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The Indian Journal of Strategic Studies (IJSS) is published annually by the Department of Defence and Strategic Studies, University of Allahabad. The department started the journal in 1968. It is an interdisciplinary, refereed journal on national security and strategic studies devoted to research and analysis on military history, civil-military relations, defence economics, defence psychology, international law, international relations, area studies and contemporary problems of war and peace. IJSS is international in scope, with a strong emphasis on comparative and interdisciplinary writings. The opinions expressed in articles and reviews in this journal are those of the contributors and should not be constructed as representing those of the Department of Defence and Strategic Studies, University of Allahabad (India), or Editorial Board.

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## Editorial Note

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The contemporary strategic landscape is being reshaped by significant geopolitical shifts, rapid technological advancements and the evolving regional and global power dynamics. For India, these developments necessitate the continuous adaptation of its diplomatic, defence and strategic approaches to effectively navigate changing power equations, technological disruptions, regional conflicts and long-term national security concerns. Against this backdrop, the present issue of the *Indian Journal of Strategic Studies* brings together a diverse collection of scholarly contributions that critically engage with emerging security challenges, strategic partnerships, military innovation and India's evolving strategic outlook. The contributions in this volume provide in-depth analyses of regional and global developments, examining the opportunities and constraints that shape India's positioning within an increasingly complex international order.

The issue opens with Professor Shrikant Paranjpe's insightful article, *West Asia: An Endless Search for Stability*, which examines the complexities of power politics in West Asia and the persistent challenges to achieving regional stability. The study offers valuable perspectives on the strategic implications of the ongoing regional developments in West Asia.

The changing character of contemporary warfare has been analysed in the following articles, focusing on emerging technologies and evolving modes of conflict. In *Strategizing for Non-Contact Warfare: South Asian Context*, Lt Gen R C Srikanth analyses the growing significance of non-kinetic and technology-driven warfare. In this article, the author demonstrate how strategic calculations in South Asia are reshaped by cyber capabilities, information operations, electronic warfare and precision technologies. Similarly, in Col P Hani's *Redefining Operational Combat in the Age of AI: Lessons from the U.S.-Iran Conflict*, he analysed the role of artificial intelligence in military planning and operations, illustrating how emerging technologies are redefining operational doctrines and influencing future battlefields. Dr. Deepak's *Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA): Evolution, Contemporary Dimensions and Implications for Global and Indian Security* provides a comprehensive study of Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA). He traces the conceptual evolution of the RMA framework and evaluates its contemporary manifestations in an era marked by AI, cyber warfare and space-enabled military capabilities.

In *Pakistan Army: Curse and Boon to a Nation*, Brig Sunil Mishra examines military influence in shaping Pakistan's political, economic and security trajectories. The article contributes to a deeper understanding of Pakistan's internal dynamics, particularly the civil-military relations. In the article *The Enduring Exile: Parliamentary Scrutiny of Kashmiri Pandit Migration, Relief and Reintegration (1985-2025)*, Dr. Deepali Khaire provides one of independent India's most enduring humanitarian and political challenges. The article analysed parliamentary debates and policy responses spanning four decades, offering valuable insights into governance, accountability and the prospects of reintegration.

India's growing engagement with major international actors is critically examined through a series of contributions focusing on its external relations. Dr. Pfockelo Kapesa's *Strategies for Meaningful and Durable India's Southeast Asia Policy: De-hyphenating China, cultivating a need-based relationship nurturing cultural-ethnic ties*, advocates a pragmatic and multidimensional approach towards Southeast Asia. The study traces the evolution of the India-Southeast Asia relations from ancient civilizational linkages to their revival in the post-Cold War era. On similar area, Dr. Aparna Chaudhary's *Resuscitating Ashoka's Foreign Policy Principles in India's Act East Policy* provides India's civilizational heritage and explore the relevance in contemporary diplomacy. The article revisit Ashoka's diplomatic philosophy with India's contemporary Act East Policy and offers normative frameworks in shaping India's external engagements. Rahul Wankhede and Dr. Ankur Yadav, in *Old Allies, New Realities: Contextualising India-Russia Relations through Naval Cooperation, analysis the*

*maritime cooperation* of India and Russia and how it remains a critical pillar of the longstanding its strategic partnership despite evolving geopolitical realities. In *Strengthening India-EU Ties: Strategic Convergence in a Changing Global Order*, Dr. Kuldeep Verma and Dr. Sonam Singh examine the expanding scope of India-EU relations. They analysed the areas of strategic convergence and security cooperation, demonstrating how both actors are responding to an increasingly complex global landscape.

In *Fractured Inheritances: State-Making, Colonial Exception, and the Politics of Insurgency on the Indo-Burma Frontier, 1947–2000* by Priyanka Das and Rimmo Loyi Lego, examine that inheritance across India, Burma, and Bangladesh – each keeping the colonial law of exception – through insurgencies from Naga and Mizo risings to the Chittagong Hill Tracts revolt, revealing how partition reappeared inside each movement, with the 1971 war as hinge, telling one connected frontier story.

Collectively, the contributions in this issue highlight the multidimensional and interconnected nature of contemporary strategic challenges. They illustrate how technological innovations, historical legacies, regional conflicts and evolving partnerships are reshaping the global security environment. At the same time, they underscore the growing importance of interdisciplinary approaches in understanding complex strategic phenomena and in addressing emerging strategic and security challenges.

As this volume has been conceived as a special issue, the publication process has benefited significantly from the rigorous assessments and constructive inputs of both contributors and peer reviewers. The Editorial Board gratefully acknowledge the efforts of all the authors for their scholarly contributions. We hope that this issue foster critical dialogue, promote further research and advance the field of strategic studies in India and beyond.

**Editor**

**Indian Journal of Strategic Studies**

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# Preface

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When the first issue of the Indian Journal of Strategic Studies was launched in 1966, Prof. D. D. Khanna, the then Head of the Department, expressed the hope that the journal would grow over time and attain higher academic standards. Following the publication of subsequent issues in 1968, he reiterated his confidence, stating that the journal would continue to progress and achieve greater excellence in the years ahead.

Over nearly six decades of its journey, the journal has played a significant role in the development and consolidation of the discipline of Defence and Strategic Studies. Upholding this enduring vision, the present issue brings together contributions from several established scholars in the field.

In this regard, the editorial team reached out to a number of eminent academicians to carry forward the legacy envisioned by the founders. While many responded positively, some were unable to contribute due to prior commitments within the journal's stipulated timelines. Nevertheless, this issue is further enriched by the valuable contributions of emerging scholars, reflecting a healthy blend of experience and new perspectives.

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## West Asia: An Endless Search for Stability

Prof. Shrikant Paranjpe\*

*Given the current state of the conflict in West Asia, it would be illustrative to understand the dynamics of power relationships of the core powers in the region and their search for stability.*

West Asia, over the past several decades had never experienced peace, however, the region did have some stability in its interstate relations. This stability had been a product of certain assumptions and acceptance of the manner of relationship between Israel on the one hand the Arab States under the leadership of Saudi Arabia on the other. The apparent understanding was that the Arab world not interfere in Israel's policies towards Palestinian region or question its nuclear ambitions; Israel would on its part not interfere in the internal dynamics of intra Arab relations including the Yemen civil war. Iran was never looked at as a participant in the power dynamics of West Asian state system during the Shah regime since it was closely aligned to the United States and also during the earlier years of the Khomeini rule. The prolonged Iran Iraq war the 1980s initiated the first disturbance to this equation. It was only when Iran indulged in the acquisition of nuclear capability that Iran started to be seen as the threat to the regional stability of West Asian state system. The emergence of Iran as a challenger to the exclusive nuclear capability of Israel was seen as a threat not only by Israel but also the dominant powers the Arab world. Consequently, the Israeli strategy, with American support, sought to contain Iran's rise to power through nuclear capability and to that end seek change in the regime that had challenged the status quo.

Iranian efforts at asserting its power status in the regional state system of West Asia almost immediately after the 1979 Islamic revolution was done through the call for export of Islamic revolution. This was seen as a direct threat to the established regimes of the Arab world who sought to secure their regime security. The use of the religious Islamic umbrella for legitimising their rule did not make the Arab states 'Islamic' in the real sense of the term; for to be classified as 'Islamic' the source of power of the ruling political elite would have to be religion and not authoritarian military dictatorship or heredity. The Iran Iraq war, at one level, may have been interpreted in geo-political terms as control over oil resources between the two countries; at the deeper level, however, it presented an effort by Iran to export Islamic rule into the Arab world. Consequently, the Arab countries stood behind Iraq to defend what could best be described as their regime security. Eventually Iran appears to have developed linkages with various Shia factions of the Arab world that would support the Iranian cause. These would include the Hezbollah in Lebanon and Houthi in Yemen, both of these received ideological and material support. The bombing of Iraqi nuclear facility in 1981 by Israel and the almost muted reactions by the Arab world had an impact on Iran's security thinking, it was a precedent that the country could not ignore. Iran realised that to be accepted as a legitimate player in the West Asian distribution of power it had to establish itself as a nuclear power. By the early 1990s, Iran's nuclear program moved forward with the assistance from Russia, China, and

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Pakistan. In the late 1990s, senior Iranian officials approved a plan, called the Amad Plan, to build an arsenal of five nuclear weapons by 2004. Various efforts were made by the international community to ensure Iran does not develop its nuclear capabilities in a manner in which it can become nuclear weapons capable state. The sanctions imposed by the United States or the International Atomic Energy Agency did not deter Iran from pursuing its nuclear ambitions. Since the beginning of 2020 Iran's nuclear programme continued to expand and accelerate. Iran's support for Russia's war against Ukraine ended Western leaders' interest in engagement with Iran.

The Lebanon war of 2006 was a second clear-cut effort at asserting Iranian military capabilities vis a vis Israel. The war ended in a stalemate with no clear victor, as both sides claimed victory while failing to achieve their primary objectives. While Hezbollah claimed a victory for standing against the Israeli military, Israel failed to achieve a clear victory. The 2023 attack on Israel by Hamas brought the Iran factor into discussion. Iran has been Hamas' strategic supporter providing it with military equipment, training and financial aid. Iran's responsibility for the specifics of the 2023 attack remain unclear, but there have been accusations of Iran's support for the attack. The end of the Assad regime in Syria and the curbing of the Hezbollah in Lebanon presented an opportune time for Israel to attack the Iranian nuclear facilities in 2025. The rationale used was of not of an immediate threat from Iran of becoming a nuclear weapons power, but that of a future likelihood of Iran going nuclear, a matter of concern for both, Israel and the Arab world. The Israeli and the American attack may have setback the Iranian programme and Iran did make a symbolic counter attack against American bases. The 2025 attack, in fact, became a catalyst for a change in mindset of Iran. According to historian Shahram Kholdi, Tehran did not read 2025 as a loss, instead the leadership internalised 2025 through a survivalist lens, it generated a feeling of defiance rather than restraint; the attacks that sought to kill Iran actually made it stronger. Iran would have anticipated that the second attack was inevitable, it would only be a matter of time. The American position became clear in early 2026 after the visit of Israeli Prime Minister to Washington DC. The belief in the utility of negotiations at Oman was non-existent for the United States and as domestic unrest spread in Iran the American position became more articulate; President Trump supported the agitation and called for regime change and later

shifted focus to Iran's nuclear enterprise. Eventually, Israel initiated bombing of Iran followed by the United States. The American aim was to prevent Iran from acquiring the ability to project power outside of its borders, eliminate its ballistic missile capability, contain its nuclear ambitions and destroy other security infrastructure. In a short time, Iran reacted with its own counter attacks. Iranian strategy would have been based on the realisation of a possible confrontation with Israel and the United States. It was based on a decentralised command structure that would allow the command structures to operate within pre-approved targeting parameters even if the central command structure is destroyed. Iran also threatened to expand its retaliation beyond Israeli territory to include regional sites hosting American military personnel as legitimate targets. The war would thus become a regional conflict that would include the closure of the Strait of Hormuz.

The West Asian crisis saw a tentative cease fire in April 2026. It is a cease fire that continues to appear tenuous, given the lack of clarity about the mutually agreed terms by all the three parties, United States, Iran and Israel. On this background, certain observations are relevant:

1. The roots of the current conflict can, in a sense, be traced to the Hamas strike on Israel in 2023. Given the fundamental differences in goals of all the participants in the conflict, it is unlikely that the conflict would end on any decisive note. Israel's struggle, since its creation has been for legitimacy of its existence and the de jure recognition of the state by its neighbours. In the post Madrid Peace talks era some of the Arab states have given this legitimacy to Israel. In contrast, some of its neighbours continue to maintain the illegality of the very existence of the Jewish state. The Iranian factor crept into this after Iran started to demand space in the power equations of this region. The core of the dispute remains between Israel and Palestine with a fall out in Lebanon. The extra-regional factors are the interests of the big powers either in terms of the dependence on oil or the exercise of power influence to counter claims of other big powers. Consequently, until the core issues are settled the conflict will continue to simmer with occasional flaring up into an overt conflict. In terms of extra-regional influences, the United States has played a vital and dominant role as an influencer in the region. The Arab acceptance of this role evolved in the post Camp David accords (1978) era and was slowly confirmed in the aftermath

of the Kuwait war, the Madrid Peace Talks and the post Saddam Hussain scenario. On the other hand, there had been a slow erosion in Soviet and later Russian activism in the region; China or the European Union had never played any serious role in the region. The United States had been accepted by the Arab world as a guarantor of security and stability in lieu of which it was granted extensive military base access that in normal circumstances would have been looked at as an infringement on national sovereignty. The current Iran war has appeared to have exploded this illusion of security guarantee.

2. Both the United States and Israel have shifted their public positions on the primary goal of the war. Both focussed on regime change since the Islamic regime had refused to accept the western rules-based order that the Arab states were willing to acquiescence. The presumption was that there was a widespread discontent about the current regime and given the opportunity there would be a public protest that would lead to the overthrow of the regime. President Trump had openly urged to people of Iran to take over the reigns of power. However, the history of regime changes attempted by the United States in this part of the world tell a different story. The Research Briefing of the House of Commons Library admits that after the long-time dictator of Libya, Muammar Gaddafi, was overthrown in 2011 with the help of UK and western forces the country has been marked by division and conflict ever since. Afghanistan went through a whole process of experimenting with a representative system of government based on an Anglo-American model of democracy and failed; the Taliban returned to power. The American wish to build a democratic Iraq after the removal of Saddam Hussain has remained unfulfilled. The Iraqi armed forces do not have full control over the Iraqi jurisdiction; beside the presence of various militant groups, Türkiye's security forces and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps have a continued presence. The fall of Syria's Assad, the takeover by pro-western new rulers led by Ahmed al-Sharaa who sought to reintegrate the country into the global community has been welcomed by the western governments. However, the justice system is unable to quickly process old grievances leading to new cycles of violence. Further, activists complain that the new political affairs bureau appears to function as a new political security apparatus. Consequently,
3. The question remains, what were the real aims of the attack against Iran in 2025 and then in 2026? It is necessary to look beyond the loud public posturing about the aims of war of both the United States and Israel to understand the geopolitical and geo-economic compulsions of the two states. Both, the United States and Israel along with the Arab world had opposed the rise of militant Iran especially under the Islamic regime as it threatened to status quo of the West Asian state system. Iran represented a challenge to the regime security of the Arab states as Iran sought to export Islamic revolution in the region. In real terms it meant a shift in power from the entrenched traditional regimes that sought legitimacy through heredity or military dictatorship to the religious leaders. The United States had succeeded in replacing the then Soviet Union as a key broker in West Asia since the Camp David Agreements done under President Carter (1978). It entrenched itself through the establishment of several military basis across the Gulf region that ensured its interests were protected, including the providing of a security umbrella to Israel. The Islamic Iran had challenged this arrangement unilaterally and with the help of its allies the Hezbollah, Houthis and the Hamas; consequently, the need to contain Iran and curb its ambitions. The nuclear ambitions were sought to be curbed through the IAEA safeguards, the power ambitions were curbed through the use of military force. The real 'success' of the United States in the current war is not what President Trump is propagating, but in the ability of the United States and Israel along with the help of the Arab allies in 'containing' Iran, at least in the short term. It needs to be noted that any future power realignment cannot ignore the American interests in the region. Given the exhaustion that Russia is facing due

to its prolonged conflict with Ukraine, its ability to counter American influence would at best, be limited. It is not unlikely that it colludes with the United States in the maintenance of order in West Asia. Similarly, Chinese primary interest would lie more in countering the United States in the Pacific region; it would watch closely the developments in the Iran war, but its direct intervention in the region appears unlikely. European ability to intervene in this region is extremely limited. Europe, minus the NATO does not have the capability for unilateral intervention. European military capabilities have been strained due to the Ukraine conflict and given the tension created due to the Trump policy about NATO the European intervention would only be in form of protestations. In case this containment holds for some period of time, it is conceivable that Iran and the United States may have a dialogue so as to accommodate Iran as a critical player in the distribution of power of the West Asian state system. In real terms, while peace is an unrealistic expectation, regaining stability in West Asia can be a means to status quo. If this succeeds Russia and China would both be out of the West Asian loop and the American dominated world order would continue to prevail. Only such an arrangement can spell stability for the region.

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# Strategizing for Non-Contact Warfare: South Asian Context

LT Gen R C Srikanth\* & AVSM, VSM

*"In the age of Grey Zone and Hybrid warfare where cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns, and economic warfare have become tools that can achieve politico-military aims without a single shot being fired".*

**Shri Rajnath Singh,**

*Honorable Raksha Mantri addressing DSSC, Wellington<sup>1</sup>*

*"For a long time both politicians and military have become accustomed to employing a certain mode of thinking, that is, major factor posing a threat to national security is the military power of an enemy state or potential enemy state.....however, military threats are already often no longer the major factors affecting national security.....the traditional factors of war fighting are increasingly becoming intertwined with grabbing resources, contending for markets, controlling capital, trade sanctions to extent that they even become secondary to these factors.... These pattern does not have the slightest military hue from the outside"*

## Strategic Context

*Op Sindoor* showcased a telescoped kaleidoscope of the application of Non-Contact Warfare capabilities (Military and Non-Military) by India and Pakistan across various domains. The operation was organized and conducted by India as a response and reaction to terror strike at *Pahalgam* and apparently not as part of a sustained long-term campaign. However, it did serve to highlight key tenets of the non-contact Warfare paradigm even in limited or very short conflict window (22 April 25 to 10 May 25). **The fundamental premise and capability matrix of Non-Contact Warfare as evidenced during the recent conflict and other such engagements across the world do raise questions on the conventional understanding of war and urges the planned to redefine the strategic outlook to conventional operations.** In the Non-Contact Warfare mosaic, the physical parameters of a nation identified by its territory, air space or maritime space are not necessarily initial or intermediate targets, the objectives are in all probability to graduate a nation towards 'natural internal subversion' of its

**'Will' by a steady and unobtrusive non-military methodology that turns a 'competitor' into a 'vassal' state.** It will be wholly optimistic to hazard a time line to effect such an operation, however, in case of Crimean annexation, the Russian operation was swift and extremely prompt, however, its preparation was extensive and prolonged to create the impact that it did in Crimea. In case of Taiwan as brought by *ibid* research it is still a work in progress since 1949, however the transition to pure peaceful assimilation is now graduating towards assertive / aggressive assimilation through non-contact coercive means. In terms of pure capabilities as exemplified by the Comprehensive National Power (CNP) of India's potential adversaries, Non-Contact Warfare capabilities against India in the regional context is more likely to be orchestrated efficiently by China. Pakistan, though has manifested it overtly and covertly against India since partition, while China has applied it more gradually through multiple actions (renaming areas in Arunachal Pradesh, border skirmishes, stapled visas, trade domination, strategic enticement of India's neighbors, footprint in Indian Ocean region, diplomatic support to India's

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\* Lt Gen R. C. Srikanth, Commandant of the Army Air Defence College (AADC), Gopalpur, Odisha. He also served as the Chief of Staff at the Headquarters, Eastern Command.

opponents etc.) over years. It is becoming apparent that China and Pakistan now project a 'fused front' as far as Non-Military Non-Contact Warfare is concerned against India.

