations of the liberal institutionalists: making mediation more institutionalised in a multilateral setting reduces financial and political costs, and it offers an alternative, less adversarial route for managing conflict for states, especially from the Global South.

Second, the initiative reveals the sense of Global South agency, as the states that participate have put forward an institution based on voluntarism, political sensitivity and flexibility of the procedures.

Third, IOMed contributes to the development of institutional pluralism by complementing the ICJ, the WTO-DSM and the arbitration regimes, thus expanding the dispute settlement environment.

Mediation Diplomacy as a Global South Governance Modality

The findings suggest that mediation diplomacy operates less as a challenge to liberal cooperation than as an adaptive response to its institutional limits. Global South states participating in IOMed are not rejecting rules-based cooperation; they are demanding institutional forms that better reflect their political, economic, and normative preferences. It is consistent with what Acharya terms the ‘localisation’ of global norms; the adaptation of the international institutional frameworks to local contexts rather than straightforward norm transfer.³⁷ In this context, a Global South agency

³⁷ Amitav Acharya, *The Once and Future World Order: Why Global Civilization Will Survive the Decline of the West* (New York: Basic Books, 2025), 142.

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operates not outside but within the liberal institutional logics -- global governance evolves through institutional layering and adaptation rather than systemic rupture. This framing comes with a challenge that has long structured scholarly debate on the Global South participation in the international institutions: rather than being either passive rule-takers, Global South states here function as active institutional inventors operating within a collaborative framework they seek to reform from within.

According to Acharya, mediation resonates with the diplomatic traditions of Global South societies in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, which have historically privileged negotiation, third-party facilitation, and relationship-based conflict resolution over legalisation and adversarial adjudication.³⁸ The features, like consent, confidentiality, and policy space, protected by Mediation Diplomacy, matter for states that fear reputational loss, external coercion, or unequal legal capacity in adversarial forums.³⁹ Here, mediation reflects specific normative preferences that reflect a fundamental style of divergent dispute management norms across a diverse international community.⁴⁰

Therefore, the IOMed's design is directly aligned with the Liberal Institutional expectations: it reduces transaction costs, improves information exchange through structured dialogue rather than adversarial litigation, and generates legitimacy via consensual processes and not coercive adjudication. The comparative matrix, produced above, empirically confirm these distinctions. Compared with the ICJ, the IOMed avoids the political costs of public proceedings and the legitimacy risks of enforcement mechanisms that depend on Security Council action. Relative to the WTO-DSM, it avoids mandatory jurisdiction regardless of the political context and retaliation-based enforcement that disproportionately disadvantages the smaller economies.

³⁸ Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community*, 71.

³⁹ Kenneth W. Abbott and Duncan Snidal, "Hard and Soft Law in International Governance," *International Organization* 54, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 434-37.

⁴⁰ Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community*, 81; Antje Wiener, *A Theory of Contestation*, SpringerBriefs in Political Science (New York: Springer, 2014), 38.

Global South agency, however, should not be understood as fully autonomous from great-power influence. Mediation can still operate under pressure from stronger states, creditors, security partners, or regional powers. The relevant question is not whether the IOMed is free from power; no institution is, but whether it can reduce the costs of unequal power by making dialogue more structured, transparent, and procedurally fair.

China's Leadership and Multipolar Entrepreneurship

China's sponsorship of the IOMed should be situated within its broader vision of a multipolar order grounded in the dialogue, sovereign equality, and the development-centered governance. The IOMed sits alongside the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Global Development Initiative (GDI), the Global Security Initiative (GSI), the Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI), and the Global Governance Initiative (GGI), which together seek to rebalance institutional authority and expand the options available to developing states.⁴¹ The IOMed is a new element that can be seen as the conflict-management arm of this architecture. In its practical applications, the IOMed is complementary to the BRI's transnational dimension, providing a dispute resolution solution that is focused on the prevention of conflict rather than its resolution, and based on trust backbones, exactly the type of relationships that litigation-based approaches can harm, not strengthen. At strategic level, the IOMed plays a role in the discourse power of China by providing it with a contribution to the public goods of the institutions as a facilitator and at the same time a contribution to a normative framework where sovereignty, non-interference and consensus-based processes are foregrounded rather than binding adjudications.

From a realist perspective, China's involvement in the IOMed will strengthen its institutional power, protect its overseas economic interests, and influence international norms in a manner that suits its strategic interests, particularly in the BRI disputes concerning financing of

⁴¹ Muhammad Imran Chaudhry, "China as a Shaper of Global Governance in a Multipolar World: Ambitions, Initiatives, and Prospects," *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 11, no. 3 (2025): 232–35.

infrastructure projects, renegotiation of loans, and regulatory conflicts. These strategic ones are not neglected under a Liberal Institutional interpretation. It disputes the notion that there is a conflict between sponsor interests and collaborative institutional arrangement. An institution can benefit its sponsor and can provide other states with extra options for dispute resolution and lower transaction costs.

In practice, settlements mediated by the Chinese have, in some instances, been successful without the imposition of lasting laws. In 2023, Saudi Arabia-Iran normalisation was successful due to the reputational and relational risks of breaking the deal being greater than the advantages. In Zambia and Sri Lanka, the renegotiation of BRI debt was undertaken without any formal adjudication.

The Legitimacy-Effectiveness Trade-off

The core challenge is what may be termed the legitimacy-effectiveness trade-off inherent in any non-binding, voluntary institution: if an organisation cannot compel compliance, how does it avoid becoming a forum for symbolic dialogue without implementation? The Liberal Institutionalism provides a coherent answer: reputational dynamics, shadow-of-the-future effects, and repeated interaction can generate compliance without enforcement,⁴² but this mechanism depends on the institution being perceived as neutral, transparent, and procedurally fair by the parties it seeks to serve. The IOMed's challenge is not merely operational but fundamentally about perception management: it must be seen to be impartial before it can be effective, and it must be effective before it can be seen as legitimate.

The IOMed is best understood as the dispute-resolution pillar of this architecture. Critically, however, this strategic logic and China's role as the

⁴² Chun Wang, "The Construction and Challenges of Public Policy Coordination Mechanisms in International Relations under Globalization," in *Proceedings of the 2025 5th International Conference on Culture, Design and Social Development (CDSO 2025)* (Amsterdam: Atlantis Press, 2026), 941.

IOMed's founding sponsor generate a structural tension: the more IOMed is perceived as an instrument of Chinese foreign policy, the less credible its neutrality claim becomes, and the more likely it is to be avoided by the states involved in disputes that implicate the Chinese strategic interests. This credibility challenge can be addressed through procedural design. Mediator panels should reflect geographic and cultural diversity. Case management should be transparent. Conflict-of-interest protocols should apply to the selection of the mediators. The IOMed should maintain the institutional compatibility with, rather than positioning itself as an alternative to, the ICJ, WTO-DSM, international arbitration, and the Singapore Convention on Mediation. Whether these design features are implemented with sufficient rigour will determine whether the IOMed accumulates reputational capital or is dismissed as a talk-shop. The institution is too new for this question to be answered definitively; whether its structural design creates the conditions for legitimacy can be accessed.

IOMed and Broader ADR Landscape

The IOMed's emergence coincides with a broader global shift toward institutionalised ADR. From the perspective of multilateral bodies, it is safe to say that ADR is widely recognised due to the various legal instruments issued by UN-CITRAL. For instance, "Model Law on International Commercial Mediation" speaks volumes by codifying mediated agreements into a legal mechanism.⁴³

What distinguishes the IOMed from these developments is its intergovernmental character and its explicit orientation toward state-to-state and state-investor disputes, domains that domestic ADR reform leaves largely unaddressed. The IOMed, thus, represents a scaling up of the ADR logic from the commercial and domestic to the geopolitical and interstate, an institutionalisation of the consensual process at the level where its absence has been most consequential. The IOMed seeks to position itself at

⁴³ United Nations Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL), UNCITRAL Model Law on International Commercial Mediation and International Settlement Agreements Resulting from Mediation (2018)

the intersection of these trends, offering a governance framework accessible to states with limited legal capacity, responsive to political sensitivities, and consistent with non-Western diplomatic traditions. The IOMed has to demonstrate meaningful consent, mediator independence, and the absence of pressure on weaker parties, leading to settlements that would not allow stronger actors to be disgraced in public.

Institutional Risks: Power Imbalance, Capture, and Neutrality

Various institutional risks warrant systematic attention. For example, the risk of power imbalance: non-adjudicative institutions are not immune to political influence. While mediation can keep litigation costs down in the public arena, it does not eliminate unequal bargaining power -- more powerful states or sponsors can shape agenda-setting and mediate selection and apply pressure for settlement. IOMed's panel-diversity mechanism, selecting mediators from geographically representative panels based on dispute type, partially addresses this risk,⁴⁴ but the independence of panel selection processes from the Chinese institutional influence has not yet been demonstrated empirically. The connected risk is an institutional capture. Even non-adjudicative institutions are not proof against political influence. More powerful states or sponsors could influence agenda-setting, mediator choice, and soft norms of practice and result in an outcome that gives priority to stronger parties of the mediation process over other weaker participants.⁴⁵ The IOMed's alignment with the BRI dispute resolution is both functional strength and political liability. Developing states receiving the BRI infrastructure financing may face implicit pressure to use the IOMed rather than ICSID or national courts, thereby foreclosing access to more independent adjudicative mechanisms. The voluntary consent

⁴⁴ *Convention on the Establishment of the International Organization for Mediation*, May 30, 2025, ch. IV, art. 21, https://www.iomed.int/files/English_text_of_the_IOMed_Convention.pdf.