**Strategic Concept.** The conceptual framework within which Non-Contact Warfare may require to be orchestrated could be considered under two distinct facets - **Non-Contact Offense and Non-Contact Defense.** The execution of the concept to prosecute the operations in these dimensions of Non-Contact warfare could take place in two scenarios - reactionary or proactive, as under:

- Crisis Management Approach - Reactionary.
- Offensive - Defense Strategy (Insulate vulnerabilities and deterrence capabilities) - Proactive.

**Crisis Management Approach.** The crisis is defined by unexpected turn of events that impacts the national psyche and standing immeasurably and requires to be responded to across domains through demonstrable and covert actions. The strategic necessity to respond demonstrably in critical in such a situation. The broad contours of the approach could be as under:

**Intent. To respond, contain and moderate damage** to nation's core vulnerabilities/capabilities by adversarial Non-Contact Warfare abilities in peace or near peace environment. The strategy is reactive in nature and builds in expanded deterrence. It is akin to responding to a natural and manmade disaster. The specific capability set in each escalation continuum is critical to be identified and holistic approach to address crisis situation requires institutionalization. The prime factor guiding the intent is to discernibly response and re-establish strategic superiority where initiative had been wrested by the adversary due to its non-contact actions.

**Context.** The reactive strategy resides in the belief that the national institutional, structural, technological or organizational abilities to address the vast spectrum of Non-Contact Warfare threats in peace or near peace either in the same domain, cross domain or multi-domain in a time frame of own choosing could be effectively employed '**when faced with a situation**'. The decision making and its narrative building requires would be evolved with deliberation and orchestration undertaken with multi-agency involvement while living within the manifested time sensitive threat environment. The Reactionary concept thus would need to be rolled out in a strategic setting of intense media glare, public expectation, international pressure, political

stress and diplomatic flux within a stipulated time zone to prevent the crisis from exploding into other dimensions. Thus, besides the 'Crisis Management Team' it may require augmentation and incorporation of certain subject matter experts that have domain expertise to 'Red Team' response options and game outcomes from a strategic and grand strategic outlook. The 'Reactionary' approach would of necessity be incremental in nature, entailing gigantic outreach to 'shape the opinions', build public trust, identify the affirmative/demonstrable action points, ascertain arenas of response, vectors (kinetic, kinetic or combination) to be employed and 'clean and clear' enunciation of methodology confining the crisis within acceptable limits and prevent its degeneration into extended conflict or war.

**Offense - Defense Strategy.** The offense defense is a deliberate strategy evolved after due consideration of 'national interests', security imperatives and priorities' mapping *interse* leverages, identification of own and competitors vulnerabilities, identification of arenas of conflicts and discord, visualizing end states over the a span of time and lines of application of national effort to realize the national aim through application of consortium of 'National Capabilities' orchestrated through the mosaic of Non-Contact Warfare strategic concept.

**Intent.** The intent would be to **assure** defense of national core capabilities/interests against Non-Contact Warfare threats, **deter** potential adversary from applying Non-Contact Warfare capabilities in peace, crisis or wartime and **defeat** the adversary in the non-contact warfare domains and sustain the national core interests.

**Concept.** To evolve comprehensive capabilities towards existing and potential Non-Contact Warfare threats and addressing them by synergizing the capabilities of nation across a cross-section of arenas and theatres through institutional structures. The capabilities may include space, communications, Chemical Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN), diplomacy, disaster response, finance, economy, trade, ecology and environment, internal security etc. It would also include developing quid-pro-quo abilities in all these fields to deflect or deter the enemy in employing these abilities against the nation. The universal approach to addressing non-contact warfare threats would facilitate integrating the capabilities of armed forces, scientific establishments, governance mechanisms and other stake holders into an institution. This in turn would enable the nation to generate effective countermeasure to defend targets, respond to Non-Contact Warfare threats in the same or

other arenas and where required undertake offensive actions against the adversary in the Non-Contact or Contact domain in a measured manner with a long-term view. Crisis management would thus form an organic part of the Offense-Defense Strategy.

The execution of Non-Contact Warfare may occur along multiple lines of operations (Political, Diplomatic, Informational, Economic, Military and Technology) though the sequence of application may vary<sup>2</sup>: In effect the

Gerasimov Doctrine highlighted may provide the guide on how non-contact warfare operations may manifest against a nation and it is unlikely to be any different in the subcontinental context and may follow the steps given but necessarily in the same order:

**Build Moral Justification.** An adversary would invest critical political capital to build a case for outcome it desires to fulfil its national interest. This justification may be political, territorial, economic, resources or anything. It would focus on reinforcing a sense of victimhood supplanted with questionable legal / ancestral data. This would be the fundamental requirement for generating disagreements and discord. The manifestation of the aforesaid may occur through application of Non-Military warfare abilities over prolonged periods encompassing information, moral, resource, psychological, ideological, diplomatic, economic measures as part of a plan to target the state and stimulate favorable political, diplomatic, economic and military situation concurrent to embedding a positive public opinion. Ideally, the adversary would aspire that realization of its national interest leads to an apparent 'Win-Win' formulation.

**Subversion of Leadership.** Leadership capitulation is the most critical component of any adversarial action. The Non-Contact Warfare formulation is not aimed to disrupt leadership architecture of adversary state unless it is unavoidable. The application of capabilities would exploit the political vulnerability of 'Leader as an individual' and thence seek outcomes desired. Persuasion, Intimidation, deception or subversion would be the means adopted against the strategic leadership or the Influencers with the objective of making them take favorable decisions based on engineered public opinion or targeted information ambushes.

2 Russia's New Generation Warfare in Ukraine: Implications For Latvian Defense Policy, National Defence Academy of Latvia, Center for Security and Strategic Research, Policy Paper no 02 April 2014.

**Population Operations.** Population is the strength as well as weakness of any state. Population is also the 'follower' of discontent and dissatisfaction. The recent 'Nepal uprising' of Gen Z is a clear indication of how population anger can burst without warning against the state. The information environment of the day and future would keep the states always prone to manipulation of population sentiment. More so in open societies this may cause intense polarization and disruption of harmony. An adversary may use intense propaganda to enhance discord and discontent amongst the population, forced internal displacement of population heightened ethnic and sectarian strife coupled with application of special forces especially in border areas and intense diplomacy in the international arena based on legal and cultural rights. Historically, the huge migration that followed the independence of India and Pakistan is a classic example of population operations of Muslim League which preyed on fears of 'Minority' Muslims to generate conditions of political migration of otherwise stable communities living on either side of current Radcliff Line.

**Diplomatic Intrigue.** Diplomacy has been effectively weaponized and is applied with that intent in engagement with adversaries and allies. The Trumpian approach of 'diplomatic intimidation' followed by 'diplomatic accommodation' with all its allies and adversary alike for reaffirming its dominant position is a reflection of a weaponized diplomacy. *Kautiliya* in his famous treatise *Arthashastra* argued that diplomacy is actually an act of subtle war, a series of action taken to weaken an enemy and gain advantages for oneself, all with an eye towards eventual conquest<sup>3</sup>. In *Kautiliyan* view even during times of peace and diplomacy a king should still be 'striking again and again in secrecy. Popularly understood as a means and mechanism to foster partnership and engagement, diplomacy has now evolved into extension of power politics seeking to enhance state power at the expense of the adversary. Diplomacy now executes dialogue supported by intimidation / posturing of forces / exercises in order to reach a compliant agreement with the state on its own terms.

**Narrative Warfare.** Information and Intelligentized information would be exploited to create the *Jus ad bellum* to act against a state/non state or by itself generate conditions of capitulation of adversary. The

3 <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/40432> accessed on 12 September 2025.

solicitation of information as a 'weapon of destruction' of enemy is novel and has also been employed surreptitiously and repeatedly in engagement over centuries. The contemporary means of collecting, collating, processing and exploiting information coupled with Artificial Intelligence (AI) is unique. *The application of AI converts non-real as real, changes the context of real and creates new 'believable truths' conjoint with near lightning dissemination amongst the target audience.* The narrative warfare places the credibility of the adversary institutions into question, denting the very essence of the adversary moral standing. The special operations to misinform political and military leaders by coordinated narrative building is undertaken through multiple means which may include use of diplomatic channels, planted media, exploiting vernacular media, economic, trade and tariff manipulation, supplanting government and military agencies with false truths, partial verifiable truths, character assassinations, false data, orders, directives, and instructions etc. at an industrial scale. Offensive information operations as part of Cognitive Warfare manipulating space, social media and cyber capabilities attempts to simultaneously and gradually disables governance, economy, services and public information system contributing to collapse of the state, public order in the country and creates an environment of confusion and lawlessness in the country.

**Amplified Coercion.** Concurrent to the generation of adverse narrative, the application of exalted coercion to extract strategic concessions from the leadership would be sought. The external application of coercion with internal informational distress will be leadership focused and timed aptly to coincide with periods of worst distress. The means utilized to amplify the coercion could include the imposition of unilateral offensive measures like sanctions, aggressive demonstrations, cyber hacking and cyber denial of service attacks, drone infringements, application of forces at friction points, supply chain disruptions through dominance of maritime arena, encroachment into unheld or lightly held territory to aggravate leadership crises, active and overt instigation of local insurgencies or extensive use of Special Operations Forces to disrupt any military movement/mobilization of the adversary. Amplified coercion would be modulated to achieve the desired 'interim objective', or alternatively it may be structured to achieve 'Governance Change'.

**Demonstrative Strikes.** Transformation of Amplified Coercion to next level of escalation would be carefully stage-managed. Ill planned escalation

may lead to unintended regression to armed conflict and may also create conditions of 'counter narrative' of national consolidation, defeating the very purpose of Non-Contact Warfare. Therefore, demonstrative strikes would be intended to highlight impotence of 'leadership' and expose its 'inabilities' or 'weaknesses' aimed to strengthen the narrative warfare rather than compromise it. Demonstrative strikes would entail testing of long-range weapons (Missiles), selective air strikes to target strategic and operational targets of the adversary across domains and in outer space coupled with use of special operations forces, space, radio, radio engineering, electronic, diplomatic, and secret service intelligence and industrial espionage, release of water from stored reservoirs to create downstream water emergency etc.

**Coordinated Application of National Capabilities Short of War.** Demonstrative actions to engagement in military conflict would be a calibrated choice with clear 'Exit Clauses'. The transition to military Non-Contact Warfare would utilize 'distance' or 'standoff' strikes aimed at decapitation of core capabilities of the adversary. The case in point is Israeli strikes against Iranian Air Defence weapons as well as its senior defense and scientific leadership July 2025 aimed at destroying Iranian Nuclear Weapons Program. The exploitation of information Intelligence and Electronic Warfare operation, aerospace operation, use of long-range high precision weapons launched from various platforms and weapons based on new principles (Microwave, Lasers, EMP etc.) against military forces and objectives would be the norm coupled with mobilization of key component of forces to pre-empt military response by the adversary. Leadership preservation at this stage would be the key to sustain the state, especially when this stage is invoked by the adversary with adequate deception and retain surprise.

**Special Kinetic Operations.** Special Operations Forces in multiple domains of operations would be applied for precise targeting in cognitive and physical domain to catalyze capitulation of adversary. These Special Operations Forces could be proxy elements, informational elements, strike elements, Electronic Warfare elements etc. The classical conception of Special Forces is distinct from Special Operations. The Special Operations across domains would generate conditions for conventional strikes employing air, land and maritime forces to defeat the armed forces of enemy in a short and swift operation, undertake consolidation and legitimize capture by getting aggression recognized by regional and international organizations / bodies, thus completing the achievement of grand strategic aim.

### Strategic Response Perspective: National Approach

The stratagem of Non-Contact Warfare relies on shaping, influencing and weaponizing capabilities that otherwise are benign and barely noticeable aimed at in most cases to avoid the need for major combat operations. The prerequisite for emphasis on Non-Contact Warfare is attributed to:

- A necessity to engage in a proactive manner while a conflict may still be brewing or relatively small or unthreatening with a view to pre-empt it effectively.
- Acceptance of the full range of possible abilities in Non-Contact Warfare Domain and adopt an institutional approach to weaponize erstwhile assets that remained 'left out of battle'.
- Evolution of a viable model for planning and conducting non-contact operations as a generational campaign extending overtime that may achieve incremental results without recourse to major combat actions.
- Its Non-declaratory and benign nature makes it extremely arduous to detect it in the first place as highlighted earlier, singularly impossible to assess the impact of deterrence on the adversary and the spread of the nonthreatening threat is so vast that the proponent could easily switch focus from one aspect of application of capability to another unobtrusively in relatively short span of time or may convert posture and deescalate.
- The deniability and non-attribution in sync with ability to create a 'Notion of Victory' in the most adverse of situation makes it more attractive to planners' vis-e-vis the classic attritionist battle where the probability of economic and political damage would be more.

The centrality of strategic culture denominating the 'Whole of Nation' approach is critical to ensure that 'Kautilyan' thought of achieving strategic and political objectives (*Dharma vijay (victory by just means), Lobha Vijay (victory through economic inducements) and Asura Vijay (victory through cunning or deceit)*) is met. Kautilya further alluded to four kinds of war (akin to the Three Warfare Strategy of China). The *Mantrayudha* – War by counsel (exercise of diplomacy when king finds himself in a weaker position and considers it unwise to engage in battle). *Prakasayudha* – akin to open warfare on Contact Warfare, *Kutayudha* – concealed warfare through *upajapa* (psychological warfare) and *Gudayudha* – clandestine war employing covert methods through use of allies, vassal kings, tribal chiefs and suborned

friends and supporters. The strategic thought enunciated by Kautilya should essentially be the core of Non-Contact Strategy as it encompasses the entire capability set of the nation to be employed in different geo-political and geo-strategic construct. **The strategic approach to contest an adversary in the non-contact domain requires confluence of Strategic Culture with 'Whole of Nation' approach** translating into developing a road map of metamorphizing each and every aspect of national capability into non-contact warfare capabilities. The strategic framework to contest Non-Contact Warfare is recommended to be based on following three pillars: -

- Strategic Structures and Decision-Making Institutions.
- Strategic Capabilities across domains.
- Strategic Concept to apply the Capabilities through structures and institutions.

### Strategic Structures & Decision-Making Institutions

The extant strategic structures at the national level reside in Union Council of Ministers with nominated Cabinet Committees handling specific agendas like Appointments, Economics, Political Affairs, Security etc<sup>4</sup>. The National Security Council (NSC) was constituted in April 1999 with the Prime Minister, Home Minister, Defence Minister, Finance Minister and Deputy Chairman Planning Commission as members (later Vice Chairman Niti Aayog). The NSC was to promote 'integrated thinking and coordinated application of the political, military, diplomatic, scientific and technological resources of the State to protect and promote national security goals and objectives<sup>5</sup>. The National Security Advisor is part of National Security Council of India and the Chief Advisor to the Prime Minister of India on National Security Policy and international affairs<sup>6</sup>. Besides the

<sup>4</sup> <https://cabsec.gov.in/councilofministers/cabinetcommittees> accessed on 11 June 2025.

<sup>5</sup> Cabinet Secretariat Resolution No. 281/29/6/98/TS, dated 16 April 1999, The Gazette of India, 19 April 1999, available at <https://archive.org/details/in.gazette.e.1999.383>, accessed on 22 May 2025. The deliberations were to include - the external security environment and threat scenario; threats involving atomic energy, space and high technology; global economic, energy and ecological threats; internal security, counter-insurgency, counter-terrorism and intelligence; patterns of alienation: social, communal and regional; trans-border crimes: smuggling, traffic in arms and narcotics; and intelligence collection, coordination and analysis.

Strategic Planning Group (SPG), National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) and National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS) was also set up. It has been stipulated that all ministries/ departments shall need to consult with NSCS on national security. A Defence Planning Committee (DPC) was notified by the MoD in April 2018. It was chaired by the NSA and included the three service chiefs, the defense, foreign and expenditure secretaries and the Chief of IDS (later CDS<sup>7</sup>). It was reportedly tasked with drafting a national security strategy, drawing up strategies for promoting defense manufacturing and exports and recommending initiatives in defense diplomacy<sup>8</sup>. The critical challenge of managing national security on a day-to-day basis is stymied by systemic, bureaucratic and inter-ministerial issues that continue to plague national security management. Coordination of activities is often hampered by 'turf' concerns, which result in imperfect real-time information sharing and resistance to coordination supervision.

In contrast the Politburo Standing Committee of Chinese Communist Party comprising seven members examine the strategic landscape facing China from all perspectives and thus arrive a coherent national outlook policy in keeping with Chinese grand strategic design to apply is multi - domain capabilities against the its adversaries, friends, sympathizers etc. In the case of Pakistan, this singularity adorned by the Chief of Army Staff of Pakistan Army is ubiquitous. To address, respond or to execute an all-encompassing Non-Contact Warfare strategy that transcends political discourse and dives over the diversity of Indian democracy the need for an agile structure that merges political leadership with national security requirements seamlessly and continuously. It must be a National Security Advisor led executive body that has cross-ministerial authority and representation to tide over the 'turf

war' and ministerial and departmental lethargy. The executive body thus established will examine, analyze, evolve and guide the formulation and implementation of Non-Contact Warfare Strategy of India. The permanency of such empowered a body is especially critical since the effects of Non-Contact Warfare are gradual, incremental and generational and are not obvious or apparent especially in the non-kinetic domain. The apex permanent body should be assigned the following roles: -

- Establishment of National Military Civil Fusion Centre.
- Enlightenment of Strategic Culture.
- Doctrine enunciation on Non-Contact Warfare.
- Developing Strategic Capabilities across domains.
- Evolving the Strategic Concept and Design to fight the Non-Contact Warfare.