⁴⁵ Kenneth W. Abbott and Duncan Snidal, "The Governance Triangle: Regulatory Standards Institutions and the Shadow of the State," in *The Politics of Global Regulation*, ed. Walter Mattli and Ngaire Woods (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 64-68.

principle (Art 4b) theoretically protects against this,⁴⁶ but consent in highly asymmetric lending relationships may not be genuinely free. Multilateralising the BRI dispute resolution through the IOMed could, in principle, reduce the risk of bilateralisation for China; whether it reduces the dependence risk for debtor states depends on the institution's operational independence. Mediation could, therefore, reproduce existing imbalances of power rather than redress them in the international politics, especially when developing states are involved and could accept an agreement that is not guaranteed against reversal.

The next risk is the talk-shop problem. Without high-profile, publicly visible mediation successes that are perceived as impartial, the IOMed risks becoming a forum without cases -- institutionally present but functionally irrelevant. Its legitimacy ultimately depends on its capacity to resolve disputes that matter, particularly those in which the Chinese strategic interests are not directly implicated.⁴⁷ The absence of major Western powers from the membership further restricts the scope of disputes the IOMed can credibly address.⁴⁸

These risks are real but not fatal. The Liberal Institutionalism suggests that new institutions accumulate legitimacy incrementally through consistent, transparent, and mutually beneficial performance. The critical variable is whether the IOMed's procedural design, voluntary consent, panel diversity, confidentiality, and flexible implementation can operate independently enough to generate reputational capital that outlasts its founding geopolitical moment.

⁴⁶ IOMed Convention, art. 4b.

⁴⁷ Yun Sun, "The Purpose and Promise of China's International Organization for Mediation," *Brookings Institution Analysis*, June 6, 2025, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-purpose-and-promise-of-chinas-international-organization-for-mediation/>.

⁴⁸ "The International Organization for Mediation (IOMed): An Introduction," *ISSRA Insight*, August 12, 2025, <https://www.issra.pk/insight/2025/the-international-organization-for-mediation-iomed-an-introduction/>.

Mitigating these risks demands more than formal principles. Mediator panel diversity must be operationalised: panels should include practitioners from diverse legal traditions, geographic regions, and professional backgrounds, with explicit conflict-of-interest disclosure requirements for all appointments. Procedural transparency and post-settlement reporting mechanisms must be established so that external observers can assess whether settlements reflect genuine compromise or merely ratify pre-existing power differentials under a veneer of consensual process. The IOMed must also demonstrate the institutional compatibility with the broader dispute-resolution ecosystem, operating alongside the Singapore Convention on Mediation, UNCITRAL arbitration rules, and existing bilateral investment treaty frameworks rather than displacing them. Most critically, the IOMed must accumulate a record of resolving disputes in which Chinese strategic interests are not directly implicated. Without such cases, the perception of institutional capture will persist regardless of the sophistication of its formal safeguards.

Implications for Global Governance

The IOMed's emergence contributes to three interconnected debates in the global governance scholarship. First, it demonstrates how institutional layering, rather than replacement, can address legitimacy deficits within the existing multilateral architecture. Liberal Institutionalism has long recognised that governance effectiveness does not require institutional uniformity; different cooperation challenges warrant different institutional forms, from highly formalised judicial bodies to flexible, consent-based mechanisms. The IOMed fills a niche that adjudicative bodies structurally cannot occupy in politically sensitive disputes where the costs of public proceedings outweigh the benefits of binding enforcement. The distinction between institutionalisation and legalisation matters here – procedural clarity and reputational consistency are more important for an institution to perform liberal cooperative functions than being highly legalised.

Second, the establishment of the IOMed reflects the evolving Global South agency from norm contestation (criticising Western-dominated bodies,

developing states) to institutional design (creating an alternative forum that embeds their normative preferences -- sovereignty sensitivity, procedural flexibility, consensual decision-making), updating the scholarly debate from whether Global South states have agency in the global governance to how that agency manifests in the institutional form. The IOMed's institutional design reflects deliberate engineering aimed at lowering participation barriers for states with the limited legal capacity. The initial states' membership from a specific type of background signals a demand for this type of institution, which has been complemented.

Third, the emergence of IOMed raises concerns regarding institutional coordination and systemic coherence in the global governance. The institutional diversity, on the one hand, enhances adaptability and expands state options, and on the other hand, may produce fragmentation, jurisdictional confusion, and conflicting commitments that raise compliance costs and undermine systemic predictability. It is still unclear whether the IOMed contributes in any meaningful sense, to adaptive pluralism or governance disorder. From a Liberal Institutional perspective, a successful global governance system requires not only institutional diversification but institutional coordination: the proliferation of forums is only a net gain if those forums can work together rather than talking past each other.

The study, therefore, recognises some limitations of the research. Currently, the IOMed is at an early stage of the institutional development. Its membership base is limited, and several major powers, including several states participating in the China-driven formats like the BRICS and the SCO, have not yet acceded to it. Its global relevance cannot be assessed at this point. The feasibility of this organisation depends on whether it can mediate high-profile disputes transparently and neutrally. According to the existing literature, for new governance mechanisms, global acceptance would require at least compatibility with the established frameworks and some proof of the institutional reliability over time. More critically, some researchers believe that the IOMed could be set up as a parallel mechanism

serving the Chinese interests, especially in disputes relevant to overseas investment and the BRI, where the outcomes in the existing legal forums may be seen as uncertain or unfavourable.⁴⁹

Furthermore, while the qualitative case-study approach is appropriate for the institutional innovation under examination, it cannot generate causal claims about the IOMed's effect on the dispute outcomes or its broader influence on the global governance trajectories. These constraints are inherent to the study of the nascent institutions and invite future research that can draw on a richer empirical record. The analytical contribution of this article lies in providing a theoretically grounded framework for evaluating the IOMed as that record develops, rather than in rendering a verdict that the evidence does not yet support.

Conclusion

In this paper, mediation diplomacy is studied through the case of the IOMed and its implications for the reconfiguration of global governance. Analysed through a Liberal Institutional framework, the IOMed emerges as an example of institutional layering, a reform-oriented complement to existing adjudicative mechanisms rather than a substitute for them.

It addresses dissatisfaction with the expensive, slow, and confrontational mechanisms by providing a consensual arena for dialogue. It is an institutional adaptation intended to maintain international cooperation under conditions of geopolitical competition, legitimacy deficits, and institutional fatigue, through the institutionalisation of mediation as a standing form of multilateral practice, which also meets longstanding calls -- especially in the Global South -- for more accessible, less adversarial, and more sensitive approaches to conflict settlement. Although the enforcement gap and Chinese sponsorship are not irrelevant concerns, this

⁴⁹ Stefania Kolarz and Marcin Przychodniak, "China Launches the International Organisation for Mediation," Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), 24 September 2025, <https://www.pism.pl/publications/china-launches-the-international-organisation-for-mediation>.

design of the institution essentially reflects a rational effort to minimise transaction costs and enhance information flows in a fragmented world -- a broader reconfiguration of the global governance in which agency is to create and supplement frameworks representative of different legal and cultural traditions. Ultimately, the IOMed's future will hinge on its ability to remain procedurally neutral while delivering on this premise of inclusive diplomacy.

First, it reveals that the mediation diplomacy is gradually taking root as a vital mechanism in the global governance -- when institutionalised through an intergovernmental organisation like the IOMed. It functions as a cooperation-enhancing mechanism that lowers transaction costs, improves information exchange, and generates legitimacy through consent rather than coercion.

Second, the IOMed represents a genuine Global South agency in the institutional design, demonstrating how developing states seek institutional pluralism in the global governance and within the existing order to correct representational and procedural asymmetries, thereby asserting the Global South's authority to lead a substantial global transition.

Third, the comparative matrix demonstrates that the IOMed occupies a diversified and complementary-cum-layered functional niche relative to the ICJ and WTO-DSM, one characterised by maximum flexibility and voluntarism, minimum binding force and cost, and expanding the range of possibilities available for the dispute settlement. Thus, rendering the possibility of the governance resilience by granting nations greater institutional choice that addresses governance gaps that those bodies cannot fill.