### National Military Civil Fusion Center

*The perceived threats to India's security are manifesting along multiple fronts, innumerable domains and revealing through unknown vectors.* Military Civil Fusion under the 'Whole of Government' approach is recommended as a strategic counter, pre-empt and defeat these threat manifestation. It is critical for India to understand the nuances of Non-Contact Warfare as part of its strategy and apply it in its engagement with world. The establishment of **National Military Civil Fusion Center having cross ministerial representation under the overarching strategic guidance of National Security Advisor and mentored through a Military Civil Directorate working under the Secretary, Department of Military Affairs, Ministry of Defence.** The National Military Civil Fusion Center may be tasked for the following: -

- To continually evaluate threats across and establish the full scale of vulnerabilities, threat magnitude, priorities and the capability gap not only in the current and near term, but also in the long term and advocate policy formulations.
- To formulate, execute and coordinate the National Non-Contact Warfare Campaign.
- Guide the 'weaponization' each aspect of comprehensive national capabilities.
- Fund research in critical areas of engagement with competitors.
- Conceptualize and evolve an ingenious and far-reaching media, law and psychological warfare strategy in line with requirement of modern 'No War' War' scenarios.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/list-of-officers-pmo/> accessed on 11 June 2025. "The Cabinet Secretariat Resolution of 16 April 1999 stated that the NSC 'shall have a National Security Advisor, who shall function as the channel for servicing the NSC'".

<sup>7</sup> Reforming the National Security System: Recommendations of the Group of Ministers, n. 8, p. 101." While describing the role of the CDS as the 'Principal Military Adviser of the Defence Minister', the report emphasizes that the role of the Defence Secretary as the 'Principal Defence Adviser' to the Defence Minister should not be diluted".

<sup>8</sup> 'Doval Chairs First Meet of Defence Panel', The Hindu, 4 May 2018, available at <https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/dovalchairs-first-meet-of-defence-panel/article23765476.ece>, accessed on 30 May 2025.

- Create Inter-ministerial platform for reviewing the evolving contours of Non-Contact Warfare threat and response options especially focusing upon the 'leverages' that threaten or strengthen the state.

### Enlightenment in Strategic Culture

Indian Strategic thought has transitioned from a colonial oriented subservient outlook towards the West or the world to an autonomous, accommodative and status quoist view point especially post 1999 Nuclear Explosion. Indian Soft Power expressed through its culture has found resonance across continents and its message of '*Vasudeva Kutumbakam*' resonates favorably with political establishment across. The economic attractiveness especially its skilled human resources, peaceful and stable policies, demographic advantage and huge market provide natural allurements to the foreign investors. Concurrently, the Asian region and the world have also become extremely unpredictable, competitive, transactional, revisionist and mercantilist with few takers for morality and ideological high ground that Indian Strategic thought proposes. Strategic compulsions now drive the strategic choice and these choices demand exploitation of leverages in the true '*Kautilayan*' fashion. Goodwill amongst the comity on nations is important, but equally if not more important is to extract a price when the nations do not reciprocate the 'goodwill' akin to Chinese where no opportunity is left to take advantage across domains. In view of prevailing and anticipated geo-political environment, India's strategic choices require to become sharper and achieve the following:-

- **War Avoidance.** War Avoidance or War Deference by integrated management of Contact and Non-Contact deterrence against its known adversaries i.e., China and Pakistan and potential adversaries in South Asia and beyond through fused application of all instruments of national power enabled by visionary, synergized and long-term decision making.
- **Technology Disruption.** Technology has become a key disruptor in the engagement amongst states and non- states in peace and conflict. It is not only the cutting-edge unique technologies that define ascendancy but equally the low-cost legacy technologies that can be leveraged effectively to disrupt an adversary. Therefore, India needs to
- metamorphose from a technology dependent nation to a technology inventor in all the technology breakthrough areas. Too often innovation at scale of legacy technologies is missed out. Ukraine (Russia - Ukraine War) has shown that properly imagined the legacy technologies which are low-cost can be innovatively engaged to equally disrupt the canvas of warfare contact or non-contact. India needs to be disruptor rather than being disrupted by the technology explosion. Focused infusion of funds in R & D would jump start this transformation. The R & D should be supplemented by a resilient Military - Civil - Industrial complex that can absorb the technologies and deliver quality products to Armed Forces and other component of national power.
- **Hard Power.** Armed Forces coupled with the military - industrial complex define the Hard Power equation of a state or non-state. There is **no substitute for hard power** and hence kinetic capability (contact and noncontact) needs to be sustained to maintain 'deterrence' levels (dissuasive, punitive or credible) across facets of conflict spectrum. Hard Power cedes into regress when imagined in silos and hence Theaterisation needs expeditious pursuit to ensure fusion of tri-service capabilities and ensure its effective synergy with other elements comprehensive national power. Capability voids in defense require to be addressed through import of critical weapon systems as well as energized indigenization.
- **Reliable Partnerships.** India needs '**reliant partnerships**' with nations without creating dependencies. The alliances are an anathema to India's strategic culture and contests India's 'autonomy' standpoint. However, it might be a strategic necessity owing to the asymmetry in capability between India and China across domains. **The 'Diplomatic, Technology, Informational, Economic and Military' mix should facilitate developing reciprocal leverages nations sharing India's strategic space.**
- **Law Fare Approach.** The geo-legal understanding of strategic issues especially related to disputed land / maritime / space borders/frontiers with adversaries/stake holders is very critical to advance claims as well as seek the most favored outcomes with respect to global commons. It may be prudent to consider enactment of **an Indian Land Border Legislation** to assert own territorial claim as well as bring more stakeholders in national defense matrix.

- **National Strategic Power.** The imperative of graduating towards 'Sharp Power' and 'Smart Power' should be the foundation of all strategic formulations. In a transactional world there is unlikely to be substitute for 'Sharp Power' especially with a design to employ for furtherance of national interests. Strategic signaling to deter potential adversaries to seek alliances with inimical elements would draw teeth for 'Sharp Power'. The 'Soft Power' has few takers in the evolving world today, thus weaponizing each aspect of comprehensive national power is critical to realize the range of aspiration accruing out of 'National Strategic Power'.

### Review War Fighting Doctrine.

The Union War Book<sup>9</sup> is a classified book that documents the responses of the Government of India, its departments, ministries and states governments in the event of war or war like situations. Being classified its content are not privy to general public. However, this base document needs to address the requirements of mobilizing the nation to meet not necessarily 'War' or events short of war but equally the means to apply the 'National Strategic Power' for furtherance of national interests. As the current thesis has brought out, the concept of war and warfighting both have metamorphosed from conventional understanding of it transitioning from political discourse to application of military power to an evolved interpretation, where every engagement amongst states / non-states is akin to 'conflict like situation'. In keeping with the above a holistic review of the **Union War Book** with specific focus on developing nimble procedural response to threats that graduate imperceptibly and may require nuanced application of Contact and Non-Contact capability with imagination is needed relevant to current and evolving geo-strategic realities.

**Doctrine Enunciation - Non-Contact Warfare.** The wide and ever-expanding concept of capabilities that may be employed as weapons in the non-contact domain calls for revisit of current approaches to

develop an innate understanding of non-contact warfare threats and cultivate conceptual models' and cogent arguments to assure the leadership at the grand strategic level of the imminence, dangers and counters to these imperceptible threats. **As a developing regional security provider India would need to invest in developing, acquiring, sharing niche capabilities with a view to address Non-Contact Warfare asymmetry with its adversaries across domains.** Cyber, Space, Resource, Informational, Environmental, Diplomacy, Economy, Electronic Warfare, Special Forces etc assets would serve to augment the military Non-Contact Warfare abilities as well as provide 'Information Deterrent' of requisite weight crucial to maintaining parity amongst India's adversaries. The Doctrinal or philosophical canon to develop the concept for undertaking offensive and defensive Non-Contact Warfare could include the following:

- **Identifying doctrinal gaps** in strategic thought, orientation and philosophies and undertake review and revisions where required. Validate the reviewed doctrinal formulations at grand strategic table top exercises.
- **Evolve cross domain approaches** to address Non-Contact Warfare threats across environments ensuring favorable outcomes.
- **Defining Force in Non-Contact Warfare Context.** In the evolving war matrix conventional military force require to be reorganized to take on threats that may emanate not necessarily from a state or its proxies, but from non-state, mafias, religious organizations, multinational corporations with their own conventional and non-conventional capabilities (East India Company like), drug cartels or terror organizations. The template that hitherto guided our conception of 'War' or 'No War' has all but disappeared. Therefore, we need to ask ourselves the questions are we organized adequately to address the entire spectrum of threat in Non-Contact Warfare context. The review may lead the necessity for redefining **the concept of 'Non-Contact Force' consequently leading to new Force Development, Force Structuring and Force Commitment models to ensure readiness to preempt threats and address them in non-kinetic and / or kinetic realms.**
- Invest in strategic capability evaluation across the spectrum with a view to weaponize them. These may include economy, technology, perception management, environment, cyber, resources, demography, security management, asymmetric abilities etc.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.theweek.in/news/india/2025/05/12/what-is-union-war-book-2010-top-secret-manual-that-guided-india-amid-conflict-with-pakistan.html> accessed on 20 August 2025 "Titled Union War Book 2010, the manual is secretly stashed at the offices of every state and key ministries at the centre. The book itself is so secretive that very few are privy to its whereabouts, including the officials of the defence and home ministry who helped to prepare it in 2010. The book is updated every 15 years by the cabinet secretariat officials..."

- **Non-Contact Deterrence** - Revisit the concept of deterrence in the conventional and strategic arenas and expand its vistas to include the domain of Non-Contact Warfare.

**Strategic Capabilities across domains.** Demonstrable and concealed capabilities that depict resolute resilience, robustness and response capability to contest, respond and execute Non-Contact Campaign. The campaign/ response should be orchestrated through the National Military Civil Fusion Center recommended to enable cogent planning, analysis, mentoring and decision making. The strategy of necessity requires to be woven around the leverages, competence and resources across domains that India can generate. Thus, it has perforce to be realistic with an imaginative information warfare veneer. Meticulous analysis of competing leverages in each domain of Non-Contact Warfare will facilitate to quantification of the relative capability differentials, guide the feasible lines of effort to execute multi-domain non-contact operations and where necessary weaponize select benign capabilities. **Strategic capability development** to execute, contest, deter and defeat non-contact Non-Military or Military threats should encompass wide spectrum military capabilities and non-military abilities that could be weaponized to generate suitable effects against the adversary. The imperative to win each domain in the amorphous context will underline India's ability to assure victory in any declared or undeclared contest.

### Conclusion

*"They are going to sneak up on us.... They are going to do more and more of the toting. They are going to do more and more of surveilling and when they start fighting, no organized force could stand against them"*

*John Pike, Globalsecurity.org*

War and Warfare have focused on defeating the 'Will' of the adversary and ideally creating irrevocable conditions of Peace. The 'Will' of adversary (state or non-state) could be impacted by 'Contact War' or by 'Non-Contact Means'. The meaning of war undertook different connotations post 1991 Gulf War where the Allied forces defeated half a million strong Iraqi Army with minimal physical contact through asymmetric use of decisive technologies. The rise of Non-State Actors and their unique methodologies have challenged the universal accepted view on declaratory nature of war; war thus became all pervasive and all inclusive. The 'Unrestricted Nature of War' and its application in all known domains have been captured by various theories of war. Non-Contact Warfare as a concept thus emerged as a

means of impacting the 'Will' adversary nations / non state actor without physical or contact warfare or with minimal use of 'Force'.

The contemplation of subjugating a nation / non state actor without having to come in contact with in the battlefield revolutionized the concept of warfare itself giving a conceptual fillip to the philosophy of 'Non-Contact Warfare'. The act *seduce, prompt, coerce, subordinate or subjugate the opponent(s)/ adversary(s) into compliance /compellence/ submission without physically entering into combat with it or with minimum physical contact is enticing and has led to a palpable shift in thinking of not fighting a conventional war to achieve political ends. Rather the intent is gravitating to developing capabilities and leverages to preserve national interests while still retaining the capacities to achieve 'Victory' against adversaries without entering into physical contact with them. The non-declaratory and distributed characteristic of non-warfare are distinctive and make it extremely difficult for the rival nation / non state actor to decipher it and take counter measures.*

In India's case faced as it is with multiple adversaries on its Western, Northern and Eastern borders, the acceptance of Non-Contact Warfare concept and strategizing for its application in multiple domains would be the first step in evolving a cogent counter narrative against it, especially so as many of the dimensions of Non-Contact Warfare lie well outside the conventional thought process of war and war fighting. It would be also be naïve to assume that the next war would be based on the pattern of previous war and only continuous reappraisal of the concept of international relations and warfare would keep us ahead of our adversaries. The exploitation of economy, resources, diplomacy, media, conventions and legal treaties, concocted history, cyber and space technologies, exploiting proxies (Pakistan) etc China may attempt to outmaneuver India and circumscribe its role and obtain moral domination over it. Therefore, it becomes critical of India to evolve fresh insights and new thought process that would enable to integrate all national resources towards contending Non-Contact Warfare threat while simultaneously also build capacities to apply them successfully to further own national interests. India needs to evolve a short-and long-term perspective to developing and weaponizing its national capacities in multiple fields to develop requisite counter leverages to facilitate deterring Non-Contact Warfare threats as well as executing Non-Contact War where required to realize its national strategic objectives.

# Redefining Operational Combat in the Age of AI: Lessons from the U.S. Iran Conflict

Col P Hani & SM

## ABSTRACT

*US-Israeli military campaign launched against Iran on 28 February 2026, under the codenames Operation Epic Fury and Operation Roaring Lion, has become the defining test case for artificial intelligence in live warfare. This was the first time in history that large language models, machine vision targeting systems, autonomous drone swarms, space-based sensor networks, and AI-accelerated kill chains were deployed simultaneously in a high-intensity conflict against a state adversary. This article examines the technological architecture that supported this campaign, the platforms and systems that were its backbone, the doctrinal shifts that it has induced, and the strategic implications for India and other aspiring military powers. It provides a comprehensive operational and strategic assessment based on open-source reporting, official statements and defence-analytical literature.*

### 1. Introduction: When Silicon Valley Went to War

Shortly after 1:15 a.m. EST on February 28 2026, the Islamic Republic of Iran was attacked by two of the most technologically sophisticated military forces in the world in a coordinated attack. In the first twenty-four hours of what the United States called Operation Epic Fury and Israel called Operation Roaring Lion, allied forces had struck more than a thousand targets inside Iranian territory.<sup>[1]</sup> This speed was at an unparalleled level. They had all been machine-assisted, they had all come out of Pentagon labs and had been polished over almost a decade of iterative experiments, and now this was the time when the doctrine was put into use.

The size and political boldness of the campaign were nothing new, but a new thing was its sheer technological aspect. By any serious analytical measure, the 2026 Iran war is the world's first AI war.<sup>[2]</sup> Artificial intelligence systems ingested and processed intelligence from more than 150 simultaneous data feeds, compressed multi-hour targeting processes into seconds, directed autonomous drone swarms that saturated air defences across multiple axes, and hence facilitated a pace of strategic targeting that no prior generation of military planners could have executed.<sup>[3]</sup> As US Central Command

(CENTCOM) commander Admiral Brad Cooper stated publicly: "Our warfighters are leveraging a variety of advanced AI tools. These systems help us sift through vast amounts of data in seconds so our leaders can cut through the noise and make smarter decisions faster than the enemy can react."<sup>[4]</sup>

The Iran conflict is not just some distant spectacle for Indian defence planners, strategists and the wider global security community. It's a live-fire classroom, streaming lessons on the future of war in real time. The platforms being validated today in the skies over Tehran and Isfahan will influence procurement decisions, doctrinal revisions, and alliance calculations across Asia for years to come. To understand what happened, why it happened and what it means is not an exercise in academic curiosity. It's a strategic necessity.

### 2. The Road to Epic Fury: The Genesis of Project Maven

The history of the AI architecture being used in Iran goes back to 2017 in the United States, when the Pentagon undertook a program that would, in the next ten years, over time subtly change the character of warfare in America. The project was formally established on 26 April 2017 through a memorandum from the US Deputy Secretary of Defence proposing

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an “Algorithmic Warfare Cross-Functional Team.”<sup>[5]</sup> In popular parlance, it became known as Project Maven.

The deceptively simple problem Maven was set to resolve was flying in the faces of the military analysts in war zones as they receive an avalanche of footage shot by drones. Frame-by-frame human review of surveillance imagery was both impossibly slow and deeply error-prone.<sup>[6]</sup> Maven was designed to use machine learning algorithms to process this swath of data to detect military value objects at faster speeds than could any human team. As journalist Katrina Manson, author of the book *Project Maven: A Marine Colonel, His Team, and the Dawn of AI Warfare*, described the system: “Imagine Google Earth for war, a map of war with white dots, infused with information like elevation, coordinate, what is precisely there, whether it’s friendly or foe.”<sup>[7]</sup>

The program’s original technology partner was Google, whose artificial intelligence capabilities were considered state-of-the-art at the time. However, in 2018, over three thousand Google employees signed an open letter protesting the company’s involvement, arguing that the contract crossed a fundamental ethical line.<sup>[8]</sup> Google subsequently withdrew from the project, but the project did not pull out. The data analytics company Palantir Technologies got involved and expanded the programme beyond its original, narrow, scope. Part of the collaboration with the Pentagon would lead to the Maven Smart System (MSS), the command-and-control platform that would serve as the mental nerve center of Operation Epic Fury. The evolution of Maven from a drone footage analyser to a comprehensive targeting and battlefield management system was gradual but accelerating. Maven’s computer vision capabilities eventually increased the rate of targetable observations from fewer than a hundred per day to over a thousand.<sup>[9]</sup> After the integration of large language models (LLMs) in the 2024 to 2025 period, that figure rose further, with officials projecting the capacity to process five thousand targets per day.<sup>[10]</sup>

By early 2025, the Maven Smart System was described by Palantir as “production-level” across every unified US combatant command, encompassing INDOPACOM, EUCOM, CENTCOM,

NORAD/NORTHCOM, SPACECOM, TRANSCOM, AFRICOM, CYBERCOM, STRATCOM, and the Joint Staff.<sup>[11]</sup> In March 2025, NATO’s Communications and Information Agency acquired the Palantir

Maven Smart System for use within Allied Command Operations, with deployment reportedly completed within thirty days of acquisition.<sup>[12]</sup> Maven had ceased to be an American experiment. It had become the foundational AI architecture of the Western military alliance.