The IOMed represents a conditional rather than conclusive contribution to the global governance. Its non-binding character, untested neutrality credentials, and structural dependence on the Chinese sponsorship generate legitimate questions about impartiality and long-run compliance,

particularly in the disputes marked by acute power asymmetries or sovereignty contestation. In contrast, the absence of major Western powers further constrains both its legitimacy claims and operational reach. Whether the IOMed succeeds in becoming an enduring leg of the global governance architecture, or an experiment in progress, depends on how this instrument seeks to integrate adaptability with accountability, leadership with inclusiveness in this emergent multipolar world order, in which mediation diplomacy, under the IOMed, can provide an attractive vision of human-centered, inclusive, and cooperative architecture for global governance.

Future research efforts, then, need to include empirical studies of the actual use of the IOMed in the dispute resolution and comparisons with various region-based mediation institutions, such as ASEAN, SCO, and the African Union for evaluating how effective, contemporary, and impartial the use of the IOMed is, its effectiveness in resolving mediation disputes, and comparisons with other China-led institutions. ■

Taking Climate Change Seriously: Climate Justice for Pakistan

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Abstract

This paper intends to explore how normative discourse can persuade states to cooperate and implement policies central to the common goal of climate protection. It will also look into who has the mandate to address global climate justice, and how? Likewise, why does Pakistan qualify for climate justice and what needs to be done? This paper endeavours to answer the foregoing questions by examining the climate justice in theory and practice. It offers an overview of the mainstream theories and debates on climate justice and assesses how well these can work in the Pakistani context. It stipulates that creative, justice-centred policy recommendations that may be adapted to Pakistan's socioeconomic and environmental realities by drawing on local needs and international best practices. This study seeks to suggest ways through which Pakistan can advance a just and sustainable future by making a persuasive case for climate justice at the international level.

Keywords: Climate Change, Climate Justice, Pakistan, Environmental Equity, Cosmopolitanism, Communitarianism, Ethics.

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Introduction

Arguably, states that are mainly responsible for carbon emissions and those receiving its impact balance-out the justice equation. Borrowing from International Political Theory, this paper offers a groundbreaking study for a pre-theory of climate justice as opposed to the traditional studies which mainly focus on the issue of climate change and global warming. This approach may work for making a new narrative calling for global empathy for the climate-induced most vulnerable societies like Pakistan. In doing so, it draws upon both primary and secondary data with an interpretivist mode of inquiry. It examines ethical frameworks, morality, and justice to evaluate the problem and proposes ideal political arrangements. The data sources include official reports, scholarly articles, encyclopedic entries and reliable news outlets.

This paper is divided into three main sections based on a theoretical survey relevant to the study while referring to traditional academic scholarship on the subject as well as international norms, ethical principles and institutional initiatives. This can help make a compelling case for international theory of climate justice. The theoretical insights, thus, derived can help application on the case of Pakistan. The last section suggests the way forward to address the issues of climate change and justice in Pakistan.

Theorising Climate Justice

The contemporary literature on climate justice is comparatively a recent innovation in the global academic circles. The traditional literature on the subject has typically explored the problems of climate change and global warming in terms of its description, explanation, and prescription. This study first offers a brief literature review by encapsulating the traditional approaches to the issue, then it delineates the more advanced theoretical literature on climate justice by borrowing insights from the International Political Theory (IPT), and lastly, it illuminates the literature drawn from the international institutional discourses and practices.

The “tragedy of the commons” by Garrett Hardin is credited as one of the environmentalism’s most-cited essays.¹ For Hardin, the issue of environmental degradation appears to be the realist one where individuals act as selfish herders whose self-interest in sharing unregulated resources leads to collective depletion of commons.² While ignoring community-based governance, Hardin proposes state coercion or privatisation as solutions. Likewise, Marvin S. Soroos, scales-up Hardin’s allegory of the individual behaviour in local setting to states’ behaviour at international level. Soroos recognises the consequence of international anarchy on states’ behaviour vis-à-vis the global commons which he suggests can be mitigated by the international organisations, iterative diplomacy, and epistemic scientific communities.³

These individual, state and regime-centric approaches to environmental problems were later rejected by Elinor Ostrom by arguing that local communities can successfully self-govern shared resources by applying carefully designed, bottom-up rules and mutual monitoring. Ostrom emphasises the central importance of polycentric governance involving multi-level frameworks in resolving complex problems.⁴ The foregoing literature hardly touches upon the issue of climate justice albeit it sets the stage for considering the issue in ethical dimension.

The question of justice in international relations has typically been discussed in the academic literature in the realm of economic justice as north-south gap. When smuggled to the environmental justice, it typically seeks accountability and justice against the historical emissions of global north by Global South.⁵ The emphasis remains on the exploitative practices of

¹ Garrett Hardin, “The Tragedy of Commons,” *Science*, Vol. 162, No. 3859 (Dec 13, 1968):1241-1248, accessed March 12, 2025, <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.162.3859.1243>.

² Garrett Hardin, “Living on a Lifeboat,” *Bioscience*, Vol. 24, No. 10 (Oct. 1974):561-68, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1296629>.

³ Hardin, “The Tragedy of Commons...”

⁴ Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁵ Ruchi Anand, *Environmental Justice: A North-South Dimension* (Ashgate, 2004).

wealthy states of Global North, cost of which poor states of the Global South pay in the form of global climate change and by extension global warming.⁶

Another mainstream perspective deals with the question of climate change as of “here and now,” which means focusing on the need to protect the least responsible and most vulnerable nations from the impact of the climate change.⁷ The question of climate justice, however, cannot be reduced to a peculiar mode of economy or systematic empirics rather it demands certain normative foundations and just principles in order to assigning responsibility, calling for retribution and restoration at international level. Turning to IR theory, ethics has been a much-contested subject. Moral dimensions of international relations are debated by numerous scholars of International Political Theory. It covers the ethical dimension of the relations between states pertaining to justice in war to international distributive justice. In this regard, enormous contributions have been made by academics like Michael Walzer, David Rodin, John Rawls, and Terry Nardin.⁸ Moreover, some notable interdisciplinary work on the issue of climate justice by Henry Shue, David Schlosberg, Elizabeth Cripps, and Naomi Klein offers rich commentary from moral, scientific, systemic, distributive, procedural, and responsibility standpoint but none of it offers any substantial theory of climate justice.⁹

⁶ Md. Kamal Uddin, “Climate Change and Global Environmental Politics: North-South Divide,” *Environmental Policy and Law*, Vol 47, Issue 3-4 (October 28, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.3233/EPL-170022>.

⁷ “Climate change here and now,” *Nature*, Vol 446, No. 7137 (April 11, 2007), <https://www.nature.com/articles/446701a>.

⁸ Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1977); David Rodin, “The Ethics of War: State of the Art,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, Vol 23, No. 3 (2006): 241–46. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24355174> [accessed in May 2025]; John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard University Press 1999); Terry Nardin, *Law, Morality and the Relations of States* (Princeton University Press, 1983).

⁹ Henry Shu, *Climate Justice: Vulnerability and Protection* (Oxford University Press, 2014); David Schlosberg, *Climate Justice and Capabilities: A Framework for Adaptation Policy* (Cambridge University Press, 2012); Elizabeth Cripps, *What Climate Justice Means and Why We Should Care* (Bloomsbury 2022); Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism Vs. The Climate* (Penguin, 2015).

Nevertheless, the present study banks on International Political Theory (IPT) or Normative IR Theory as a starting point. To explicate, IPT consists of two currents of thought called cosmopolitanism and communitarianism. The former tends to adopt a strong anti-statist position than the later that sees the central role of state in fixing the ecological problems.¹⁰ To delineate IPT, cosmopolitans follow deontological approach in advancing their moral arguments. Deontology refers to universalism which means some rules are always right for everyone to follow, in turn, making certain moral values as universal. Put differently, when it comes to humanity, national borders become morally irrelevant. Ethical cosmopolitanism advocates for sphere of equal moral standings, making all humans as citizens of the world. It argues that all humans have duties to everyone else globally, regardless of any other affiliations.¹¹

Conversely, communitarianism follows the community approach, holding the idea of justice as fundamentally rooted in the distinct understanding of human relations in the form of community eventually, constituting a shared way of life. Therefore, membership in particular communities and participation in the life of those communities are morally defining. On the other hand, identities and roles necessarily define one's moral starting point and offers foundations for ethical reasoning.¹² Hence, communitarianism would see state as a morally defining unit, a morally defining actor, playing an ethical role at international level originating from its own norms, values, rights, and responsibilities.¹³ In a nutshell, communitarianism has a lot to offer in sensitising rights and responsibilities of the people at domestic level which may then be extended to the international level too.

The foundation of communitarian justice is the belief that states are the basic building blocks of the international order. This point of view holds that governments oversee rights and welfare of their own citizens, and that moral

¹⁰ Knud Erik Jorgensen, *International Relations Theory: A New Introduction* (Palgrave McMillan, 2018), pp 41-65.

¹¹ Knud Erik Jorgensen, *International Relations Theory...*

¹² Jorgensen, *International...*

¹³ Jorgensen, *International...*

duties are mainly due within the borders of the nation-state.¹⁴ According to this framework, negotiated agreements that represent national interests, sovereignty, and mutual benefits are what propel international cooperation. Climate agreements that follow this model, for example, frequently place a strong emphasis on state-level emissions targets and permits varying responsibilities according to past contributions and present capabilities.

Cosmopolitans, on the one hand, question the state's supremacy and on the other hand, places the moral value of people at the centre of ethical considerations. For them, justice necessitates the development of cross-border moral norms. In the context of climate discourse, this translates into calls for international minimum standards that hold everyone accountable, regardless of nationality, like equal rights for carbon emissions per capita. Given that their disproportionate consumption and emissions are a primary cause of ecological harm, this strategy also supports policies that target the wealthiest and most environmentally harmful people and businesses worldwide. Thus, cosmopolitanism aims to address global inequality by distributing the burden of accountability to those who are most capable of acting. It emphasises the demand for the compensation for losses from the climate vulnerable countries, however, developed countries oppose such claims because they fear legal repercussions and precedent-setting reparations.

The above arguments between communitarianism and cosmopolitanism help us finding out the middle ground or a synthesis between the two. Cosmopolitanism, which emphasises transnational justice and global moral obligations, contends that climate justice must cut across national borders and calls on wealthier countries to provide financial, technological, and capacity support to vulnerable states like Pakistan. In contrast, communitarianism places a higher priority on the obligations and ideals of specific communities or nation-states, stressing independence, regional identities, and national objectives when determining climate responses. A

¹⁴ John Vogler, *Climate Change in World Politics* (Palgrave, 2016).

third-way suggests a well-coordinated, local-global nexus, an indigenous climate action supported and illuminated by regional and international actors and structures. The present study refrains following either cosmopolitanism or communitarianism but an innocuous mix of both, albeit it gives primary importance to the later which has been significantly reflected in the climate governing institutions.

The institutional frameworks, policies and reports offer more concrete analysis of the issue. At present, there are three interrelated frameworks available for climate justice. These include international judicial and legal frameworks, treaty frameworks and governance and lastly, financial and operational mechanisms. These frameworks are based on the ideas of historical responsibility, human rights, and obligations of conduct through international courts, UN treaties and specialised funds. The purpose of these international institutional frameworks is to hold states accountable and protect the vulnerable and marginalised communities through legally binding mechanisms. Under international judicial and legal frameworks, there is a central role of the International Court of Justice (ICJ), human rights mechanisms, International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS), and regional courts.

Along the lines, the category of treaty frameworks and governance includes UNFCCC and Paris Agreement which formally recognise the concept of climate justice as well as IPCC. It provides the scientific assessments and policy advice for global warming related vulnerabilities. It also includes civil society and advocacy against corruption in the climate governance and helps institutionalise transparent frameworks to protect affected populations.

The third such institutional arrangement is based on the financial and operational mechanisms. It is based on the loss and damage fund which provides financial assistance to the climate-induced highly vulnerable developing countries. Similarly, green climate fund works as the primary financial mechanism designed to function as a channel of investments into

developing countries for mitigation and adaptation. Lastly, the forum of global fund for social protection helps cushioning climate shocks and ensures just transition. All these frameworks, however, assign states main responsibility in turn, making them main duty bearers.¹⁵

Pakistan's Case for Climate Justice

Pakistan is one of the top ten nations that are most at risk from the effects of the climate change, despite contributing less than 1% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions. Over the past 20 years, climate-related disasters have caused economic losses of over \$100 billion. According to projections, persistent climate challenges could result in the GDP reductions of 18–20% by 2050.¹⁶ Approximately 42% of the workforce of the country is employed in the agricultural sector, which is seriously threatened by climate variability, endangering livelihoods and food security. In 2024, Pakistan witnessed extreme heat waves with highs of 49°C (120.2°F), led to over 568 fatalities and roughly 7,905 hospital admissions for heat-related illnesses.¹⁷ Likewise, in August 2024, Lahore received 360 mm of rain in three hours, the most since 1982. This caused extensive flooding and damage to infrastructure. Similarly, the flooding of 2022 caused \$14.9 billion in damages and \$15.2 billion in the economic loss, leaving 9 million people at the stake of poverty, 15% of rice crop and 40% of cotton crop was affected due to the floods.¹⁸ In the same vein, over 1.8 million people were impacted

¹⁵ Bonny Ibhawoh, "Climate Justice, Sustainability and the Right to Development," *United Nations Expert Mechanism on the Right to Development: Thematic Study Policy Brief*, No. 06 (October 2025), accessed April 3, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/development/emd/policy/climate-justice-sustainability-right.pdf>.

¹⁶ Laiba Shahid, "Climate Change: A Major Challenge for Pakistan," *Institute of International Peace Leaders*, 2025, accessed May 7, 2025, <https://internationalpeaceleaders.com/climate-change-a-major-challenge-for-pakistan/>.

¹⁷ Khalil Ahmed Shaikh, et al., "Alarming Heat Wave-2024: The summer season in Pakistan," *Pakistan Journal of Medical & Health Sciences*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (2024), accessed May 11, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.53350/pjmhs02024182.ed1>.

¹⁸ "2022 Pakistan Floods," Center for Disaster Philanthropy (2022), accessed May 15, 2025, <https://disasterphilanthropy.org/disasters/2022-pakistan-floods/#:~:text=20.6%20million%20people%20required%20humanitarian,are%20at%20least%20%2416.3%20billion.>

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by the dangerous air quality levels in November 2024 in cities like Lahore and Multan, where PM2.5 concentrations reached 947 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$, well above safe limits. These severe weather conditions led to health crisis including diseases like dengue, malaria, diarrhea and skin ailments. It also contributed to food insecurity due to crops devastation, food inflation, and loss of income base for agrarian belts of country. It pushed already struggling social classes into further poverty. Furthermore, the floods destroyed schools, hospitals, homes and other critical infrastructures.

These weather abnormalities have developed over time in Pakistan. The country has faced frequent and devastating natural disasters including massive earthquake in 2005, devastating floods in 2010 and extremely disastrous floods in 2022. In the aftermath of these floods, Pakistan raised its serious concerns for transformative climate justice, accountability and reparations. The extreme weather conditions implicated in 2022 floods took 2000 lives, displacing 30 million people and net loss of US\$30 billion to Pakistan's vulnerable economy. The government alone was unable to reach all the affected population of 33 million people across 72 districts without extensive international support.

According to Germanwatch's Climate Risk Index (CRI), from 1993 to 2022, more than 765,000 lives were lost and direct economic losses of \$4.2 trillion were recorded.¹⁹ During this period, 9,400 extreme weather events were recorded, and the frequency and intensity of the climate-related disaster continue to rise. According to CRI 2022 report, Pakistan stands on the top amongst the most affected countries due to extreme weather events. These include, storms, heat waves, floods and droughts. Report illustrates that most of the countries impacted by the climate change are the low-income countries of the Global South. Since 2022, Pakistan has been struggling to get the Loss and Damage Fund. However, the Fund and the follow up COPs 28 and 29 failed to deliver the finances so far.

¹⁹ "Climate Risk Index 2025: Who suffers Most from Extreme Weather Events?" *Germanwatch*, accessed July 12, 2025, <https://www.germanwatch.org/en/93013>.

Domestic Ingenuities

The Pakistan Climate Change Act 2017, provides for the establishment of the climate change authority. It assigns the authority to prepare suitable adaptation, and mitigation projects domestically and internationally. The Act also envisages the establishment of a Climate Change Fund for Pakistan to assist the adaptation projects. The Supreme Court of Pakistan has recognised the right to healthy and clean environment under Article 9 of the Constitution. Likewise, Lahore High Court held that combating climate change was the government's responsibility to ensure constitutional right to life. Similarly, the judiciary has issued numerous rulings on the climate related issues pushing Pakistan towards climate resilience which include urban planning, disaster preparedness, health and food security, etc. Recently, the Supreme Court has directed the Federal Government to shut down stone crushing plants due to their contribution to air pollution.²⁰

In the year 2021, Pakistan undertook the National Climate Change Policy (NCCP), which aims to improve resilience and make the shift to a low-carbon economy, as a cornerstone for climate action. The country has also introduced the National Adaptation Plan (NAP) which provides a thorough strategy for addressing climate vulnerabilities in important industries. It emphasises building resilience and is backed by programmes such as the Challenge Fund for Climate Resilient Infrastructure, launched in collaboration with the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Most importantly, in the fiscal budget for 2024–2025, climate-sensitive projects receive 15.3% of the Public Sector Development Programme (PSDP). Initiatives pertaining to climate change receive 7.7% of the Running of Civil Government (ROCG) budget. Furthermore, the government implemented the goal of national climate finance strategy to draw in the international climate funding. For clear tracking of funding for

²⁰ Syed Mansoor Ali Shah, "Climate Justice Is Inevitable," *Dawn News* (February 06, 2025). Accessed May 12, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1890109>.

climate initiatives, it uses Digital Climate Finance Monitoring Dashboard. The purpose of gender and climate budget tagging is to guarantee inclusive policy making.