“You’re reducing a massive human workload of tens of thousands of hours into seconds and minutes. You’re automating human-made targeting decisions in ways which open up all kinds of problematic legal, ethical and political questions.” – Craig Jones, Modern Warfare Expert [13]

### 3. The Maven Smart System: Architecture of Algorithmic War

At the operational heart of Operation Epic Fury sits the Maven Smart System, described by the Pentagon’s Chief Digital and Artificial Intelligence Officer Cameron Stanley as “revolutionary.”<sup>[14]</sup> The system ingests and fuses intelligence from more than 150 simultaneous data feeds, including satellite imagery, drone video, radar returns, infrared sensors, signals intelligence, and geolocation data, presenting commanders with a unified common operating picture in near real time.<sup>[15]</sup>

Stanley, speaking at Palantir’s AIPCON 9 conference in March 2026, described the transformation Maven had achieved: “We were having this done in about eight or nine systems where humans were literally moving detections left and right in order to get to our desired end state, in this case closing a kill chain. So we’ve gone from identifying the target to now coming up with a course of action, to now actioning that target, all from one system. This is revolutionary.” What previously required eight separate platforms and extensive human mediation had been consolidated into a single, AI-accelerated workflow.

The system’s user community expanded from fewer than a hundred analysts in 2017 to more than twenty thousand military personnel across every branch of the US armed forces by mid-2025.<sup>[16]</sup> During Operation Epic Fury, the Maven Smart System reportedly generated over a thousand strike options within the first twenty-four hours of the campaign, enabling the coordinated targeting of approximately nine hundred military installations within a twelve-hour operational window.<sup>[17]</sup> This timeline from identification of intelligence to strike authorisation is a qualitative shift in the nature of military operations not fully expected by doctrine written prior to the AI age.

### A. The Role of Anthropic's Claude

Embedded within the Maven Smart System as its natural language reasoning engine is Anthropic's Claude, a large language model that received US Defence Information Systems Agency Impact Level 6 accreditation for use in classified environments.

<sup>[18]</sup> Claude was integrated into Palantir's Artificial Intelligence Platform running on Amazon Web Services infrastructure in late 2024. By July 2025, the Pentagon had formalised this relationship through a \$200 million, two-year prototype agreement with Anthropic to advance frontier AI capabilities for national security applications. <sup>[19]</sup>

Within the Maven architecture, Claude serves as the reasoning layer: it summarises raw intelligence reports, analyses patterns across disparate datasets, generates natural language explanations of targeting recommendations, and simulates operational scenarios to support commander decision-making.

<sup>[20]</sup> Anthropic itself acknowledged that Claude was used to help the military process data and make decisions in the context of the Iran conflict, though the company maintained that it did not sanction the use of its models for fully autonomous weapons systems.

The relationship between Anthropic and the Pentagon became the defining political controversy of the conflict's opening phase. Just one day before the launch of Operation Epic Fury, on 27 February 2026, the Trump administration formally designated Anthropic a "supply chain risk to national security," effectively suspending the company's direct government contracts.<sup>[21]</sup> The disagreement was about the policy Anthropic said its models should not be deployed for mass domestic surveillance and for controlling fully autonomous lethal weapons systems that are not in need of meaningful human control in wartime.

The strategic irony was noted by multiple observers: Operation Epic Fury was launched the morning after Anthropic's formal blacklisting, yet Claude tools continued to function within classified military networks because they had been so deeply integrated into operational infrastructure that no political directive could disentangle them at the speed of war.<sup>[22]</sup> AI dependence, once acquired, proved structurally irreversible on the timescale of active operations.

### B. The Kill Chain Accelerated

The process of a military force used to detect, identify, decide and engage a target is called the kill chain.

Each link in this chain during war needed the ability to think and to systemically integrate. This chain contained multiple links that were compressed and partially automated all at once by the Maven Smart System. The 18th Airborne Corps reportedly achieved targeting output comparable to the two-thousand-person intelligence cell employed during Operation Iraqi Freedom, using only approximately twenty personnel, a force-multiplier ratio that speaks to the transformative power of AI-assisted operations.

<sup>[23]</sup> By June 2026, National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency Director Vice Admiral Frank Whitworth announced that Maven would begin transmitting "100 percent machine-generated" intelligence to combatant commanders, with no human hands involved in the template or dissemination process. <sup>[23]</sup>

As the Center for Strategic and International Studies reported, after the initial surge of over a thousand targets struck in the first twenty-four hours, the US strike campaign settled into a sustained operational tempo of between three hundred and five hundred targets per day.<sup>[24]</sup> It's not a frenzy of frenzy. A new baseline, backed up by the AI systems that can process and prioritise targets many times faster than any purely human intelligence apparatus..

### 4. The Drone Dimension: LUCAS and the Era of Expendable Autonomy

If the Maven Smart System was the cognitive architecture of Operation Epic Fury, the Low-cost Uncrewed Combat Attack System (LUCAS) was its tactical symbol. Developed by the Arizona-based firm SpektreWorks, LUCAS made its combat debut on 28 February 2026 as part of the opening wave of strikes conducted by CENTCOM's Task Force Scorpion Strike.<sup>[25]</sup> It was the first confirmed operational deployment of an American autonomous one-way attack drone in combat history.

The origins of LUCAS are themselves instructive. The platform was reverse-engineered from Iran's own Shahed-136 drone, the same delta-winged kamikaze system that Iran had supplied to Russia and that Russia had used extensively in Ukraine. <sup>[26]</sup> As former US Army special operations officer Brett Velicovich explained: "That's the best part about it. These autonomous, expendable kamikaze drones were modelled off Iranian designs that were stolen off of captured Iranian systems used in Ukraine. There's a real strategic irony here: we took a weapon that Iran developed and fielded against our very forces and our allies, studied how it worked, and then turned

that playbook into an American capability that was used in combat against Iran's own military targets."<sup>[27]</sup>

## B Specifications and Capabilities

The LUCAS platform has a reported operational range of approximately five hundred miles, a wingspan of eight feet, and a take-off weight of around 180 pounds. <sup>[28]</sup> The unit cost is estimated as \$35,000 to \$55,000, making procurement of the missile system at such a scale unreachable with conventional missile systems, and changing the cost mathematics of sustained strike operations. Can be launched by catapults, rocket-assisted take-off or mobile ground and vehicle systems to provide dispersed low signature launch patterns making adversary countermeasures difficult. Crucially, LUCAS incorporates a key technological advancement over the Shahed design it mirrors: while the Shahed relies primarily on static GPS coordinates for guidance, LUCAS uses vision-based object recognition to identify specific military hardware at the terminal phase of its attack run. <sup>[29]</sup> The difference is huge in contested electromagnetic environments, where GPS jamming has become a part of the modern air defence doctrine. LUCAS also possesses built-in systems to coordinate operation of multiple platforms in a coordinated formation, and anti-jamming systems to avoid jamming by other platforms or the enemy. During Operation Epic Fury, LUCAS drones were deployed to strike Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps command and control facilities, Iranian air defence nodes, missile and drone launch sites, and military airfields. <sup>[30]</sup> "Hundreds" of unmanned platforms across multiple domains were integrated into both offensive and defensive operations, operating in the air, at sea, under the sea, and on the ground, according to Admiral Cooper's public statements. <sup>[31]</sup>

## C The Strategic Logic of Expendable Mass

The deployment of LUCAS crystallises a broader doctrinal shift that the Ukraine conflict had already foreshadowed. Western military doctrine had for decades rested on the assumption that superior technology, concentrated in expensive, exquisite platforms, could defeat numerical or economic advantage. The global spread of affordable drone technology has challenged that assumption at its foundations. <sup>[32]</sup>

If it costs tens of thousands of dollars for an interceptor missile to destroy an incoming drone, but hundreds of thousands of dollars for a defender to neutralise it, then the numbers of attrition quickly don't add

up. The Pentagon is finally acknowledging this mathematical fact: the LUCAS programme stands for the Pentagon's recognition. American planners could saturate Iranian air defense by hitting them with a coordinated attack of a thousand swarms of sub-\$55,000 autonomous platforms, keep their high-value crewed craft intact for more valuable missions, and keep a high pressure on them on an ongoing basis at a much lower cost than an equal conventional strike package.

The Defence Security Monitor captured the strategic significance succinctly: Operation Epic Fury represents the United States' "cheap drone moment," a doctrinal pivot point after which no serious military power can plan a high-intensity conflict without incorporating mass autonomous systems as a foundational element. <sup>[33]</sup> Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth's January 2026 AI strategy memo, declaring the US military an "AI-first warfighting force," had already outlined plans for the Drone Dominance Programme to field more than 200,000 one-way attack drones by 2027. <sup>[34]</sup>

## 5. Iran's Asymmetric AI Response: Drones, Hypersonics, and Unmanned Surface Vessels

This conflict is one in which Iran was starting without any similar AI capabilities, yet it had a lot of expertise in utilizing low-cost autonomous systems as well as taking advantage of asymmetric advantages. At the most basic level of autonomous armed combat, the technology has been fully democratised and at an even more sophisticated level it was possible for state actors with varying budgets to have autonomous attack choices.

### A The Shahed Swarm

Iran launched thousands of Shahed-series drones across the Persian Gulf throughout the course of the conflict, striking civilian, commercial, and military targets and disrupting global oil supplies and commercial aviation across one of the world's busiest transport hubs. <sup>[35]</sup> Iranian FPV drone footage emerged showing platforms autonomously searching American airbases in the region, demonstrating a level of navigational and target-recognition sophistication that went beyond remote-piloted operation.

The operation of drones in Iran despite the technological advantage of an enemy power has demonstrated the lasting impact of autonomous mass. LUCAS was meant to take advantage of an offside advantage, an asymmetry, but in the

case of Iran, it was being used as an advantage on the defensive side. Though Iran's manufacturing limitations, in part brought about by the regime's need to import essential technologies such as accelerometers, gyroscopes and satellite navigation receivers by using international smuggling networks, ultimately prevented its drone campaign from being sustainable, the impact on tactical operations was notable.

## B The Fattah-2 and the Hypersonic Challenge

The most technically consequential element of Iran's offensive arsenal in this conflict was the deployment of the Fattah-2, which Iran claims is a hypersonic glide vehicle capable of travelling at fifteen times the speed of sound while dynamically manoeuvring through the atmosphere to evade interceptors.<sup>[36]</sup> The Fattah-2 was first employed on 28 February 2026, the opening day of the conflict.

Western analysts have noted considerable uncertainty around the system's actual technical classification. The International Institute for Strategic Studies assessed the Fattah-1, upon which the Fattah-2 is based, as a medium-range ballistic missile with a maneuverable reentry vehicle rather than a true hypersonic glide vehicle in the strictest sense.<sup>[37]</sup> Nevertheless, Iranian statements following their claimed 17th round of "Operation True Promise 4" asserted that Fattah-2 missiles had penetrated US-made Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) systems deployed in Israel.<sup>[38]</sup> Whether or not these claims are fully verified, the demonstrated capacity to complicate the defensive calculus of some of the world's most sophisticated missile defence architecture carries substantial strategic weight.

## C Unmanned Surface Vessels and Maritime Disruption

An additional dimension of autonomous warfare emerged on 1 March 2026, when an Iranian Unmanned Surface Vessel (USV) struck the Marshall Islands-flagged oil tanker MKD VYOM in the Gulf of Oman.<sup>[39]</sup> This marked the first confirmed state-led deployment of an explosive drone boat against commercial shipping. Drone technology company CEO Cameron Chell described the unique command challenge these systems pose: "They can have one person controlling a swarm of ten boats, where they might have ten boats that can act with a large level of independence because they're pre-programmed."

The maritime dimension of autonomous warfare, which had been visible in the Red Sea and Black

Sea in earlier conflicts, escalated to direct state-to-state targeting of commercial shipping in the Gulf of Oman. The economic and logistical implications of this capability, applied at scale against one of the world's most critical hydrocarbon transit corridors, represent a category of strategic vulnerability that no purely kinetic military response can fully address.

## 6 Space, Cyber, and the Invisible Dimensions of AI Warfare

### A. Space as an Operational Domain

The 2026 Iran conflict demonstrated, more clearly than any prior engagement, that space has ceased to be merely a support domain and has become an integral operational layer of modern warfare. The US Space Force provided real-time missile warning data throughout the conflict, with orbital sensors detecting the infrared heat signatures of Iranian ballistic missile launches within milliseconds and feeding automated defence systems the trajectory data required to calculate interception solutions.<sup>[40]</sup>

Equally significant was the role of commercial satellite infrastructure. SpaceX's Starlink and Starshield low-Earth-orbit constellations provided high-bandwidth, highly resilient communications that enabled continuous command and control of autonomous drone swarms even in heavily contested electromagnetic environments where conventional communications would have been jammed or disrupted.<sup>[40]</sup> Israel's Ofek-class reconnaissance satellites also provided the coalition planners with high-resolution imaging and radar surveillance, enhancing the common operating picture they were able to access.

### B. Cyberspace and Data Infrastructure as Targets

In the opening hours of the conflict, the Israel Defence Forces and US Cyber Command conducted operations against Iranian military telecommunications networks, delaying and disrupting Iranian counter-offensive coordination.<sup>[41]</sup> This digital suppression of enemy communications was to be the equivalent in the cyber domain to air superiority, which has been the defining capability of war for centuries to control the information domain and make it harder for the adversary to organise a coherent response. Analysts reported that both the US and Iran attacked data centres in the Persian Gulf region during the conflict. In the initial stages, forces struck a data centre responsible for banking transactions that served as a primary payments mechanism for Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard

Corps.<sup>[42]</sup> The IRGC reportedly threatened retaliation against the Stargate AI data centre in the United Arab Emirates. AI data infrastructure, previously a civilian commercial asset, had become a high-value military target.

The upshot has far-reaching consequences. The equipment and technologies used to support the operation of AI systems are also vital for military operations and are becoming popular targets for cyberattacks. AI systems are becoming more and more a key component of military operations, so the physical infrastructure that provides support to these systems becomes a more important target to be attacked. AI-enabled warfighting is only as secure as the data centres and network architecture which support it. Ensuring the protection of forward deployed AI infrastructure against precision missile strikes, cyberattacks and electronic warfare is one of the biggest challenges on the roadmap in the AI era.

### 7. Ethics, Accountability, and the Governance Deficit

Governance, accountability, and legal frameworks are not keeping pace with the rapid integration of AI into the realm of combat. Likewise, the governance, accountability, and legal frameworks have not developed as quickly as AI has. It is obvious in the 2026 Iran conflict, and it has been quantified in terms of civilian loss of life.

The most acute public controversy arose from a US strike on a girls' school in Minab in southern Iran that killed more than 170 people, overwhelmingly children aged seven to twelve.<sup>[43]</sup> The Pentagon launched an investigation into whether the Maven Smart System's targeting recommendations played a role in the strike.<sup>[44]</sup> When the Pentagon's Chief Digital and Artificial Intelligence Officer subsequently displayed a Maven map at a public conference showing targeting icons in Iran, one marker was positioned on an area corresponding to Minab.<sup>[44]</sup>

This incident crystallises a persistent vulnerability in AI-assisted targeting: error rates. AI targeting systems used in prior conflicts demonstrated error rates of approximately ten percent, raising the prospect that in a campaign striking thousands of targets per day, hundreds of recommendations might have been algorithmically generated on the basis of flawed or spoofed data.<sup>[45]</sup> AI systems are known to hallucinate, produce systematic biases, and fail in unpredictable ways in contested environments involving electronic warfare, jammed signals, and high operational tempo.<sup>[46]</sup> In a commercial application, such errors

are embarrassing. In a targeting context, they are potentially catastrophic.

The political architecture governing AI in US military operations proved equally inadequate to the moment. Until February 2026, Anthropic held a \$200 million Pentagon contract that included explicit prohibitions on the use of Claude for mass surveillance of American citizens and for controlling fully autonomous weapons without meaningful human oversight.<sup>[47]</sup> The Pentagon's refusal to abide by these boundaries, and its subsequent characterization of Anthropic as a security threat for ensuring that it would do so, showed a governance system with no intention of imposing even the ones that had been agreed upon.

The broader international governance vacuum is equally concerning. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's September 2025 address to the United Nations characterised AI-powered weapons as having triggered "the most destructive arms race in human history" and called for urgent global rules.<sup>[48]</sup> China issued warnings against the excessive militarisation of AI. Senator Elissa Slotkin introduced the AI Guardrails Act in the US Congress, which would prohibit the use of autonomous weapons to kill without human authorisation.<sup>[49]</sup> None of these initiatives had produced binding constraints before the first AI war began.

"AI has moved from experimental tool to load-bearing operational infrastructure, and it has done so faster than any governance framework can track."  
— AI Habtoor Research Centre <sup>[50]</sup>

### 8. Strategic Implications for India: Lessons from the First AI War

India is on a turning point of history. The pace of Defence modernisation planning around the world will also accelerate following from the experience of the Iran conflict in 2026, an event that was being witnessed "as it happened" by all of the major Defence powers. The borders of the Mediterranean region are also shared with the nuclear threat of a rival country and as well as an escalating navy in the Mediterranean, the sense of threat to the outside is present and imminent.

#### A. The Speed Imperative

Operation Epic Fury, however, fought under the label of a "high intensity" war, has demonstrated in the short-term the pace of war in the modern world. If it is an enemy AI network of a thousand targets per hour and kill chains time the first few hours in

the war becomes a few seconds, then every military force operating on human intelligence cycles and decision-making will be like a speck on a parquet floor.

With Infosys investing a lot in the modernization of C4ISR (Command Control Communications Computers Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance), the concept of AI integration as demonstrated in Epic Fury is generations ahead of the current thoughts and ideas in C4ISR. The task today is neither to modify the current systems, but to redesign the systems convergence procedure itself to be adapted to the operation with the integration of the AI.

### B. The Drone Production Imperative

The LUCAS model which was reverse engineered from an enemy platform, is a procurement model which India's defence establishment must now embrace localize and use massively with kick-off costs of a mere Rs 5,500 per unit. The time of pure perfection, low numbers, high unit value products at the core of air power doctrine is over. Scalable expendable systems which can be deployed independently in contested environments require space in the Doctrine domain.

The DRDO and the nascent Indian defence technology entrepreneurial eco-system needs to be guided and provided with capabilities to create indigenous low-cost autonomous strike/reconnaissance systems, on a scale. This capacity, which companies would have to rely on imports for, would be the same as the vulnerabilities of the American technology industry in the Iran conflict.