Currently, with the UN cooperation, Pakistan is engaged in several climate related projects including the Living Indus Project, Early Warning Systems and Urban Forests and Smog Control Projects. At the international level, it is signatory to various Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs)/conventions/protocols and the UN Conventions on the Climate Change. According to the Ministry of Climate Change, the country has ratified all these agreements and protocols and has ensured their implementation too.

Demands for Justice and Steps Taken

Pakistan's demand for climate justice is rooted in its claims of bearing disproportionate burden of climate-induced events like floods where its contribution to global emission is less than 1% of the total but faces 15-fold higher risks. In fact, Pakistan's emissions are negligible compared to over 50% share of four major economies of the US, China, EU and India. Pakistan's floods, therefore, continue to bear the impact of carbon emission by other countries having the historical responsibility for causing the havoc. Similarly, the floods hit harder to the poorest and other vulnerable populations living in the rural areas and on agriculture-based humble living. Likewise, keeping in view the poor economic health of the country, Pakistan cannot move to low-carbon economy without sufficient access to climate finance. The overall situation calls for compensation from the countries who have significantly contributed to climate change. Pakistan is just to demand that bigger contributors to global emissions to provide adequate support for adaptation, mitigation, and development. It has advocated for international support, financial assistance, technology transfer, capacity building, climate finance and justice for loss caused by extreme weather events due to high-income countries' historical and current carbon emissions. The country has actively pursued the course of action to mitigate climate challenges which includes concrete measures at national, regional, and international levels.

At the regional level, Pakistan has been an active member of South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), South Asia Cooperative Environment Programmes, and UN Environment Programme (UNEP). It is pertinent to note that South Asian region is one of the most vulnerable ones to climate change. Most of the countries comprising this region are economically struggling, and they rely on climate financing to build resilience and rebuilding against climate related challenges. These countries, however, are making great efforts to mitigate climate issues. Bangladesh, for example, has launched Climate Development Platform (BCDP) in 2023. It exhibits a partnership between the government of Bangladesh, international financial institutions, private sector, and bilateral donors to launch a domestic climate change fund.²¹

India contributes a major portion of its climate financing from domestic sources including both public and private sectors. The country has also accessed billions of dollars from Global Climate Fund. The small states of the region like Sri Lanka, Maldives and Nepal also launched their own strategies and frameworks to meet the climate challenges and finances. For example, in 2023, Maldives established Integrated National Financing Framework, Nepal, the Climate Change Financing Framework and Sri Lanka. Its Sri Lanka Climate Fund offer workable strategies for climate financing. All these countries, however, heavily rely on the international agencies, financial institutions and intergovernmental organisations to meet the climate challenges.

As a developing country, Pakistan has taken several measures to mitigate and adapt climate action. It has demonstrated its commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emission while submission of Nationally Determined

²¹ Fahmida Khatun, "Review of Climate Budget and Recommendations for Climate Public Finance Management in Bangladesh," *Centre for Policy Dialogue* (2023), accessed June 30, 2025, <https://cpd.org.bd/resources/2023/11/Review-of-Climate-Budget-and-Recommendations-for-Climate-Public-Finance-Management-in-Bangladesh.pdf>; and Manzur Hossain, "Green Finance in Bangladesh: Politics, Institutions, and Challenges," *Asian Development Bank Institute* (2018). <https://www.adb.org/publications/green-finance-bangladesh-policies-institutions-challenges>.

Contributions (NDC) document to the UNFCCC in 202. It requires extensive financing. It has struggled to secure climate funding, however, two of its projects have been approved under the Kyoto Protocol, ten by the Clean Environmental Facility and fifteen of its proposals are accepted by the Global Environmental Facility to date.²² Pakistan being the top victim of climate change has received \$304 million for its ten projects under the umbrella of GCF which is lowest in the region in comparison to India and Bangladesh who received \$804 million and \$441 million respectively. One potential reason for low financing may be Pakistan's inability to formulate comprehensive funding proposals and policy initiatives.

According to Reuters, the World Bank has pledged \$20 billion in lending to Pakistan over the next decade to address the impacts of the climate change. Additionally, it has approved specific climate related projects worth \$937 million.²³ Most recently, International Monetary Fund (IMF) approved Pakistan's financial request of \$1.4 billion under the Resilience and Sustainability Facility (RSF). The EU is also providing financial support to Pakistan on climate change through multiple initiatives including green economic growth, disaster resilience and renewable energy. Pakistan acknowledges these efforts, however, the question of justice remains alive and kicking. For example, in the aftermath of 2022 floods, Pakistan's estimated loss was \$15 billion. At the Geneva Conference \$11 billion pledges were made for the flood affected population out of which Pakistan has received just \$2.8 billion.²⁴

²² Namra Saleem, "Pakistan's Quest for Sustainable Climate Funding," *Friday Times* (February 25, 2025), accessed May 12, 2025, <https://thefridaytimes.com/25-Feb-2025/pakistan-s-quest-for-sustainable-climate-funding>.

²³ Charlotte Greenfield, "World Bank makes 10-year plan with Pakistan for \$20 billion in funding," January 15, 2025, *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/world-bank-makes-10-year-plan-with-pakistan-20-billion-funding-2025-01-15/>.

²⁴ Shahbaz Rana, "Pakistan receives \$2.8b in flood relief so far," June 4, 2024, *The Express Tribune*, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2469793/pakistan-receives-28b-in-flood-relief-so-far>.

In a nutshell, Pakistan has led the case of climate justice by leveraging its position as one of the most vulnerable nations responsible for less than 1% of global emissions. It has successfully pushed for the loss and damage fund at COP27 and still continues to demand grant-based climate reparations and international financing at COP30. The country's strategy combines international diplomacy, judicial action, policy frameworks and grass-root activism to highlight the climate induced crises as a severe human rights violation adversely affecting the different sections of societies including the most vulnerable ones i.e. women and children.

The Way Forward

Climate justice deals with the normative questions related to the rights of the people to decent and healthy environment which also includes the rights of future generations. Undisputedly, all human beings have their right to clean air, water, hygienic food and living conditions which can also be interpreted through Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). However, these rights have been increasingly compromised since the advent of industrial revolution which led to the degradation of the environment and subsequently implicate in the global climate change.

Climate change has much far-reaching effects on human and non-human lives alike. According to the World Meteorological Organisation January 2025 was 1.75C above the pre-industrial level, an alarming situation leading to climate catastrophe.²⁵ This anomaly is directly linked to the disturbances in the *greenhouse* caused by human activities i.e., burning fossil fuels, cutting down forests, enormous cultivation for the ever-growing population and massive industrialisation, leading to the concentration of carbon dioxide (CO₂) and methane (CH₄). The result of these human meddling with nature results in an increase in the temperature.

Similarly, when temperatures rise at a moderate level, glaciers begin to melt and provide water supply to rivers without which there is less water for

²⁵ "January 2025 sees record global temperatures despite La Niña," *World Meteorological Organization* (2025), <https://wmo.int/media/news/january-2025-sees-record-global-temperatures-despite-la-nina>.

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energy production, agriculture and daily use. However, at higher temperatures, these very glaciers melt at a higher speed implicating more water into the oceans, resulting rise in the sea level, precipitation patterns change, and we see an increase in the frequency of extreme weather i.e., hurricanes, floods and droughts. It then ends up making people homeless, aggravating famines, tropical diseases, implicating in deaths and destructions, human sufferings and migration ending up in the social upheavals and political conflicts. The situation here leads to a logical inference that we have a moral duty to protect the climate.

Against this pretext, it is pertinent to note that Pakistan is one of the worst affected countries in the South Asian region. At present Pakistan needs climate financing of at least \$40 billion annually for the next 25 years.²⁶ On the contrary, Pakistan received \$2billion against \$10 billion in pledge after 2022 floods that caused over \$30 billion losses. International cooperation in the wake of global warming and climate change is mandatory for the whole world keeping in view the gravity of the issue and its global implications. The most daunting task in this regard, however, remains the approach guiding leaders across the globe.

As discussed above, the phenomenon of climate justice contains precise meanings that entails consciousness and acknowledgement of proportionate allocation of responsibility for the global warming and climate crisis on states, industries and corporations. It also asks for conceding the adverse impacts of climate change on the less responsible and underprivileged nations and communities including social, political, economic aspects which in turn, provide them moral ground for demanding justice from the parties responsible for the losses. In this vein, the “polluter Pays Principle” and the “Beneficiary Pays Principle” are the guiding principles in the environmental

²⁶ Aamir Latif, “Pakistan’s climate financing requires at least \$40B annually for next 25 years,” *Anadolu Ajansı*, February 6, 2025, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/pakistan-s-climate-financing-requires-at-least-40b-annually-for-next-25-years/3473772>.

law.²⁷ Put differently, it simply means that those who cause the environmental damages should bear the costs of its impacts including controlling, preventing, and remediating it. It further asks for sharing with those communities who are currently relying on burning the fossil fuels due to falling behind in modern technologies and structures, hence, equipping them with needful resources to cope the challenge of mitigation and adaptation.

Mitigation stands for taking measures towards decarbonisation and investing in reducing carbon emissions that may help creating carbon sinks to absorb greenhouse gas emissions and in turn delay and avoid climate catastrophes. Adaptation, on the other hand, requires changing living environment in manners that could minimise the negative impacts of the climate change. It demands pathways to deal with the effects of existing climate change at the state or community level. Currently, almost all developing countries ambling in both mitigation and adaptation, and Pakistan happens to be one on them. Although Pakistan is advancing to ban coal, electric cars, renewable energy sources, reduction in plastic consumption and massive plantation yet the pace of technological transformation in all these sectors is slow primarily because of the lack of finances and investments.²⁸

Climate finance in Pakistan fundamentally relies on the government, and the state-led projects are mainly hampered by limited finance-base, and often marred by political instability and discontinuity in policies. On the other hand, the private sector is less incentivised for shift to renewable energy and adaptation measures. Several industries in Pakistan are still away from renewable energy consumption, for example, cement factories, brick kilns and power sector use coal. Millions of old cars and heavy transportation vehicles run on diesel and often these are without fitness certificates.

²⁷ "Climate Justice," Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (June 04, 2020).
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/justice-climate/>.

²⁸ "National Climate Change Policy," *Government of Pakistan* (October 2021).
<https://mocc.gov.pk/SiteImage/Policy/NCCP%20Report.pdf>.

Likewise, impoverished and poor households consume coal and wood for cooking and heating purposes, in turn contributing to carbon emissions.

Pakistan's adaptation pathways include protecting and strengthening the most vulnerable ecosystem like wetlands, waterways, preserving flora and fauna, promoting ecotourism, green construction industry and jobs, preserving national forests and enhancing green belts on highways and motorways. The country has secured international funding for its Resilience, Recovery, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Framework (4RF), and is focusing on the adaptation measures to enhance resilience to the climate change. Despite these steps, Pakistan needs enormous international support to deal with the gigantic issue of climate change which requires extensive mitigation and adaptation pathways. Keeping in view state's inability to tackle climate disasters like floods, massive thunderstorms, abnormal temperature variations and change in the raining system and its adverse effects on the population demands to build credible resilience through mitigation and adaptation for which climate justice and financing is a must. Beyond doubt, Pakistan today is facing climate emergency and government lacks minimal resources to respond. The contributors to this vulnerable situation needs joining hands with the government to mitigate the situation. The climate-led disasters have forced millions of Pakistanis to displace, their homes were destroyed, and livelihood ruined and were deprived from their possessions and cultural affinities as well as peace of mind. Many of them were killed and caught in multiple diseases and traumatised. The government, however, was unable to offer them substantial support or substitutes. The scenario makes a compelling case for the climate justice to combat the climate-led anarchy.

As our theoretical approach would suggest, the key lies in adopting a dual approach: holding the Global North accountable while building self-reliance through innovative financing and resilience-building strategies. A collective, well-coordinated effort across vulnerable nations can amplify their voice and secure a fairer share of climate financing to address their pressing adaptation and loss-and-damage needs. Courts in the Global South

have a transformative role to play.²⁹ While judicial interventions cannot entirely resolve Pakistan's adaptation or loss and damage challenges, they can amplify urgency, foster accountability, and open pathways to meaningful climate justice.

Courts can be a powerful driver to (i) compel the government to act decisively, (ii) create public pressure to fast-track adaptation projects, (iii) mobilise global attention toward the plight of vulnerable communities, and (iv) by positioning themselves as protectors of the constitutional and environmental rights, Pakistani courts can ensure that the voices of its most vulnerable citizens are heard and acted upon. The judicial approach includes recognising climate finance as a fundamental right.³⁰ The obligations of the Global North needs to be viewed as "Climate Debt." Climate justice focuses on climate finance and more so on 'Reparative Justice' which focuses on compensating communities or individuals for harm caused by the environmental degradation, including climate change, recognising these as rights violations.

Lastly, judicial oversight of the climate financing by virtue of courts demanding greater transparency and efficiency from the government agencies responsible for applying for, utilising, or managing international climate fund can mandate the government to prepare comprehensive, bankable adaptation and loss/damage projects. By establishing a clear judicial understanding that climate finance is tied to the right to life, health, and a sustainable environment, courts can push for stronger legal obligations from both domestic governments and international entities. Likewise, Pakistan must continue to assert international financial institutions to

²⁹ Maria Antonia Tigre, "Climate Litigation in the Global south: Mapping Report," *Columbia Law School: Sabin Center for Climate Change Law* (June 2024), accessed June 30, 2025, https://scholarship.law.columbia.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?params=/context/sabin_climate_change/article/1231/&path_info=Climate_Litigation_in_the_Global_South_Mapping_JUN24_FINAL__Tiffany_Campiz_Challe.pdf.

³⁰ Adeel Mukhtar Mirza, "Environmental Rights and Case of Climate Justice in Pakistan," *Institute of Strategic Studies* (2020), accessed May 13, 2025, https://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/3-SS_Adeel_Mukhtar_Mirza_No-2_2020.pdf.

restructure delivery of funds through grant-based financing. The country must push for fair international partnerships for technology sharing which may help different economic sectors to renewable energy without stalling its economic growth. These efforts however, remain fruitless in the wake of slow policy enforcement as Pakistan faces social and systemic challenges in the local capacity building and national climate change policy implementation. Last but not the least, as communitarians would argue that the climate justice requires reforms at home, bring fairness and equity for the most vulnerable and bring tax-reforms, support the environment friendly transition of the targeted sectors like agriculture and small industries and try to sensitise the population on the issue of the climate change.

Conclusion

The idea of international climate justice can be understood in several ways. The current study has made a case in favour of IPT and more specifically hybrid communitarianism which in turn, seeks to highlight the role of state as a primary actor along with international institutions and non-state actors to address the issue of climate justice. It prescribes indigenous climate action coupled with the regional and international support. It also highlights the just transition of climate funds, community resilience and adaptation strategies along with the possible ways to multiply social consciousness on the issue.

This study concludes that indigenous climate action is the first step towards the solution of the problem, however, considering the financial and technological limitations of the less developed countries, the cooperation of developed ones is inevitable which must be based on consciousness, morality, justice and genuine understanding of the gravity of the issue and justice for the victims of global warming. The role of the global institutions, international organisations and regional bodies are extremely important so that the capacity gap of the poor and less developed economies get minimised. There is a need to sensitising the local population, building community resilience and empowering less developed societies with needful technology, credit, and infrastructure is extremely important. These

three steps are closely interrelated and interdependent in their nature hence demands a 'global-local' cooperation or a 'glocal' initiative for climate justice.

For Pakistan, the advancement of the climate justice will ultimately necessitate both internal changes/adaptations and external involvement/finances, based on the moral accountability, calculated diplomacy, and empowerment of the most effected. Only by integrating global solidarity and local agency can Pakistan craft a truly just and sustainable climate future. The nation's climate policies and their implementation reflect a complex interplay between the international commitments and domestic vulnerabilities. Internationally, there is a need to change international climate finance systems, such as the Green Climate Fund (GCF), to incorporate compensatory components in addition to investments with an eye toward the future. There is also a need to collect historical emissions reports from developed countries and associate them with the monetary contributions. Although the problem is collective yet justice demands to ensure the *Polluter Pays Principle* and the *Beneficiary Pays Principle*.

In international negotiations, models like "Contraction and Convergence" should be used to guarantee that long-term emissions rights are equalised. To assess national contributions under upcoming international agreements, metrics for per capita emissions should be used. It distributes the remaining carbon budget equitably and equally to everyone, regardless of where they were born.

International community should encourage the creation of a separate funding source for loss and damage that is separate from adaptation assistance. There is a need to carve a system for determining and allocating climate liability that may be supported by global legal frameworks. It will help recognising that some damages cannot be mitigated by adaptation and require outright compensation rather than merely risk-sharing or insurance.

Taking Climate Change Seriously: Climate Justice for Pakistan

Domestically, Pakistan should include personal carbon allowances or other forms of individual carbon accounting in national legislation. Doing so will uphold international justice and stop the rich people from polluting without consequence, even in nations with low emissions. Likewise, there is a dire need to include underrepresented groups, such as youth, women and children, in the climate boards and policymaking bodies. Governments should make use of community-based adaptation planning and citizens' assemblies as examples of participatory models. Climate education, community engagement and research funding on the issue would serve the dual purpose of increasing consciousness and advanced policy decision-making. The role of NGOs, media and civil society is also crucial in this regard. In turn, it will guarantee that choices are based on a range of lived experiences and result in more equitable outcomes.

In sum, international community needs to bend back to its very origins which are fundamentally based on an ethical enterprise rooted in international norms, values and laws. The way states collectively constituted international state system that ensured the smooth functioning of the international order, in the same way, they need to work together on the issue of climate change and justice. These issues can be dealt according to the shared values and principles as well as states' commitments to resolve them by well-coordinated international and domestic efforts.■

Book Reviews

Saudi Arabia and the UAE: Foreign Policy and Strategic Alliances in an Uncertain World

Robert Mason, (Manchester University Press, 2023) Pp320.