### C. The Space and Cyber Imperative

Satellite networks were an absolute necessity in the Iran conflict; throughout the air war it was obvious that without such networks, aviation would be as unreliable as it was during the twentieth century. India's Space Defence Agency (SDA) that was formed in 2019 should be suitably empowered and mandated to develop SSIRA, develop resilience against hostile space environment and also develop a capability of counter space offensively. Commercial satellite systems that proved to be an asymmetric advantage to the US coalition during the Persian Gulf may not be provided to India in a similar situation in the Indo-Pacific.

So is it with Cyber operations and data infrastructure protection, an issue that also needs to be developed

in doctrinal terms. India's war-like military AI setup would be one of the targets in the event of any high-intensity conflict, even though the Iran war was the first time it has been witnessed on such a large scale, targeting of data centres is also one of the signs. However, future AI-driven war-fighting must include resilience by design, distributed architectures and forward deploying computing capability in the blueprints of any system to be built.

### D. The Governance Imperative

India has long called itself as a responsible voice to govern the new technologies in multilateral fora. When it comes to AI in warfare, the Iran conflict also represents an opportunity and responsibility to shape the international norms. The active diplomacy of course takes place through the United Nations Group of Governmental Experts on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems, bilateral dialogues with like-minded democracies, and the creation of India's ethical AI in defence framework are not sideshows. They are investments of a strategic nature that will provide a rules-based environment with reduced freedom of action for the adversary whilst maintaining India's own freedom of action.

### 9. Conclusion: The Architecture of Future War

Since the 2026 US-Iran conflict there is a verdict which defence establishments all over the world are looking at absorb. No longer are AI, autonomous operations and algorithmic decisionmaking add-on functions being used in an experimental way and layered on existing militaries' theories. These are at the heart of the new business model. A military force, without them, heading for war will be at a disadvantage as will be a military force, minus their counterparts, heading for the Second World War: radio communications.

Of these, all the systems of Jupiter's NTT Data Systems used to define 'Epic Fury'-- from the AI compressed kill chains, LUCAS autonomous drone swarms to the use of the unjammable space-based communications provided by Starlink, and the offensive use of data centre targeting, the tactical use of unmanned surface vessels are all at the lower boundaries of AI enabled military capability. These are a floor. The path is well defined and is an up-hill route.

Clearly, the answer for India is none - faster investments in indigenous AI for defence applications, a national 'nation agile systems' programme to develop expendable platforms

capable of scaling up with ease, strategic investment to space architecture in response to contested space environment, robust cyber and data capability and India's active presence in the international space governance mechanisms. These are vital minimum essential parameters required for credible deterrence and to emerge victorious in the wars of next 10 years.

No more are the machines listed at the gate. These are individuals who are on the cutting edge. That is why it is not the question, "will this future come?" on the Iran war of 2026 that looms. The question we must ask, is our preparation is done for that?

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# Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA): Evolution, Contemporary Dimensions, and Implications for Global and Indian Security

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## ABSTRACT

*Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) is a significant shift in the nature, conduct and organization of warfare resulting from changes in technology, doctrine and organization. From the dawn of time, war has been constantly progressing from a manpower dependent conflict to technologically advanced and information focused operation. The modern era brings many advances in the field of information technology, artificial intelligence, cyber, precision-guided weapons, and network-centric warfare, all of which have changed the way the military operates and strategizes. The paper critically reviews the history of RMA, its underlying theories, key features and also looks into its global nature of this emerging concept. It also identifies the rise of hybrid warfare as well as the implications of technological changes for countries that are developing strategically, such as India. The study proposes that RMA is less than just a "technological fact" and that it represents a transformational process -- doctrinal, organizational, information superiority and strategic innovation. The paper suggests that countries which can use advanced technology and adapt their strategies to suit the conditions of warfare will have a huge strategic edge in a future war.*

**Keywords:** *Revolution in Military Affairs, Information Warfare, Network-Centric Warfare, Hybrid Warfare, Artificial Intelligence, Cyber Warfare, India, Military Modernization*

## Introduction

War has been constant throughout man's history, but its characteristics, instruments and way of proceeding have been continually changing over the years. Military forces were at first mainly driven by manpower and standard firearms while new technologies, development processes, and innovative strategies gradually changed the nature of warfare to more and more complicated and sophisticated forms. This change in our Modern times has become multi-dimensional, technologically-savvy and very dynamic. Such profound changes are collectively referred to as the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA).<sup>1</sup>

The RMA has been defined as a "essential change in the nature of warfare," probably caused by the adoption of new technologies, military strategies

and organizational changes. The advent of the information-approached field after the end of the Cold War, greatly advanced information technology, communication systems, surveillance systems and the development of precise weaponry radically changed the nature of warfare and constitutes an ever-engaging field from the information perspective. Consequently, military success no longer depends solely on the numerical strength of soldiers or weapons; rather, information superiority, speed, precision, networking, and technological dominance have emerged as decisive factors.<sup>2</sup>

Hence, RMA shows that the future soldiers would not be the ones to be distinguished by their command of force, but by their ability to apply hi-tech equipment to enable speedy decisions, manipulate the military in an organized way and control information.

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### Historical Background of RMA

The idea of RMA grew out of experience in history, wherein war experiences changes that were often revolutionary. In the 16th and 17th centuries, Europe saw great transformations in military structure, armaments and tactics. The development of firearms, the establishment of standing armies, and innovations in battlefield tactics marked the beginning of modern military transformation.<sup>3</sup>

The twentieth century saw these changes speed up even further with the advent of the atomic bomb which changed the nature of war from fundamentally strategic. The idea of military-technological revolution was systematically formed during the Cold War by the Soviet military theorists. They argued that technological innovations—especially nuclear weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs)—had the potential to transform warfare entirely.<sup>4</sup>

The idea was revived in the 1980s by then-Soviet Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov, who suggested that precision guided conventional weapons and advanced military technology would have a strategic importance. Subsequently, American defense analysts adopted and popularized the term “Revolution in Military Affairs.”<sup>5</sup>

### Conceptual Foundations of RMA

A ‘Revolution in Military Affairs’ (RMA), is characterized for a change significant to the art of the military due to the new application of new technologies, which consequently leads to significant alteration of military doctrines, strategic operations and organizations. Historically, inventions such as gunpowder, the steam engine, and the atomic bomb have served as examples of RMAs by fundamentally altering the methods of warfare.<sup>6</sup> The concept of a Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) has been a subject of scholarly debate and policy analysis for decades.

The question of precisely and consistently defining a Revolution in Military Affairs is difficult, but after a key change has occurred it is easy to conclude that a revolution does indeed exist. For example, it is the evolution of the airplane or the atomic bomb that created the revolution in the very character of war. Likewise, the shift from wooden sailing ships to steam-gunmetal armed ships was a huge military revolution in the 19th Century. The transformations of the socio-political landscape, including the ‘Levée en masse’ system of conscription in France, also greatly increased the scope of the war. In all these

examples the emphasis is on the ‘breadth’ and ‘depth’ of change rather than the ‘pace’ of it. In other words, the critical factor is the magnitude and impact of the new transformation when measured against existing military capabilities.<sup>7</sup> While technological advancement is typically a prerequisite for an RMA, technology alone is insufficient. Genuine transformation cannot occur unless new military doctrines and operational methods are developed in tandem with the new technologies. For instance, in the case of \*Blitzkrieg\*, tanks were not the sole critical element; rather, they were inextricably linked with novel concepts of military operations. History suggests that three primary conditions must be met for an RMA to fully materialize.<sup>8</sup>

First: Technological Development – the creation of a new technology and its use in practice in the context of the army (making the engine possible a vehicle and an aircraft be invented).

Second: Innovation in Doctrine or Operations—the creation and actual implementation of new military doctrines to make best use of the new technologies.

Third, Organizational Transformation – alterations in the army’s structure, systems, and culture—to ensure that new technologies and doctrines are effectively integrated.<sup>9</sup>

Only when these three come together can there be a real military revolution. Hence the “Revolution in Military Affairs” is a catch-phrase that is now more commonly used, because it also implies a change in doctrine and organisation. The ‘revolutionary’ changes often occur during peacetime more than wartime; because often during peacetime plenty of opportunity and resources exist for experiments and polishing. While their effects are suddenly visible in the midst of war, they have been established prior to the war. The conversion of sailing ships into armored, steam powered warships is such an example of the great changes that had to occur when the peace flags were up.

In other words, historically, new technology began with a military purpose followed by the development of doctrine and organization. In today’s 21st Century battle space however, all these and the process have become much more coordinated. The processes of military operations are being greatly improved by new modern technologies. Aided by these technologies, highly advanced and potent military systems are being developed. As a result, these systems are impacting the way wars are planned and fought—or the “Operational Art”—then a doctrine (set of rules) and organization is brought into being which incorporates these changes.

While in these modern times, just four major areas of wars can be seen with the effect of technological development:

Precision Strike,  
Information Warfare,  
Dominating Maneuver, and  
Aerospace Warfare.

It is knowledge of these factors that determines the conduct and result of war. Thus, an RMA is when one side in a conflict adopts new technology, improved organization and effective military tactics to the point of dominating the other side with immediate and decisive results. Most important of all, if any opposition party wants to threaten it, then they have to matching 'technologies', 'organizations' and 'doctrines' of their own as well – or simply be left behind. The tactics and successes of the winner are thus crucial to any military effort in that area that comes after them.

### Defining Revolution in Military Affairs

Various scholars have given different definitions to the concept of the Revolution in Military Affairs from various vantage points which helps in comprehending the wider aspects of the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA).

RMA is a "paradigm shift" that entails not only technological innovation but military doctrine changes and changes in both the military's "organization and governance," according to Andrew F. Krepinevich. This transformation is so profound that it fundamentally alters the entire structure and conduct of warfare.<sup>10</sup>

According to Steven Metz and James Kievit (1995), the central focus of RMA is the integration of information technology, which has transformed the Command and Control (C2) system. As a result, the decision-making process has become faster, more accurate, and more effective.<sup>11</sup>

According to Lawrence Freedman, RMA is not limited merely to technological advancement; rather, it is the process of integrating information-age technologies with new methods of warfare, thereby significantly enhancing military effectiveness, precision, and speed.<sup>12</sup>

From the perspective of these scholars, on RMA can be seen as follows as a general:

Revolution in Military Affairs is defined as: A sequence of new technologies, military doctrines

and organizational change, that are synchronized and connect each other to produce a fundamental change in the nature of war.

This definition should highlight the fact that the RMA has not only to do with technological development, but encompasses four broad pillars:

1. Technological Development
2. Doctrinal Innovation
3. Organizational Adaptation

Integration of Information and Communication – the way in which ITC tools are applied in an integrated way and how information is shared.

This concerted construction of these four aspects produces a real military revolution.

RMA isn't about superior weaponry and equipment, it's about being successful with the enemy. Instead its focus is on a whole-of-socio-military rethink of military strategy, training, command-and-control, and structure to ensure best utilization of new technologies. There is a nation that has actually realized the ideals of RMA; it has become more agile to carry out its business, greater coordination of intelligence systems has been achieved and it is the "superior in the battlefield".

On a normal basis, RMA is a fundamental change in the 'mass-movement' battlefield configuration into an 'information' oriented one where the information superiority and the technological interoperability is a weapon. Its implication would be that modern war was being fought by innovative reorientation of defence organisations and flexing the approach to them with a more comprehensive approach.

### Historical Evolution of the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA)

Theories about "Revolution in Military Affairs" (RMA) in the modern age can be divided into various groups with respect to the nature. There are differing views on the number of Revolutionary Transformations there were in the history of Military affairs. Some say that there have been just two major revolutions in history, and this is the third; but others say it is a dozen or more.

The only thing which finally made the impact and importance clear for most Revolutions in Military Affairs was after their development (after some gestation time). But with the threat of nuclear weapons, the effects were evident almost as soon as they were used. There are two great military revolutions of the 20th century, these are:

**(a) First Revolution**

The first one took place in the course of World War 1, resulting from the emergence of the aircraft, the motor vehicle and chemical warfare.

**(b) Second Revolution**

The second revolution arose because of the invention of missile technology and nuclear weapons during the World War 2.

Other scholars estimate the number quoted above to be less than the number of Revolutions in Military Affairs. Based on this wider view, many significant military revolutions can be identified and discerned throughout history, which shifted the character of war. These are as follows:

**1. Infantry Revolution**

The Infantry Revolution occurred during the Hundred Years' War. In this revolution, infantry forces replaced heavy cavalry as the dominant force on the battlefield and established themselves as the principal military power.<sup>13</sup>

**2. Artillery Revolution**

Subsequently, the "Artillery Revolution" developed, again during the Hundred Years' War. In this revolution, technological advancements led to the development of effective cannons and siege warfare, due to which the previously strong defensive systems of cities began to weaken rapidly.<sup>14</sup>

**3. First Naval Revolution**

The "First Naval Revolution" brought a major transformation in maritime warfare with the advent of sail-powered warships and naval artillery.<sup>15</sup>

**4. Fortress Revolution**

In the 16th century the so-called "Fortress Revolution" was undertaken to build fortifications which could withstand the impacts of modern artillery and weaponry.

**5. Gunpowder Revolution**

Gunpowder revolutionised the practice of warfare. Prior to this, battles were to be waged for supremacy with the traditional weapons of the sword, spear, bow and arrow. The use of gunpowder it ushered into the era of gunpowder artillery and gunpowder weapons. One outcome of this was the "Gunpowder Revolution" and the new technology of muskets and other guns soon revolutionized the art of war. Efforts to overcome the initial limitations of these weapons and maximize their effectiveness eventually gave rise to a new military revolution.<sup>16</sup>

**6. Second Naval Revolution**

At the end of the nineteenth century, the "Second Naval Revolution" occurred, when rifled artillery, steel warships, and steam power completely transformed the character of naval warfare.

**7. Mechanisation, Aviation, and Information Revolution**

During the interwar period between the two World Wars, revolutions occurred in the fields of mechanisation, aviation, and information. These developments gave rise to major military innovations during the Second World War, such as Germany's "Blitzkrieg" strategy, the use of carrier aviation by Japan and the United States, amphibious warfare by the United States, and strategic bombing by Britain and the United States.<sup>17</sup>

**8. Nuclear Revolution**

The "Nuclear Revolution" emerged as a result of combining nuclear weapons with intercontinental bombers and ballistic missiles. This revolution elevated the destructive capacity of warfare to an unprecedented level and altered the global balance of power.<sup>18</sup>

**9. Information Technology Revolution and Information Warfare**

In the modern era, the "Information Technology Revolution and Information Warfare" is considered the fourth dimension of warfare.<sup>19</sup> Today information is becoming independent and determining factor in the war. It's eroding traditional warfare views and putting the spotlight again on attack, with the uncertainty of war known as "The Fog of War" affording the defensive side a better chance of winning in the past.

Information based warfare is a practice of reducing information systems, processes and networks of an enemy while safeguarding information systems.

This fourth-dimensional information is used to enhance military operations' tempo and effectiveness. It is designed to reach far back into enemy territory, influence and weaken their "psychological centre of gravity" which allows the future military operations to be more successful. For an effective warfare, development of complex system, called Operation Information Systems (OIS) and Management Information Systems (MIS), is inevitable.

Although there are many proposed definitions of Information Warfare, in simple terms it is the act of disrupting or destroying enemy information,

information-based processes, information systems, and computer networks while, at the same time, ensuring information system security and information superiority.

But the underpinning of RMA relies now on an interplay between information gathering, processing, fusing and communication systems and also military force systems. The idea of a "System of Systems" aims to facilitate and keep going this coordination. Its aim is to quickly and decisively win at minimum cost, with only soldiers and civilian casualties and with minimal loss of resources.

In the context of RMA the growing importance of information flows is clearly visible. Previously an instruction style of "Command and Control" was adequate, where military leaders relied on information from their subordinate officers to inform them about conditions at the front lines. Eventually, it was found that separate military divisions had to be linked in other theaters of war and fields of knowledge as well as receive information from specialized channels. Because of this growth, the term 'Command, Control, Communication and Intelligence' (C3I) developed.

This idea has evolved to "Command, Control, Communication, Computers, Intelligence and Battle Management" (C4I/BM) in today's age. This is a relatively complicated, but nevertheless clear, example of the term's usage to indicate that the information systems have become very significant within the vast and complex category of wars buttresses. These systems are not only critical to multiple functions of the military but are also tightly coupled systems.

As it has always been, a key element of warfare is information. In future, however, it might prove to be the deciding factor in waging war. In that case, one of the objectives of military strategy will be to achieve "Information Dominance" over the enemy.

There can be multiple aspects to "Information Warfare", including:

- Achieving full and accurate intelligence on the enemy's military, political, economic and cultural aspirations and denying the enemy the same intelligence.

Disruption, or manipulation, of the "C3I" (Command, Control, Communication and Intelligence) systems of the enemy; while protecting systems of the own side.

Using space-based information systems including satellites and blocking an enemy's access to them.

Moving to fusion of data from sensor-to-shooter systems.

Use of advanced and flexible information/intelligence databases.

Using simulation methods for helping with military decision-making.

The word "information" in plain language can be the topmost weapon of war in future conflict.

In this sense, it is clear that the Revolution in Military Affairs is a process that is not finished yet but comes from interaction of technological innovations, organizational change and strategic innovations. The increasing complexity and comprehensive command of information, communication and advanced technologies in the modern era is making RMA more important, more comprehensive and more decisive and thus radically changing the nature of the future wars.

The RMA is an ongoing journey that is brought by the interaction of technological development, strategic reorientation and organizational evolution. The important role that information, communication, and the latest in technology play in the world today has given RMA great influence. The nations that speed up these changes will have a decisive leadership on any battlefield in the future.

### Contemporary Dimensions of RMA

The revolution of military affairs (RMA) has become more and more technological, information and network-focused. Advanced technologies and information and communication have also been crucial factors in modern RMA and has been termed as the 'Information Revolution'. The United States demonstrated its Gunsight during the Gulf War in 1991 by launching or targeting precision-guided munitions onto military targets, making reconnaissance flights using satellites, and employing network-centric warfare via satellites outfitted with electronic sensors. Today's RMA includes some of the following:

Using the military terminology, MHs are Munitions of Destiny (MODs) (i) Precision-Guided Munitions (PGMs).

Precision Guided Munitions is one of the foremost elements of the current-day RMA. These are definitive weapons that attack their targets with unprecedented precision that are guided using laser, GPS, infrared or satellite technology. The PGMs' are also reportedly deployed more efficiently than traditional bombs and missiles due to fewer

secondary effects they create when attacking their target.

These weapons will give them a higher chance of being successful in the war, and will make them more efficient with fewer materials. Modern day use of “surgical strike” and “smart bomb” in warfare largely depends on the accuracy with which the military target can be hit by the missile and/or the bomb. This has not only facilitated the destruction of military targets but also allowed efforts to limit civilian casualties.<sup>20</sup>

### **(ii) Network-Centric Warfare**

Network-centric warfare is a crucial concept in modern military strategy. In this system, all branches of the military—the Army, Air Force, and Navy—are connected through an integrated communications network. This network allows for real-time information exchange, enabling quick decision-making on the battlefield.<sup>21</sup>

The concept’s central aim is that of “information superiority. Well coordinated military units can move rapidly and efficiently if they are combined in one country, to defeat the enemy army. Networks are as essential to network centric warfare as satellite communications, digital mapping, secure data networks and command and control systems.

During modern warfare, it is the method by which a military force can function as a ‘system of systems’ with each system linked and interrelated with other systems to render fights more effective.

### **(iii) Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) System**

In today’s warfare the role of ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance) systems is growing steadily. It gives real-time data relating to enemy actions, troops movements, strategic assets and potential threats. ISR systems utilize satellites, drones (UAVs), radars, sensors, electronic surveillance equipment, and reconnaissance systems.<sup>22</sup> The information obtained through these means helps military commanders make accurate decisions.

In today’s wars, military power alone is not considered sufficient; obtaining accurate information at the right time has also become a crucial basis for victory. For this reason, ISR is called the “eyes and ears” of modern warfare.

### **(iv) Cyber Warfare**

In the 21st century cyber warfare is a new and extremely important aspect of warfare. Today,

modern countries rely on computer networks for the functioning of their military, economic, banking, energy and communication systems. If a country can be in that situation, a cyber-attack can disrupt the functioning or disable a country’s vital systems.

Cyber warfare actually involves hacking, stealing data, disrupting communication networks, impacting power grid and jamming defense networks. This warfare can be less costly and more confidential than conventional warfare, as it does not require the use of direct military force.<sup>23</sup>

In modern times, cybersecurity has become an integral part of any nation’s national security. Many countries have established Cyber Commands and specialized cyber forces to protect their digital infrastructure and, if necessary, launch offensive cyber operations.

### **(v) Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Robotics**

Artificial intelligence and robotics are among the most advanced and futuristic features of modern RMA. AI-based systems analyze vast amounts of data on the battlefield, enabling quick and accurate decision-making. Through this, target recognition, threat assessment, and planning of military operations have become more effective.<sup>24</sup>

Autonomous robots, such as drones, unmanned combat vehicles, robotic soldiers and automated defence systems are being made in the field of robotics. The systems can be implemented in places where people do not want to accompany the soldiers.

Armed conflicts could become more technological, automated and swift in future with the involvement of AI and robotics. But there are ethical and legal issues as well, for example over who is responsible to control, and use, autonomous weapons.

### **(vi) Unmanned Systems**

Unmanned systems are a significant part of today’s RMA. These include the likes of drones, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), robotic tanks and autonomous submarines, all without necessarily being in a specific place. They have the ability to carry out surveillance operations, to collect intelligence, identify targets and make precision attacks.

Unmanned systems augment a military sequence of operations, while keeping soldiers safe in dangerous zones. These systems are quickly becoming autonomous and capable with the introduction of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and improvements in sensor capabilities. Their importance is likely to increase further in the future, making warfare more technology-driven and human-free.<sup>25</sup>

It is thus clear that modern RMA is not limited to the modernization of weapons, but is based on information, communications, cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, and comprehensive coordination of networked military structures. Success in modern warfare no longer depends solely on the number of troops, but on technological superiority, information dominance, and quick decision-making.

### Overview of the Global Revolution in Military Affairs

Global revolution in military affairs is a concept that signifies the change in the nature and conduct of warfare, more importantly resulting from the combined effort of newly developed technologies, innovative Doctrines and new organizational structures. RMA is more than a change over from the previously accepted methods of warfare for the Industrial Age; it is actually a transition to an information focused combat style that emphasizes precision, velocity, agility and strategic superiority. Much of this change, especially in the development of information and communication technology (ICT), robotics, artificial intelligence (AI), space-based surveillance and precision-guided weapons, has been driven by the extraordinary advancement of information, communication, and weaponry technology. Its essential capabilities are digitization of battlefield operations, precision-guided weapons, satellite communications and artificial intelligence, O'Hanlon says. Some countries have developed specific models of RMA, in line with their national doctrines and perceptions of threats, including Israel, China, and Russia. In the history, military revolutions have been recorded to take place at different times, e.g. when gunpowder was discovered, when tanks and aircraft made their appearance in World Wars I and II, and when constitutional experiences entered the arsenal during the Cold War. But the current RMA is special in its scale and rapidity; its most distinctive features are the modifications in the military strategy of the United States in the wake of the Gulf War and its allies in the world like China

and Russia. Informational superiority and more rapid, more lethal and more precise operations are at the heart of this revolution.

Now, the concept of RMA highlights importance of joint operations, real time situational awareness and advanced decision-making capabilities. Changes in strategic calculations and models of deterrence are brought about by various new developments such as the use of drones for surveillance and warfare, cyber warfare tools, new satellite-based systems, and new autonomous weapons. This transformation has brought hybrid warfare into existence – that is, when state and non-state actors mix conventional and irregular warfare with cyberspace and information warfare.

### Global Perspective on RMA

The Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) does not only affect one country, it is panatomic and has, more and more, been shaping the strategies, doctrines and ways of fighting of the world's military giants. RMA has been experienced in various forms by various countries, depending on their security requirements, geopolitical conditions and technological means.

#### (i) United States

RMA is regarded as a pioneering innovation, and the most influential promoter of RMA is the United States. Modern warfare has been transformed by the use of precision guided weapons, satellite-based surveillance and network-centric warfare -- especially in the 1991 Gulf War. Shock and Awe' is the goal of the US to inflict damage to the enemy's combat capability in the opening phase. The approach of this type of strategy is extreme precision, extreme intensity, and psychological punching. The United States developed doctrines such as "Joint Operations" and "Full Spectrum Dominance," which aim to simultaneously dominate all domains – land, air, sea, space, and cyber.<sup>26</sup>

#### (ii) China

China has made RMA an integral part of its long-term military modernization program. China's strategy is based on "Informationized Warfare" and "Intelligent Warfare." The primary objective of Informationized Warfare is to achieve information superiority, while Intelligent Warfare utilizes artificial intelligence (AI), big data, and autonomous systems. China has comprehensively reformed its military structure, strengthening cyber warfare, space warfare, and electronic warfare capabilities. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is being

transformed into a modern, technologically capable force, ready for future network-centric and AI-based warfare.<sup>27</sup>

### (iii) Russia

Russia on the other hand has taken a different method of RMA and has been focusing on 'Hybrid Warfare' and 'Cyber Warfare.' Russia's strategy is one that is comprised of conventional military forces as well as unconventional tactics including cyber warfare, information warfare, and psychological warfare. Initially during Ukraine crisis, and annexation of Crimea it is how effectively Russia worked. Russia has also made significant progress in the fields of electronic warfare, missile technology, and information control.<sup>28</sup>

### (iv) Israel

Currently Israel is one of the most innovative and technologically advanced countries in the RMA arena. Israel's high-tech warfare systems have been developed with a particular focus given the limited geographical area of the country and its constant security issues. In addition, Israel leads in the field of drones (UAVs), cyber security, the defense against missiles like the Iron Dome, and intelligence. Its war strategy is based on extreme precision, rapid response, and technological superiority.<sup>29</sup>

## Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA): An Indian Perspective

Technology has undoubtedly gained prominence in today's warfare through recent wars. As a consequence, a sea change in the nature of warfare, or as others call it, the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), is here. Although perhaps not all the means are currently in place to exploit this revolution completely, its core message is clear: technology is a big strategic advantage and needs to be used to the optimum extent. Therefore, it is high time to consider and create an "indigenous" RMA which could address India's themed requirements and provide an advantage when it comes to head-to-head competition with rivals. Beyond the deployment of cutting-edge technology, changing military doctrine, strategy and organization to fit the changing nature of war must be done to achieve that goal. Meanwhile, systems must be in place to make sure they are built to respond to and fit these changes. Furthermore, special attention must also be paid to the implications of RMA for Low-Intensity Conflicts (LIC) and asymmetric warfare conducted by non-state actors.<sup>30</sup>

RMA is generally defined as a fundamental transformation in the nature of warfare brought about through the innovative application of new technologies. However, this transformation is not confined merely to technological innovation; rather, it also encompasses profound changes in military doctrines, operational concepts, and methods of warfare, thereby fundamentally altering the character and conduct of military operations. In this sense, RMA introduces an entirely new dimension to modern warfare.<sup>31</sup>

Doctrine, technology, strategy and training are the main components of RMA. While technology provides the catalyst for change in this revolution, changes in doctrine, strategy and training are equally important, if not more. Thus, RMA cannot be considered merely as a continuation of what has long been the standard trajectory of military modernization – it's a massive and holistic change in the nature and manner in which military operations are conducted. It is basically the cumulative product of technological developments applied and adapted by the military and put to good use. Thus, while thinking of future strategic, operational and tactical needs, armed forces have to pay great attention to the new technology available and scrutinize it carefully. Alongside this, equal importance must be given to the restructuring of human resource management and training systems, because technological advancement alone cannot decisively influence the outcome of wars unless corresponding changes occur in the ways soldiers think, train, and fight.<sup>32</sup>

The foundation of RMA lies in the C4I2SR system, which comprises Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Information, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance. This system enables the generation of comprehensive and accurate battlefield awareness, often referred to as "dominant battlespace awareness." Consequently, this domain becomes an area of critical importance and strategic priority. The five major operational components of RMA are Information Warfare, Dominant Manoeuvre, Precision Engagement, Full-Dimensional Protection, and Focused Logistics. Advancements in C4I2SR have also facilitated the emergence of a new concept in warfare known as Network-Centric Warfare (NCW), wherein different military units operate through integrated networks and exchange information in real time.<sup>33</sup>

A study of these components shows their great significance in the context of India; and implementation of such components and acquisition

of the technologies has to be carried out in a phased manner and in a pragmatic way. Given India's good starting base and infrastructure in Information Technology, Information Warfare can be an integral part of its Military doctrine. It is therefore necessary to maximize the utilization of this base in order to strengthen military capabilities.<sup>34</sup>

Network-Centric Warfare (NCW) has an immense strategic potential in the Indian context. For its effective implementation concepts specifically for the requirements of the Indian security must be developed. This requires large amounts of money to be spent on strong infrastructure, to be built in coordination of all three services to make sure that there are no operations breaks. With the advancement of technology, India's capability to carry out NCW operations will certainly get improved along with it. The advantages of operating geographically dispersed forces become especially significant in the backdrop of a nuclear environment.<sup>35</sup>

The challenge posed by RMA cannot be addressed solely through technological advancement; it also demands comprehensive changes in military concepts, organizational philosophy, and strategic outlook. To effectively exploit the benefits of RMA, organizational structures and military concepts must evolve in a manner compatible with the increasing use of advanced technology.<sup>36</sup>

We hope RMA will cause major modifications not only in the way the Armed Forces conducts business, but even in the nature of warfare itself. This influence will manifest itself in the deadliness and range of weapons, the mass and accuracy of gunfire, the management and use of information, as well as stealth and sensing. These changes will demand acquisition of technologies by the armed forces, that will allow increased mobility, protection, decision making, battlespace manipulation and integrated logistics systems. Simultaneously, substantial investment in indigenous technological development will be essential for achieving self-reliance and maintaining compatibility with the evolving dynamics of RMA.<sup>37</sup>

The effect of RMA in the case of Low-Intensity Conflicts (LIC) may seem less impressive by comparison to conventional warfare, but it does not mean it's not important. However, the modern technology can have a very integral part as well in the LIC area. Hence, it is essential to continuously refine military doctrines, concepts, organizational structures, and strategies so that the advantages of RMA can be maximally exploited in such conflicts as well.<sup>38</sup>

## Hybrid Warfare and Emerging Challenges

The Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) has changed the nature of the war from traditional warfare. Advancements in information technology, cyber capabilities, precision-guided weapons and artificial intelligence, and network-centric operations have broadened the nature of warfare beyond a battle-field context. This has ushered in the idea of "Hybrid Warfare" as one of the hallmark features of modern warfare. Hybrid warfare refers to a method of conflict in which state and non-state actors employ a coordinated combination of conventional military force, irregular tactics, cyber operations, information warfare, economic coercion, and political influence in order to weaken an adversary without necessarily engaging in full-scale conventional war.<sup>39</sup>

### Definition and Nature of Hybrid Warfare

Hybrid warfare may be described as a form of "comprehensive warfare" because it integrates military, political, economic, informational, and cyber dimensions into a unified strategy. Unlike traditional warfare, hybrid warfare does not necessarily involve a formal declaration of war, clearly defined battlefields, or easily identifiable enemies.<sup>40</sup>

This form of warfare generally operates within the "Grey Zone," a strategic space between war and peace where hostile activities remain below the threshold of conventional armed conflict. The objective is to gradually undermine the political stability, social cohesion, economic strength, and decision-making capacity of the target state while avoiding direct military confrontation.<sup>41</sup>

### Contemporary Examples of Hybrid Warfare

Several contemporary conflicts illustrate the operational nature of hybrid warfare.

#### 1. Russia-Ukraine Conflict

Russia's actions in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine demonstrated the coordinated use of conventional military force, cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns, proxy militias, and political influence operations.<sup>42</sup>

#### 2. China's Salami Slicing Strategy in the South China Sea

China has employed gradual territorial expansion, maritime militias, economic pressure, and strategic infrastructure development to establish influence without provoking full-scale military conflict.<sup>43</sup>

### 3. Disinformation and Election Interference

The use of social media platforms for disinformation campaigns and psychological operations aimed at influencing elections and public opinion in democratic societies represents another significant dimension of hybrid warfare.<sup>44</sup>

#### Major Components of Hybrid Warfare

##### 1. Conventional Military Force

Although hybrid warfare emphasizes non-conventional methods, conventional military power remains an essential component. Armed forces are used for direct military pressure, deterrence, coercion, and demonstrations of strength.<sup>45</sup>

##### 2. Terrorism and Insurgency

Hybrid warfare frequently involves the use of non-state actors, insurgent groups, extremist organizations, and proxy militias to destabilize the internal security environment of a target state. Such methods weaken governmental authority and increase political and social instability.<sup>46</sup>

##### 3. Cyber Warfare

Cyber warfare has become one of the most significant elements of modern hybrid conflict. Cyber-attacks can target communication systems, banking networks, energy grids, transportation systems, and critical military infrastructure. The cyber attacks against Estonia in 2007 demonstrated how a nation could be severely disrupted without the use of conventional military force.<sup>47</sup>

##### 4. Information Warfare

Information warfare includes propaganda, disinformation, psychological operations, and media manipulation. Its purpose is to influence public opinion, create social polarization, weaken trust in institutions, and generate political instability. Social media platforms have become major instruments for conducting information warfare in the digital age.<sup>48</sup>

##### 5. Economic and Political Coercion

Hybrid warfare also incorporates economic sanctions, trade restrictions, diplomatic isolation, and political interference. These measures are intended to weaken the economic foundations and strategic autonomy of the target state.<sup>49</sup>

#### Hybrid Warfare as a Multi-Domain Challenge

Hybrid warfare is highly complex because the identity of the aggressor is often ambiguous and the battlefield

extends far beyond the traditional military domain. Modern conflicts now encompass cyberspace, outer space, the information environment, and the economic sphere. Cyber operations can disrupt critical national infrastructure, while information warfare can manipulate public perception and influence political outcomes.<sup>50</sup>

Consequently, warfare in the twenty-first century has evolved into a “multi-domain conflict,” in which military operations are conducted simultaneously across land, air, sea, cyber, space, and information domains. The integration of these domains has significantly increased the complexity of national security challenges and has compelled states to adopt comprehensive security strategies.<sup>51</sup>

#### Implications for Developing Countries

The Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) has both positive and negative sides, as in developing countries. While on the one hand it allows for new modernisation opportunities, on the other hand it brings up serious strategic, technological as well as economic challenges.

The other great opportunity offered by RMA is the rising of the developing world, and their chance of increasing the quality of their military, by acquiring technology. The military modernization and the applications of new technologies such as drone, cyber security systems, artificial intelligences, information networks can create quality military capacities at a comparatively lower price while the traditional military modernization is an in itself costly process. These technologies can help the states sharpen its monitoring and investigation capability, and decrease its communication capacity and ability in striking accuracy without being the conventional army too large.

Moreover, they have now enabled the developing countries to improve command and control systems and to increase their military units' operational coordination thanks to the use of information technology and the functioning of digital communication systems. Technology has become more widely available, decreasing to some degree, the gap between developed and developing countries on the technological front.

There are a cost associated with RMA problems however. Among the first is a lack of defence budgets. Maintenance, modernization, training and technological integration are also considerable expenses, considering the significant expenses of procurement. There are several other socio-economic

goals which compete for an adequate financial allocation, and this makes it difficult for many developing countries to allocate a adequate financial resource.

Lack of technological infrastructures is also an important problem. The effective use of the RMA heavily relies on high level of sophistication of the cyber networks, communication systems and satellite systems, research institutions, as well as providing human resource knowledge to meet the requirements. Some countries in development do not have them well institutionalized or technologically established.

Also, there is minimal investment on Research and Development (R&D) in developing countries which restricts the scope for developing indigenous technologies in science-dominated defence industry. This will mean that many countries will still rely on foreign sourcing and suppliers to supply any military or guns of high or medium-grade. This dependence generates strategic liabilities and can adversely impact national security.

“Aatam Nirbhar in Defence Production” in this context has gained the utmost significance. Technological capacities are needed in the country for sustainable security. It’s a must for the developing countries to build its own military industry, IP, technology education, military research and take their military dependency of technology and build up their military independence.

India has also understood the importance of the Revolution in Military Affairs and she has taken a few important steps to rejuvenate and modernise her Armed forces. Technological Modernization, indigenous defence production and Network Centric Warfare have been acquiring new ideas to fight the new security challenge in front of the nation.

Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) has contributed towards indigenous development of defence technologies in a big way. Through its research and development programs, India has made tremendous strides in the field of rocket science, Electronic Counter-measure Systems, radars and unmanned platforms.

Agni Missile and BrahMos are weapons which have revolutionized missile technology and order of strategic and strategic deterrence for Indian country. The systems have contributed to the defence forces of the Indian nation to maintain its “albeit a creditable status” of preparedness in a complex security scenario.

satellites are doing some neat things and so has been the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) to do surveillance/reconnaissance tasks. Satellite technology is increasingly being applied in the fields of communication, navigation, collecting intelligence and tracking military activities on a real-time basis.

Moreover, after implementing such systems as Network for Command, Control, Communications and Intelligence (NC3I), India is changing its face into a world of network war. These facilitate block to block information exchange, collaboration and a feedback organization among the Armed Forces.