Rabbab Abbas Khan¹

Robert Mason's thirteen-chapter book analyses the foreign policies (FPs) of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in accordance with the evolving interstate and intrastate mandates. The author argues that both the Middle Eastern economic giants are deliberately adopting a hedging strategy in response to their ambitious national economic "vision" agendas, the perceived retreat of Washington, and concurrent Chinese expansion in the region. Hedging serves their multipronged security, political, and economic interests, supporting regime survival and expanding regional influence for a prosperous post-oil economy. Consequently, they shifted from the symbolic, religion-infused diplomacy to pragmatic, economised, and hyper-nationalist statecraft.

Mason recognises that a monolithic international relations theory is inadequate for capturing the complex dynamics surrounding both the Gulf powers. He, therefore, tailors a multi-level analytical framework by integrating various theoretical strands. Having the power and "mutual fear" premises of realism at its center, the framework combines an agent-level analysis to open the "black box" of the decision-making under Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) and Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ). The author combines realism's insight that alliances are formed against perceived threats rather than solely on power by exploring how individual psychology, threat perception, and insecurity influence their policies.

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Since ideological imperatives can produce “irrational” or suboptimal policies that pure realism cannot explain, the hybrid model further incorporates constructivist assumptions to answer changing national identities. He also adopts David Baldwin’s concept of “economic statecraft,” which views aid, investment, and economic diversification as active tools of FP and influence, not just as passive rents depicted in traditional rentier-state theory. His arguments are based on “complex realism,” citing F. Gregory Gause’s idea that regime security drives Middle Eastern states, while also considering ideas, identity, and agency.

The initial chapters explore Saudi and Emirati FP origins, seeing Iran as an “ontological threat” challenging Gulf regimes’ legitimacy, especially of Riyadh. The “oscillating existential threat” from the Ottoman Empire, regional rivals, and pan-Arab nationalism historically compelled Saudi leaders to mobilise the *Wahhabi* religious establishment and the *Ikhwan* (tribal) militia for the kingdom’s unification and later to use the Muslim Brotherhood for ideological legitimacy against new threats. When these groups consolidated power, the royal authority disbanded them. MBS actively worked on secular nationalism and economic modernisation to permanently end dependence on conservative outfits. The author, however, warns of the inherent risks of such rapid legitimacy-shifting reforms, comparing them to the Iranian Shah’s top-down modernisation.

Mason discusses how threat perception and regime survival shape FPs by examining Gulf rivalry with Iran and the bitter intra-Gulf rift with Qatar (2017-2021). He asserts that KSA’s alliances are often “forced,” e.g., in response to the Saudi embassy attack in Tehran (2016), or transactional, e.g., leveraging economic dependence by detaining Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri (2017). However, Abu Dhabi’s manageable population and an already-diversified economy allow MbZ to overcome ideological constraints and pursue sophisticated economic diplomacy with agility. Despite a shared counter-revolutionary impulse and reliance on external security, competing priorities persistently fractured their unity. For instance, upon convergence of interests, they allied in Yemen; later, the UAE focused

on securing southern ports and tactically withdrew, while Riyadh remained entangled in a costly hegemonic struggle.

While the Gulf States managed the “core-periphery” system better during the Cold War than in the unipolar era, this history foreshadows how Riyadh and Abu Dhabi now exploit renewed multipolarity through ties with China and Russia. This is a response to Washington’s pendulum policies, which have swung from Obama’s abandonment to Trump’s “carte blanche” and now Biden’s renewed conditionality. The book notes that Riyadh’s reactive diplomacy, like MBS’s dismissive “I do not care” comment about Biden on Khashoggi, and the concentrated reliance on courting figures like Trump’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner, are unlike the Emirati networking approach of building institutional leverage in the US politics beyond the White House. Nevertheless, both monarchies view American reliability as conditional, leading to diversifying partnerships.

Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) offers the KSA and the UAE deep commercial-strategic integration, allowing diversification and autonomy without challenging the US security umbrella. Similarly, Gulf States’ ties with Russia enhance sovereignty and bargaining power through diverse arms sales and OPEC-Plus energy cooperation. Hedging acts as an “inversion point” against Western calls to increase oil output in order to hurt Russia. The author highlights that economic and technological ties have surpassed ideological bonds, a trend accelerated by COVID-19, even among long-standing rivals like Turkey and Iran.

The book’s subsequent chapters analyse their political, economic, and security ties across Asia and Africa, extending the examination of their FP into these critical regions. In the Horn of Africa, security activities predominate as Riyadh established the Red Sea Council (2020) with Sudan, Djibouti, Somalia, Eritrea, Egypt, Yemen, and Jordan; whereas the UAE pursued bilateral port deals, e.g., Berbera in Somaliland, and military bases, e.g., Assab in Eritrea. This also illustrates a Saudi-Emirati divergence in security preference between multilateralism and bilateralism. Beyond

Africa, both are moving eastward by strengthening ties with the Asian states, though under distinct regional strategies that, in either case, prioritise their own interests.

They pursue the same strategies in East Asia, i.e., formalising economic and tech cooperation on future energy sources such as hydrogen and nuclear power, as exemplified by Saudi-led initiatives “Saudi-Japan Vision 2030” and “Korea-Saudi Vision 2030.” However, in Southeast Asia, they exert influence in distinct ways: the KSA through soft religious power coming from long-standing religious and educational projects, such as funding schools, universities, and mosques, whereas the UAE challenges this dominance through hard economic power as its primary tool of influence by making massive investments, e.g., funding Indonesia’s new capital city project. Yet countries like Indonesia and Malaysia often aim to resist external influence, as shown by efforts to hold the Kuala Lumpur Summit.

Gulf’s drift away from Pakistan towards India marks a key change in their “Look East” pivot. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi’s de-Islamised FPs transitioned from ideology to interest-based motives. Islamabad widened this gap with bailout hopes, emotional criticism of Riyadh over Kashmir, refusal to join the Yemen war, and alleged proliferation networks. By contrast, relations with India are free of such ideological complications. Since New Delhi is a key market for Gulf energy, offers skilled expatriates, and investment opportunities, the UAE’s neutral mediation proposal on Kashmir falls under business-first pragmatism. Islamabad interprets the relegation of brotherly support as leading to aid cuts, tighter labour flows, and a decreased strategic priority.

Mason’s book adds valuable statements on the hierarchy of economic tools, from “Riyal Politik,” e.g., granting or suspending aid, to coercive measures, like the UAE’s alleged “dark money” in Turkey’s 2016 coup, and structural dependencies through labour and Hajj quotas that increase socioeconomic leverage over Muslim-majority states. The book aptly highlights that, given the perceived unreliability of Western allies and the need for economic

diversification, both the KSA and the UAE were compelled to proactively adopt hedging as their FP strategy. They have transitioned from symbolically religious FPs to economic pragmatism and hyper-nationalist statecraft, which also entails substantial risks of overreach and instability. Mason's holistic analysis explains Saudi-Emirati actions and is essential for understanding their future amid unpredictable global dynamics. ■

Erased: The History of International Thought Without Men

Patricia Owen, *Erased: The History of International Thought Without Men* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2025), Pp431.

***Laiba Maqsood*¹**

“For most of history, anonymous was a woman.” (Virginia Woolf). Echoing this adage, “For most of history, anonymous was a woman,” Professor Patricia Owens, an influential scholar in International Relations (IR) from the United Kingdom, in *Erased: The History of International Thought Without Men*, examines how women played a crucial role in the formation of IR while being neglected from the official historical record. She attempts to rewrite the history of IR to highlight the work of many women whose ideas formed the discipline; however, their ideas were completely ignored. Grounded largely in secondary level of analysis, Owens sifts through archival research, photographs, personal letters, and organisational records to assemble a comprehensive and all-encompassing historiography of the development of IR. Through eleven thematically arranged chapters, the author systematically explores the subject with a blend of in-depth academic rigour and a well-structured prose, which adds potency to her work. The book is an endeavour to give life, respect, and recognition to the women pushed aside from the official memory of IR.

At its core, the book contends that IR did not arise from an unbiased and objective academic sphere. On the contrary, it emerged directly from the empire, imperial rule, and racial and gender-specific hierarchies. The long-told story that IR was instituted by male thinkers in 1919 at Aberystwyth, is questioned by Owens. Through meticulous analysis, she depicts works of women, including Merze Tate, Florence Stawell, Eileen Power, and Margaret Cleeve, who played a key role in laying the basis of the IR’s

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institution, teaching practices, theories and global networks. Their exclusion from the corpus of literature is intentional due to racial, political, and male-dominated decisions about whose knowledge is deemed ‘serious.’