India is also putting lots of effort in developing its cyber security, AI/Autonomous Systems and drone technology. The role of the strengthening of Cyber infrastructure has come into the limelight due to the increase in the use of Cyber attack and Information warfare.

The importance of RMA is significant particularly with respect to India with its conventional and non-conventional challenge. The threats can be considered as conventional and non-conventional threats; conventional threats are border dispute, regional military competition; meanwhile, non-conventional threats are terror, insurgency, cyber warfare, and information warfare are considered non-conventional threats. The India defence policy hence has now turned towards technology, indigenous defence manufacturing as well as comprehensive defence modernization.

## V Future Trends in RMA

Future benefits future REMA in terms of development (becoming more sophisticated and larger). In the years to come, the fate of the world of war hang in the balance thanks to new technologies.

The process their weapons go through to be created. The total independence in the possible process of boosting their capabilities to “weaponisation”.

Part of the war in the future will be played out using autonomous weaponry – weapons that are used, and acted on by, human beings with control over them – as they become more prevalent, one may assume. Unmanned drones, tanks fabricated of weapons and defence systems controlled by intelligence and artificial intelligence are poised to transform how warfare is conducted out on the battle field.

## Quantum Computing

An army could use quantum computing better to communicate and analyze data, spy on its enemies, fight codes and secure cyber information. The

phenomenal processing power could warrant fresh thinking on the issue of encryption, and may significantly affect cyber warfare power.

### Hypersonic Missiles

One of the most important recent innovations in the field of military technology are hypersonic missiles, which are said to accelerate beyond Mach 5. They are very agile and would not be easily avoided, also they are fast, easy to evade and have very quick response time making it difficult to intercept the missiles made so far.

### Space Warfare

Space is becoming a part of the military sphere. Satellite Communications, Surveillance, Navigation, Intelligence and a Precision Targeting are all areas where satellites are used. This means that "military manoeuvring in space" is increasingly becoming one of the important security issues, and the militarization of anti-satellite technology is a worrying trend.

### AI-Based Warfare Systems

The military hopes to use Artificial Intelligence (AI) to transform the way the military conducts Research and Development (R&D) in areas such as decision making, operational planning, logistics, intelligence interpretation and processing, and others. These will make warfare a more quick, accurate, more automated and more technologized war. This might induce less use of man power in commencing combat activity in the future.

### Conclusion

Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) is one of the greatest changes in the history of modern warfare. It's not just an evolution in technology, but rather a complete change in military strategy, organization, concepts, command systems and decision-making processes.

In recent years the nature of warfare has changed fundamentally with the advent of precision guided weapons, cyber warfare, AI technology, satellite technology, information warfare, and network centric warfare. A modern-day victory is no longer won on the number of its military assets or mere conventional armament. On the contrary, in today's armed conflicts it is the information, technological innovations, the powers of intelligence, communication networks and speed of decision making which matter most.

Undoubtedly, RMA has made war more accurate, quick and efficient. But it has also added to the

complexity, uncertainty and multidimensionality of security problems. Modern warfare is now fought in the cyber, outer space, economic, information and psychological realms.

Moreover, the emergence of 'hybrid warfare' and 'multi-domain operations', which is to say 'combining conventional military and non-military means of power to carry out a given task', is a testament to the fact that future wars will be fought using integrated methods of power. This means that states need to constantly change their defence policies, military doctrines and strategic planning in the wake of new technologies and geo-politics.

The RMA is a significant chance for modernization, but provides also some serious challenges, especially in the areas of financial resources, technological dependence and defence infrastructure, for developing countries. Hence, defence self-reliance in production, research and development investment and nurturing indigenous technological potential has become a part and parcel of the country's defenses.

RMA is significant for India not only because of the nation's strategic security concerns with the border disputes, threats emanating from terrorism, cyber warfare, and strategic competition in the region, but also because of their platform's relevance. This is especially relevant to the Indian scenario as the country faces different types of security threats, such as border issues, terrorism, cyber warfare, and strategic competition from other regions. India is slowly adapting new ways to meet the need for indigenous development in defence, network-centric warfare, cyber security, artificial intelligence, and space capabilities, all of which bear a close resemblance to RMA.

Finally, technology innovation, automation, AI, cyber, and space-based systems will be increasingly defining the future of warfare. So, the paradigm of RMA has strong implications for all countries, in particular, for developing countries, which need to understand the implications, reshape their defence strategies and prepare themselves for the future nature of warfare, a war which changes continuously.

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# Pakistan Army: Curse and Boon to a Nation

## Introduction

Brig Sunil Mishra \*

*'I grew up with the firm conviction that the only good Indian was a dead Indian. To add to the ranks of good Indians, I joined the Pakistan Army'*

*-Maj Gen Mahmud Ali Durrani*

### Introduction

Every nation has an army, but the Pakistan Army has a nation, which is one of the most quoted statements to describe the army. The journey of the Pakistan Army as the most prominent organisation began after the euphoria of creating a new nation subsided in light of violent partition, abject poverty and poor political leadership. The mismanagement of the economy and inability to reach a political consensus made the population hopeless, and the Pakistani army was called multiple times to control internal security situations within ten years of its existence as a country. The prevailing situation gave the army chief, General Ayub Khan, an opening to stage a military takeover of the country. Since then, it has championed itself as the defender of the nation, the protector of Pakistan's ideology, and the last hope for the country.

The British Army recruited its troops mainly from five to six districts in the Punjab and Pashtun areas during its rule, and the same trend continues with the Pakistan Army. As in other affairs, Punjab dominates the Army, which constitutes approximately 75 to 77 per cent of the full force, followed by 14 to 16 per cent from Pakistan or Pathans, leaving only 4 to 8 per cent for Sindh and 1 to 2 per cent for Baluchistan.

The officer cadre is closely monitored, and to rise beyond the divisional commander, the Punjabi identity does help. For a Baluch or a Sindhi officer, it is almost a fluke or sheer brilliance. The Pashtun officers, being naturally good leaders, are kept in low-profile appointments to minimise the risk of any misadventures. Punjab and NWFP areas, essentially the same areas, are recruiting grounds for all the other terror organisations active in Pakistan.

The threat to its border from Afghanistan and India is drummed all year long, and even a harmless political statement from the neighbourhood is seriously discussed from Parliament to the local kirana shop of Karachi, from the Rawalpindi HQ to the mess of the minor units of the Army. The scheming Hindu, the conniving white man and the thankless Afghan keep creeping into the national narrative depending upon the flow of the US dollars, diplomatic heat from India and the assertion of Afghanistan for demarcation of borders.

### Process of Radicalisation

The radicalisation of the Pakistan Army has been gradual and systematic. In 1947, the Army maintained the secular legacy of the British Indian Army; the cantonment and the officers' messes were considered the most liberal spaces in the country.

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The ball dances, wine & dining till late at night were natural. The nature of the army changed after Ayub took over the reins of the country; it started modernising after joining the CENTO and the SETO under American influence in the 60s. The military alliance with the US bloc of countries exposed the army to professional armies. It received military training in the best of institutions and US bases. The psychological operation became part of the military strategy, and India and its Hindu population became the natural targets and enemies. The institutional radicalisation of the Army started after 1965, with the view that 'as a general rule Hindu morale would not stand more than a couple of hard blows at the right time and place' in all war-fighting strategies of Army training institutions. The myth was shaken in 1965 and broken after the loss of East Pakistan and the surrender of 91,000 troops in 1971. Bhutto, after becoming the prime minister, was able to make the army work under the constitution, but failed to do so. Instead, he interfered too much in Army matters and used it too often for internal security, making it relevant and powerful again in the national narrative.

After the hanging of Bhutto, under Zia-ul-Haq, Islam became the core of belief, and he took active steps to enforce Islam in Pakistan and prepared the Army to uphold its values. Compulsory offering of Namaz five times and study of the Koran and the Ideology of Pakistan as part of the Army training schedule. The 786 became the symbol of faith; '**Iman-Taqwa- Jihad Fi Sabilillah**' became the motto; and the 'Quranic concept of war' became a new area of study in Army institutions. The officers and men were released to fight the religious war in Afghanistan; interactions between the Islamic Preachers and the officers and their families were organised; the Tablighi Jamaat had free access to the cantonment; and many officers and men, upon retirement, joined the Jamaat ranks. ISI became the lead agency and took control of all the ministries, government departments, the police, and paramilitary organisations. During the Afghan war, it rallied and facilitated the move of all the leading Islamic terror organisations across the World and was running the largest supply of unaccounted guns, ammunition and war-like stores.

The Islamisation and radicalisation have crept deeply into the Army, refusal to follow orders of superior officers, attempts of military Coup and assassination on the Army Chief and Corps Commanders, insider

1 "Four Wars, One Assumption". Altaf Gauhar, *The Nation*, 5 September 1999

attacks on military bases, and the decision not to shoot fellow Muslims indicate growing fundamentalism in the country.

### Civil-Military Relation

The Army sees politicians as people with petty personal ambitions who cannot be trusted with national interests and security. The Defence, foreign and Home Ministers are thus under-employed, relegated to a corner, and only doing the bidding of their Military masters. The Pakistan Army has a disparaging view of democracy and politicians. The dictators take delight in condemning the politicians and the political process and express their disdain in no uncertain terms. Ayub considered, '*We must understand that democracy cannot work in a hot climate. To have democracy, we must have a cold climate like Britain*'<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, Zia felt that '*Our present political edifice is based on the secular democratic system of the West, which has no place in Islam*'<sup>3</sup>, and Musharraf felt that '*Our democracy is not mature in the country. I think many politicians do not behave maturely... I have a belief that democracy has to be modified to an environment; that is the reason for my retaining the power of dismissing an assembly*'<sup>4</sup>. Lt Gen. Hamid Gul stated that the '*democratic government*' tended to compromise, and that political compromise might sometimes counter the national interest. So ... there must be some means of defining and promoting the national interest, some means of rising above political partisanship and compromise on issues of high policy – such as Afghanistan, Kashmir, or relations with India'<sup>5</sup>.

The overarching and pervasive presence of the Pakistan Army since independence has made democracy shallow and prone to failure. The PPP and PML have significant hold over the population, but their traditional constituencies are not enough to secure a clear majority to form a national government. Imran Khan's entry into the political landscape has permanently altered the country's political landscape, making a coalition a necessity to form the government. The permanent differences within the parties make the coalition government fragile and its dismissal easy. The ISI manages defections by

2 Ayub Khan, M. (1967). *Friends Not Masters: A Political Autobiography* (p. 23). London: Oxford University Press.

3 Ziring, (1997). L. *Pakistan in the Twentieth Century: A Political History* (p. 276). Karachi: Oxford University Press.

4 Musharraf, P. (2006). *In the Line of Fire: A Memoir* (p. 134). London: Simon & Schuster.

5 Akhund. (1997). I. *Memoirs of a Bystander* (p. 211). Karachi: Oxford University Press.

using brute methods, creating political alliances, and collecting and using personal information to damage politicians' reputations, making them unpopular and laying the groundwork for the dismissal of elected governments. In these circumstances, the success of democracy and the importance of Parliament are minimal, and the Army will continue to dominate the national landscape.

### Corruption in the Pakistan Army

The service chiefs and senior military officers prefer to settle out of Pakistan, citing security concerns. The officers initially plan the wards' higher education in Europe, the US, and Australia, and they start investing through offshore companies while in service. They buy properties in the name of their wards and fictitious companies and settle in these locations on retirement. The law does not permit senior officers privy to sensitive information to leave the country without the government's approval. Still, the Army violates the rule by issuing no-objection certificates to officers without government approval. After his retirement in 2016, General Raheel Sharif settled in Saudi Arabia, heading the Military alliance forces of Muslim countries and allotting 90 Acres of prime agricultural land worth 400 Crores. Lt Gen Ahmad Shuja Pasha, after his retirement in 2012, settled in the UAE and works for a multinational firm, explains that 'for a business to be successful, employing a senior military officer is the surest way, or even the only way, to get things done in Pakistan. Twenty-seven civil servants hold dual nationalities. Gen Parvez Musharraf has property in London and Dubai; Gen Ashfaq Kayani has a property in Sydney; and Gen Bajwa is reported to have a billion-dollar property in the USA, and his daughter-in-law became a billionaire eight days before the marriage.

Qazi Hussain Ahmed, Emir of Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), in Oct 1998, made a famous remark: "Generals are not Corps Commanders but the Crore Commanders,"<sup>6</sup> which sums up the rot that has set in the Pakistan Army. Shushant Sareen argues that the Pakistan Army has been involved in drug trafficking since the Afghan war, and Lt General and later governor of NWFP, Fazle Haq, was one of the biggest beneficiaries. Two National Accountability Board (NAB) chairmen benefited from the LPG quota allotment by the businessman they investigated. A former ISI chief, along with a Lt General, was booked for illegal leasing of the railway land for a golf course in Lahore. Three retired Generals were found to have caused a loss of 200 Crore to the National Logistics

6 <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-crore-commanders-of-pakistan-army-72492>

Cell (NLC) in the stock market in exchange for commission. The Inspector General of the Frontier Corps office, looking after Balochistan, is a hub of corruption. One Lt General, two Maj Generals, and ten officers were sacked for corruption. It is estimated that Obaidullah Khattak made 1,500 crore in three years, while his successor, Maj Gen Ejaz Shahid, paid 5 Crore to GHQ as a punishment award for the money they amassed as Inspector General of Frontier Corps (IGFC). The corruption in CPEC, the Defence Housing Authority (DHA), Military business Conglomerates, and land schemes and deals is widespread, and the Army investigates the issues without providing any information to the government or the court.

**Media control.** The Pakistan Army has mastered manipulating the media to manage its image since the first military takeover by Ayub. The creation of ISI and ISPR has further strengthened the control, and many of the news Channels, social media sites and handles are created by ISPR through proxy identities. The think tanks' talks, social media activities, Twitter trends and trolls, high-quality videos on YouTube, and quality content on Facebook are organised by ISPR to manage the environment within and outside the country. The citizens of Pakistan get to see the Pak Army as a selfless organisation making tremendous sacrifices to keep the citizens safe from internal and external threats. The political parties, politicians, and government policies unsuited to the establishment are projected as corrupt, selfish and self-serving. The political parties are weak in exercising their political and constitutional authority, and media management is so weak that the military debacles of 1947, 1965, 1971, Kargil, and Abbottabad raids, despite being apparent military failures, are blamed on the poor political leadership.

### Dominance of the Army in Internal Security

The radicalisation of society, availability of arms, sectarianism, ethnic divide and policy paralysis to deal with terrorism often lead to IS situations that are beyond the capability of the police and PMF. The Army stepped in to control the situation, but contrary to the belief that it contained the problems, it aggravated them. The creation of Bangladesh, the problems in Baluchistan, the Lal Masjid operation, and the operation in NWFP and FATA created permanent issues for the country. The Army policy to maintain terror groups as strategic assets against India and as tools to extract foreign funding has boomeranged and created a severe law and order situation for the country.

## Defence Budget

Even when the country is in an economic crisis, the Pakistan Army has been getting the lion's share of the budget. The Army budgetary allotment was between 70 and 56 per cent between 1947 and 1959, and after that, it stabilised between 15 and 20%. The allotment for the nuclear programmes (500–700 billion rupees) and the military pension (120–130 billion rupees) are shown under separate budget heads and are not included in the defence budget. The Army receives a significant share of the Defence budget, while the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) and Pakistan Navy (PN) do not receive the requisite budgetary support.

## Commercial & Business Interest

The Pakistan Army is accused of creating commercial and business organisations in the name of the welfare of its employees. The Fauji Foundation of the Army, Shaheen Foundation of the Air Force, and Bahria Foundation of the Navy are the top three organisations in Pakistan, with multiple industrial and commercial establishments holding over 600 billion USD in assets. The activities of the welfare foundations are beyond the scope of a national audit; they utilise government capital, land, machinery, staffing, and resources, but do not share their profits with the nation. The Foundation is accountable only to the respective service Chiefs, and even the defence or the Prime Minister of the country cannot question their functioning. The Ayubs formulated a plan for a welfare organisation and a policy to provide land to Armed Forces officers officially. The Army Welfare Trust and the Defence Housing Authority (DHA) acquire land at no cost, which is then developed into housing schemes and allotted to officers, who, in turn, sell the land to civilians, commercial entities, and private builders at a premium. The Armed forces have acquired 12 million acres, i.e., 12 per cent of state land, since independence, mostly at prime locations in cities. The Army treats any investigation into the corruption charges as interference in the defence of Pakistan and often resorts to physical harm, targeted killing of investigators, and threats to their families. The charity foundations created for veterans' welfare have now become Pakistan's most prominent business houses. Free land, staffing, infrastructure, water, and electricity make these businesses highly profitable, and private players have no scope to compete with such entities. The ventures encompass cement, paint, trucking companies, shopping malls, restaurants, and spare manufacturing companies. The soldiers usually return to their villages and rarely seek second employment; hence, the officer

cadre is the ultimate beneficiary of such ventures. The exploitation of daily workers by military personnel often leads to clashes, leading to several deaths; the Case of Okaru Military Farm is one of the glaring examples.

## Absolute Control

Pakistan must be one of the few countries where martial law and military courts are superior to civil courts. In an emergency, the Military decides the cases, and except for the president, there is no appeal possible for the victim. Even the courts are wary when dealing with matters involving the Army, and judgment is mostly a request rather than an order. The use of force, the establishment of Military Courts for terrorist activities, and the Army's representation on all committees at the National and state levels have ensured that civilians have accepted the Army's presence in areas that should ideally be the civil domain. The Army retains absolute power in the country and is unwilling to concede space to politicians. The Army has become more potent than democratic institutions, and it does not hesitate to criticise the government on national policies. *"Whatever the constitutional position, one thing is clear in the final analysis: political sovereignty in Pakistan resides neither in the electorate nor the parliament, nor the executive, nor the institutions it creates. It resides, if it resides, anywhere at all, where the coercive power resides... which is the ultimate authority in the decision-making process in Pakistan. In practice, they decide (the Hidden Power) when to abrogate the constitution, when it should be held in abeyance, when elected government should be sacked, and when democracy should be given a chance. Behind the scenes, they also decide whether an elected Prime Minister shall live or die"*<sup>7</sup>.