Numerous theories, though possessing a lasting legacy, were ignored because they were regarded as excessively feminine, emotional or beyond the male-centric boundaries of IR. Lucie Zimmern’s contributions, for instance, on cross-border cultural interaction, music, emotion, and art exchange as tools of international understanding, are given scant regard. Owens argues that Spykman vs. Lucie Zimmern should be understood as the first real “great debate” in IR, rather than realism vs. idealism. Margery Perham is another seminal yet overlooked theorist whose frameworks on imperial and progressive African self-governance, as well as administrative trusteeship, inspired the works of renowned IR scholar Martin Wight. Perham was erased from the field because she did not match the male-hero storytelling. Beyond the theoretical contributions, women at Chatham House, such as Margaret Cleeve and Veronica Boulter, are also highlighted. They played a crucial role by managing the research system, editing the major IR journals, organising the archives and shaping the development of IR knowledge. Owens illustrates that IR was developed not only through grand theories but also through “housekeeping work” like documenting, editing, writing communication and public education, which was mostly done by women whose names hardly ever appear in history.

Owens has explained her thoughts comprehensively, including her biases, conflicts, and personal reflections. She reveals that numerous intellectual traditions in IR were removed. Some of these were either completely disregarded, such as: Polyphonic Internationalism by Coral Bell and Rachel Wall, Popular Internationalism and Peace Education by Evelyn Stawell and Ethel Power, and Black Internationalism by Merze Tate. While women, such as Susan Strange, were given an exception because they did not openly talk about feminism. Owens claims that a body of these “lost theories” was either due to their association with women, ideas developed by the

colonised, or viewed as overly emotional, cultural, or feminine for a field that aimed to appear scholarly and politically unbiased.

Erased: The History of International Thought without Men stands out as a measured voice of forgotten women, articulated through a scientific and non-partisan lens. Rich in theories purported by women, the book makes history engaging and impactful rather than tedious. Owens illustrates why certain forms of knowledge persist, while others fade, linking this endurance with gender, race, empire, and class. Her archival work is remarkable, and many insights leave a lasting impression. Some parts are difficult to follow at first glance. The writing could have been more streamlined, particularly when Owens discusses the debates and history of IR. Some bits of the initial chapters erect a less-engaging portrait owing to their overemphasis on the history of the British Empire, and the abundance of names, dates, and concepts regarding the empire. It further hinders the seamless flow of the core argument and its comprehension, and complicates the crucial nature of some details. The use of jargon and, at times, complicated sentences render it a slow and challenging read. Moreover, the Eurocentric approach in general and Western-centric in particular, lessens the impact. The addition of voices from other countries could have enriched the discourse.

This book is not just an attempt at a historical amendment within the canon of international thought, but a petition to construct a discipline that is more gender-inclusive, intellectually all-encompassing, and pluralistic. Despite a few limitations, such as some sections being unnecessarily laborious and a predominantly Western-centric focus, the book nonetheless effectively illustrates how women's contributions have been systematically erased from history. The book is valuable for researchers, scholars, and students of International Relations, history, and gender studies, providing a comprehensive, inclusive re-examination of the field, bringing long-overlooked issues into rightful focus.■

New Cold Wars: China's Rise, Russia's Invasion, and America's Struggle to Defend the West

David E Sanger, Published by Crown, 2024, Pp 528.

*Ezba Walayat Khan*¹

New Cold Wars: China's Rise, Russia's Invasion, and America's Struggle to Defend the West by David E. Sanger provides a compelling and striking evaluation of the contemporary geopolitical environment. The core thesis of the book is that the United States and its Western allies have moved beyond an era of strategic complacency, a fantasy world, as Sanger calls it, into the complicated world of great-power rivalry. It is no longer a single, bipolar conflict of the 20th century, but a multifaceted conflict involving an increasingly assertive China and a violent Russia, both desiring to undermine the US-led international order.

David E. Sanger is a veteran Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist for *The New York Times*. He is the White House and National Security Correspondent and has decades of experience reporting on the US foreign policy and intelligence community. His previous writings on cyber operations and statecraft are highly cited, and his extensive career offers valuable insights into institutional processes and strategic decision-making, giving this book depth and clarity.

Sanger uses the concept of the “end of history” by Francis Fukuyama to suggest that the West was precociously celebrating the perceived victory of liberal democracy following the collapse of the Soviet Union, expecting that economic interdependence and democratic values would unite adversaries into a peaceful world order. The book explains how this premise was

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disastrously false, pointing out how China has leveraged its global supply chains to influence other countries and how Russia has not been hesitant to deploy overt military force to alter the borders. At its very centre, the book focuses on the question of whether politically disintegrated America has the ability and foresight to cope with these two crises and highlights that the decisions made today will define the dynamics of the world for decades.

The author supports the main thesis of the book with three themes that are interconnected. The first is the reordering of relations between major powers, which is demonstrated by the dilemma Washington had to deal with. The Russian invasion of Ukraine is presented as a regional war and a direct breach of the traditional standards of the use of force. The emergence of China, however, is claimed to be a systemic alteration grounded on economic strength, technological ambition, and increasing global influence. According to Sanger, since the US is currently confronted with two concurrent challenges, it must react immediately to the slow build-up of power by China and the outright disruptive actions of Russia. All these dynamics lead to a strategic environment in which former assumptions about deterrence, leadership and post-Cold War stability cannot be determined.

The second theme is related to the changing nature of conflict. Sanger explains how competition has been spreading through digital networks, industrial supply chains, data ecosystems and scientific research. The semiconductor debate is distinctive because it involves the intersection of the technological innovation and economic hegemony. He refers to these tiny elements as the “new oil” of the 21st century and Taiwan as a possible flashpoint where economic survival and military strategy intersect. The US chip embargoes are not only referred to as a trade policy measure, but as a strategic warfare. Thus, the American attempts to limit the access of China to advanced chips represents the growing dependence of strategic value on technological frameworks rather than geopolitical dominance.

The third theme is about internal restraint in the United States. Sanger emphasises that long-term strategy is difficult to uphold in times of institutional fragmentation, political polarisation, and changing priorities between administrations. This discussion transcends the narratives of decline and how, in some cases, structures of governance fail to keep up with the global transformations. These themes are depicted by vivid descriptions of policy arguments, intelligence assessments and diplomatic exchanges. This is illustrated by the early signals of Russian mobilisation, tension over the issue of deterring China over Taiwan, and the issue of regulating advanced technology, which sheds light on the dilemma that policymakers have to struggle amid sustained, multidimensional strategic competition.

This book provides an empirical based explanation of how post-Cold War assumptions of American primacy and global stability have been weakened. The relationships among the economies, political and diplomatic relations, and the virtues of democracy were found to harmonise the decisions of Russia and China. Conversely, the new threats, aggression of Russia, and the tool of economic and technological power by China challenged the limits of these principles. The US, facing domestic crises in the form of wars, pandemic, and political instability also resulted in the diversion of external threats, and the technological dependence on China introduced vulnerability that can hardly be addressed by the traditional deterrence.

The description of policymaking in practice is also another highlight in the book. It discloses the strains, rivalries, and ambiguities of American national security apparatus and provides insights into the connections between institutions and strategy. Likewise, the focus on the uncertainty of the international system presents a comprehensive view of the unpredictability and the dynamics of the modern strategic environment.

Nevertheless, there are certain limitations of the book. It is necessary to exercise caution when looking at the Cold War as a frame of reference, as the current geopolitical landscape is significantly different from the

circumstances of the 20th century. The traditional Cold War was characterised by two comparatively distinct blocs. At the moment, the US and China are closely intertwined on the economic front. Such an interdependence renders an actual decoupling or a simple re-enactment of the policy of containment impossible. The author does not deny these nuances but is over dependent on the binary model of “defending the West” and authoritarian threats. This view, though politically appealing, sometimes oversimplifies the political motivations of non-aligned countries like the Global South, which are averse to picking a side.

Besides, the US-centric approach has also been persistent to a point where there is a limited focus on the views of the emerging powers that are actively defining a multipolar world, and are not fixed on the Washington-Beijing-Russia conflict. The book mainly focused on how the West and particularly America leads the world, giving the impression of the US hegemonic interests and being the only responsible player to maintain stability and international order.

There is also a narrow geographical scope. Many countries and regions that affect global supply chains, energy markets, and politics, like South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, are underexplored. Likewise, the ideological dimension of the issue is covered much narrowly through the lens of democracy versus autocracy; limited attention is given to how the rising powers themselves are framing their narratives or influencing the world order outside the Western paradigm.

New cold wars is a timely book as it provides an account of a transitional world in a concise and systematic manner. David E. Sanger provides an effective narrative to push the West out of its post-Cold War illusions and compels it to face the strategic reality of China and Russia. Sanger manages to employ the metaphor of “New Cold Wars” to show the magnitude and the ideological nature of the modern geopolitical arena. Despite the fact that the book does not position itself as a universal narration and has its limitations in terms of framing and scope, the book is still an enlightening

contribution to the literature as it provides a concise outlook of the driving forces behind the ongoing competition and the intricacy of the new era of global politics.■

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