## Reforms

Pakistan constantly needs foreign funding and loans to sustain itself, and lending institutions have been demanding accountability for the money they have pumped in over so many years, as well as reforms in Pakistan to be eligible for loans. The Military Cartel controls many sectors of the market economy and directly threatens the existence of private players, and the open market economy opposes any kind of reform. Nawaz Sharif undertook the 1998 reform on the insistence of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB), and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The government's reform

<sup>7</sup> Khan Roedad: *A Dream Gone Sour*, Karachi; Oxford University Press, 1997, P 179

initiative so upset the military hierarchy that it eventually led to the downfall of his government, and the next government installed by the Army put the economic reforms on the back burner. Without loans, it's difficult for any government to launch a populist programme, which is a must in a parliamentary government. The withdrawal of foreign funding, difficulty securing loans, increased vigilance on terror financing by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), and a lack of foreign investment, especially after the USA's withdrawal from Afghanistan, led to mounting debt in the country. Presently, it has very little foreign exchange reserves left and is struggling to meet day-to-day government expenditure and the ever-growing budgets of the Armed Forces. The significant presence of military personnel in governance left little leeway for politicians to exert themselves in establishing a new narrative.

### Democracy vs Military Rule

The other stumbling factor that crept into the system was the expert propaganda of the Army and ISI, which blamed corruption on the political setup and projected the politician in a feeble light. The idea to demonise the political leadership is systematic and blatant, and it's very common to see the national cabinet ministers and Chief Ministers being openly accused and abused in open debates on TV, raising the stakes of the Pakistan Army. The opposition parties being used by the Army propaganda machinery reflect an immature democracy, resulting in the dismissal of the Nawaz Sharif & Benazir governments twice and of Imran Khan once; to date, none of the elected governments has completed their full terms.

Compared to democratically elected governments, tenures of military rule in Pakistan are considered to be the golden period for the country, and ISI uses this narrative to justify the dismissal of elected governments and military takeovers. Compared to political rule, which was marked by chaos and uncertainty, military rule has been a period of calm, as military might was used to ensure good public order. The effect of such measures on the public has been

visible, and military takeovers are always welcomed. The fact that none of the elected Prime Ministers could complete their customary five-year tenure due to manufactured defections and unprecedented manipulation by the ISI speaks volumes about the importance of democracy. The policy reforms required to drive the economy directly threaten the personal and institutional interests of the Pakistan Army. Threats to dismiss the government, public criticism of government policies, and branding any steps that hurt the military interest as anti-national and engineering street protests left very little chance for the democratic setup to succeed.

### The Role of Global Players in Perpetuating the Autocracy

The Global Players, such as the US, the West, and even China, played a major role in perpetuating the autocratic Army rule over the political setup due to the Army's efficiency in getting things done. They supported all four Coups in Pakistan, and major military alliances also took place under dictatorial regimes without the consent of parliament. Diplomatically, the Army Chiefs meet visiting foreign dignitaries independently, and ambassadors at foreign missions consult the Army directly to resolve important bilateral issues.

### Conclusion

Pakistan Army is involved in every sphere of life, and the legislature has lost executive control of the army. To remain relevant, they have established a mechanism to control the national narrative, discredited the political machinery, forged military alliances, brokered impossible international peace deals, outsourced military in exchange for money, sold terrorists they groomed and established an anti-India stance. Eight decades after Jinnah's dictum, "*Never forget that you are the servants of the state. You do not make policy. It is we, the people's representatives, who decide how the country is to be run. Your job is only to obey the decision of your civilian masters.*"<sup>8</sup>, the scene is changed to 'Civilian government job is to obey the decisions of Military Masters'.

<sup>8</sup> Asghar Khan. (2005). *We've Learnt Nothing from History: Pakistan: Politics, Military and Religion* (p. 15). Karachi: Oxford University Press.

# The Enduring Exile: Parliamentary Scrutiny of Kashmiri Pandit Migration, Relief, and Reintegration (1985–2025)

Dr Deepali Khaire

## ABSTRACT

*This article presents a focused analysis of the recurring and critical discussions held in the Indian Parliament (Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha) concerning the multifaceted issues faced by Kashmiri Pandit migrants over a four-decades period, from 1985 to 2025. The study specifically focused on the discourse surrounding the community's forced exodus that followed the rise of militancy in 1990, and tracks the legislative response through subsequent political eras, including the major shift post-2019.*

*The parliamentary record reveals consistent scrutiny of the Central Government's handling of this enduring humanitarian crisis. The key themes addressed by legislators includes, the provision of immediate relief and sustained aid, such as cash relief and the quality of housing in migrant camps like Jagti. The legislative debate over property and livelihood protection, particularly mechanisms to safeguard immovable assets left in the Valley and strategies for generating employment under the Prime Minister's rehabilitation and employment package. The complex, critical discussions on the challenges and often slow implementation of schemes for their safe, dignified return and permanent resettlement back into the Kashmir Valley. By analysing this continuous legislative and deliberative scrutiny, the article demonstrates how Parliament kept the displacement and rehabilitation of the Kashmiri Pandit community at the forefront of national policy and political attention, serving as an essential check on executive action and an enduring measure of the political and social restoration of justice in Jammu and Kashmir.*

**Keywords:** Kashmiri Pandit Migrants, Indian Parliament, Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), Political Scrutiny, Rehabilitation, Displacement, Legislative Debate, Article 370.

## Introduction:

Over the period of seventy years, Kashmir has evolved as multi-layered conflict. India's intervention on behalf of the Jammu and Kashmir after its the accession to India and Pakistan's stubbornness to give up the claim over the territory sowing the seed of intractable conflict within the Indian subcontinent. The religious and regional polarisation in Jammu and Kashmir is a deeply layered phenomenon that cannot be decoupled from broader global trends, as its internal political fractures were systematically transformed by external geopolitical shifts and

institutional failures over several decades. The structural roots of this divide trace back to historical socio-economic asymmetries and regional-demographic cleavages established during the 1947 Partition, which permanently fractured the multi-ethnic fabric of the state (Akbar, 1991). This structural decay intensified throughout the 1970s and 1980s due to New Delhi's repeated political interference, bureaucratic ineptitude, and the systematic subversion of democratic processes notably the rigged 1987 state assembly elections which severely alienated the local population and shattered faith

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in democratic dissent (Singh, 1995). The resulting vacuum allowed a localised quest for political autonomy to be rapidly co-opted and radicalised by institutional Islamism and external pan-Islamic forces. Following the Soviet-Afghan war, Pakistan's security apparatus redirected its proxy warfare infrastructure into the region, shifting the struggle from an indigenous demand for self-determination into a highly polarised, exclusivist armed jihad (Joshi, 1999). This influx of transnational terror networks, paired with targeted sectarian violence, culminated in the tragic ethnic cleansing and forced mass exodus of the minority Kashmiri Pandit community by 1990, establishing an irreconcilable, weaponized religious divide that permanently dismantled the region's pluralistic tradition of *Kashmiriyat* (Swami, 2007; Seminarist 2018).

### The Trajectory of Militancy and International Shifts

The 1975 Delhi Accord between Indira Gandhi and Sheikh Abdullah attempted to restore democratic processes, prompting a temporary revival of competitive participatory politics in the 1977 and 1983 assembly elections. During this period, interregional competition emerged among the National Conference, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Janata Dal, and the Jammu and Kashmir Panthers Party across Jammu, Kashmir, and Ladakh. Nevertheless, persistent central interventions eroded public trust in the electoral process, as citizens increasingly perceived their electoral mandates as meaningless. The 1986 Rajiv-Farooq Accord, which formed a National Conference-Congress coalition, shattered public confidence in local governance, widespread perceptions of systemic rigging during the 1989 parliamentary elections served as the ultimate catalyst for armed militancy. Prior to 1989, debates primarily focused on the geopolitical status of Kashmir within bilateral India-Pakistan relations, while historical demands for a plebiscite receded. India maintained that the dispute was strictly an internal affair, arguing that the 1975 Accord established political legitimacy by securing the National Conference's affirmation of Jammu and Kashmir as an integral part of the Indian Union.

The subsequent insurgency developed across five distinct phases, initially, the Gathering Storm (1988–1991), the Outbreak (1992–1993), the Containment (1993–1994), and the Turnaround (1995–1996), after which traditional militancy became largely obsolete (Boleria 2012). The crisis escalated dramatically with

the 1989 abduction of Rubaiya Sayeed, daughter of the union home minister. Subsequent targeted killings of Hindu government employees inflamed intercommunal friction, prompting a decade of heavy military deployment (Joshi 1999; Schofield 2003; Quarashi 2004).

Global trends actively shaped the political discourse surrounding the conflict in Jammu and Kashmir. Between 1989 and 1992, the local discourse assimilated concepts of 'ethnic nationalism' and 'self-determination,' inspired by contemporary Eastern European revolutions. This era featured the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front's (JKLF) 'Long March' under Amanullah Khan, aimed at securing a unified, independent state (Bose 2002; Behera 2006). By 1992–1993, the international focus shifted from self-determination to human rights violations, catalysed by the Bosnian conflict. Consequently, the narrative in Kashmir transformed to emphasise alleged state-sponsored human rights abuses, drawing scrutiny from the Organisation of Islamic States and the European Union (Paranjpe 2019). This discourse shifted again after the 2001 World Trade Center attacks, as the global 'War on Terror' reframed the conflict around Islamic extremism and jihad.

Amid the peak violence of 1993, the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC) emerged as a political umbrella representing dual ideologies: absolute independence or merger with Pakistan. Though it orchestrated major protests, strikes, and election boycotts, the APHC suffered from endemic internal friction, leading to splits in 2002, 2005, 2008, and a formal fracture in 2014 when Mirwaiz Umar Farooq departed. Syed Ali Shah Geelani's resignation in June 2020 marked the further decline of its institutional relevance.

### Interlocution and the Rise of Radicalisation<sup>1</sup>

Beginning in 2001, New Delhi launched several peace initiatives. The K.C. Pant Committee (2001) engaged diverse stakeholders and recommended broader autonomy, yet its lack of a clear timeline stalled progress (The Kashmir Post 2017). Subsequent efforts included the Arun Jaitley briefing (2002) and the unofficial Ram Jethmalini Committee (2002), both

<sup>1</sup> According to Schmid (2013), radicalisation is an individual or collective psychological and behavioural process wherein politically polarised actors shift from conventional politics toward justifying and using political violence. This transition involves a systemic rejection of democratic values and a deliberate embrace of extremist ideologies to achieve far-reaching societal or political change.

of which highlighted Pakistani sponsorship of cross-border terrorism. The N.N. Vohra Committee (2003) established a three-pronged strategy prioritising border security, economic development, and sustained dialogue, leading to talks with the Hurriyat in early 2004. Under the UPA government (2004), Prime Minister Manmohan Singh held roundtables and met with separatist figures like Sajad Lone and Yasin Malik, resulting in the judicial review of Public Safety Act detainees.

Concurrently, observers argued the BJP was transitioning from a party of militant nationalism to a pragmatic party of governance (Mehta 2004). Later, the NDA led government administration appointed Dineshwar Sharma to address deep-seated issues of institutional decay, mal-governance, and identity politics. Many critiques notes, however, that Indian strategy frequently prioritised tactical kinetic success over local judicial accountability (Lalwani & Grayner 2020).

### **The Context of Exodus (1985–1990)**

Around 1982 the bordering states like Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir and Northeast were facing the rise in disintegrating forces. Addressing the Eighth Lok Sabha on February 20, 1986, President Giani Zail Singh stated: “A great responsibility rests on those who have secured the mandate of the people. Their supreme task is to isolate those who are resorting to violence to disturb communal harmony and peace.” (Singh, G. Z, 1986 President Speech: 290).

The National Integration Council was reconstituted in 1986 to facilitate this process of national consensus. The issue of Punjab was brought under control around 1987 with the help of law enforcing agencies. The discontent in Jammu and Kashmir region escalates primarily due to covert support of Pakistan. Though the militancy surfaced as major security threat in 1989, isolated incidences were observed from March 1985, like violent activities in state carried out by local groups. It was brought to notice of the government. The incidence of communal violence in February 1986 in Anantnag district unveiled the communal tension in the region. In response to the grave situation, Shri George Fernandes was designated as a Minister for Jammu and Kashmir Affairs on March 14, 1990, to coordinate matters related to Jammu and Kashmir across all Ministries.

In December 1995, *The Situation in Jammu and Kashmir*, report produced under the chairmanship of Shri Rajni Ranjan Sahu. The committee has visited Jammu and Kashmir during 15-19 September 1995.

The Members interacted with various groups of local representatives. They conveyed the impression that people of the state have started realising that Pakistan has been exploiting them for vested interests. They were fed up with militancy. All the nationalist forces in the state should strive to bring Kashmiris back into the national main-stream and strive to restore popular Government. The general law and order situation in the state has registered a distinct improvement. There was a discernible change in the mood of the people, who earlier hesitated to speak against militants, but were coming forward with vital clues and information to the security forces about them. The committee also noted that Pakistan never wanted normalcy and restoration of popular government in the state. Pakistan sponsored militants tried to negate all efforts towards bringing back normalcy in the State, through their subversive activities. Government should deal with Pakistan’s agents and foreign elements with a firm hand. The Doda Revenue District in Jammu Region had large concentration of militants, due to the vast hilly areas and dense forests. The security forces have to operate under great constraints. Government should explore the possibility of dividing the district into different police districts, though it may remain one revenue district.

The ensuing exodus of the Kashmiri Pandit community and other minorities from the Valley in the first half of 1990 was primarily driven by the ‘insecurity of life and honour’ they felt, coupled with the ‘total collapse of the structure of governance’ and the prevailing anarchy. This environment was fostered by the covert support from Pakistan through indoctrination, training, arms, and trained manpower, leading to a strategy of terror by brutalised killings to paralyse the authority structures. Approximately 56,000 families migrated out of the Valley following the surge in violence and militancy after the 1990s (137<sup>th</sup> Report 2009).

### **Parliamentary Scrutiny of Relief and Property Protection**

Over the period last 40 years, Parliament addressed Kashmiri migrant issues through political, security, economic, and socio-cultural debates, approximately between 1200 to 1500 questions in both houses concerning Jammu and Kashmir matters. Out of these approximately 400 questions are regarding the issues of governance. A consistent theme was the provision of relief and the protection of the community’s immovable assets.

### Jammu and Kashmir Migrants Overview<sup>2</sup>

Around 56,000 families migrated out of the valley after 1990s violence and militancy. The migration has occurred over a period of several years. The primary reason for migration was 'insecurity of life and dignity' under the changing political and security environment in the state. The concentrated relocation of Kashmiri migrants in five to seven Indian states emerges as a direct consequence of restrictive state policies, structural incentives, and desire to preserve the cultural identity. Initially, geographical proximity dictated survival; families fled to contiguous northern territories like Jammu, Delhi, Punjab, and Haryana under the short-lived illusion that their exile would be temporary (Datta, 2017; Dhar, 2023; Shekhawat, 2006). Beyond the northern borderlands, further migration occurred only where specific regional governments engineered powerful structural pull factors. Maharashtra, for instance, drew a massive secondary wave of migrants by offering a unique 1% blanket educational reservation for Kashmiri children, a policy that directly capitalized on the community's distinct premium on academic and professional advancement (Ali, 2026). Similarly, families possessing deep bureaucratic ties gravitated strictly toward central administrative and corporate hubs like Delhi-NCR where transferable government jobs existed (Datta, 2017). This uneven distribution intensified because the highly educated, urbanised Kashmiri Pandit population actively resisted forced resettlement into distant, unfamiliar agrarian states that lacked cognitive-professional opportunities and linguistic compatibility (Shekhawat, 2006). Instead, they instrumentalise their own social capital to form tight community enclaves in urban pockets like Bengaluru and Pune, creating a chain-migration effect where early settlers acted as social magnets for subsequent arrivals.

However, the state apparatus actively immobilised these populations by anchoring critical relief aid and cash assistance exclusively to concentrated camps in Jammu and Delhi, effectively trapping the poorest migrants within those specific administrative zones (Dhar, 2023; Pandey, 2025). The major initiative taken are cash relief to Kashmiri migrants of Rs. 1000/- per person per month from 2006 onwards. It was increased from initial amount of 250/- per person per month in 1990. The *ex-gratia* relief for victim of terrorist ranges from 1,00,000 to family after death

2 Department Related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs one hundred and Thirty Seventh report on Rehabilitation of Jammu and Kashmir migrants presented to the Rajya Sabha on 13<sup>th</sup> February 2009

of individual, 75,000/- Physical handicapped, 5000/- major injuries and 1000/- minor injuries. Further to age relaxation of 5 year in employment was given to people who had domicile of state of Jammu and Kashmir from 1<sup>st</sup> January 1980 to 31 December 1989. The provision was extended till 31 December 2007. The guidelines were issued by the Ministry of Human Resource Development that at least one percent of seats should be reserved for Jammu Kashmir quota and quota for Jammu and Kashmir migrants. However, all state governments had not done it. Both people from Jammu and Kashmir and Kashmir migrants in other states like Delhi, Gujarat, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Punjab, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh. Not all states have made the similar provision.

Education being the instrument of transformation, the government had made provisions for facilitating the Kashmiri Migrants. The Sub-Committee visiting examining it noted that considering the volatile situation extension of 30 days to the Jammu and Kashmir migrants. The relaxation in cut-off percentage up to 10 per cent, subject to minimum eligibility requirement. The course-wise provision of up to five percent increase in intake capacity and reservation of at least one seat in merit quota in technical/professional institutions. The waiving of domicile requirements; and facilitation of migration in second and subsequent years. The guidelines were issued by the Ministry of Human Resource Development that at least one percent of seats should be reserved, though not all states are taking the initiative.

### The Preservation and Protection of Migrants Property:

The distressed migration of people from Kashmir have raised the issue of preservation and protection of the immovable property of these people. The state government to address these issues has enacted two laws namely *The J&K Migrants Immovable Property (Preservation, Protection and Restraint on Distress Sales) Act 1997* and *The J&K Migrants (Stay of Proceedings) Act 1997*.

It tried to provide various measures to ensure that the immovable property of a migrants cannot be alienated without the prior permission of Revenue and Relied Minister. The district magistrate shall take possession of all properties within 30 days after commencement of the act. There should be made for evacuation of unauthorized occupants. Another act made the provision of stay of recovery of loan on the property of migrants from Kashmir Division under

the present circumstances until government notified otherwise.

The Secretary in the presentation to the committee also stated that efforts were being made to restore the temples in the Valley affected by militancy. The details of the restoration efforts indicate that out of the 436 temples existing prior to 1989, a total of 266 temples remain intact, while 170 temples sustained damage. Till March 2021, 90 of these damaged temples have been successfully renovated, with a total expenditure incurred amounting to Rs. 32.50 lakh.

In accordance with the executive implementation framework outlined in Action Taken Report No. 184 (March 2015), the statutory designation of Deputy Commissioners as the legal custodians of Kashmiri migrants' property has been reinforced by explicit directives instructing them to verify all complaints regarding the illegal occupation of these assets. These directives were operationalised through; a formal grievance mechanism has been established to invite and collect complaints directly from affected individuals. However, upon evaluating these enforcement measures, the Parliamentary Committee expressed dissatisfaction with the current pace of execution, subsequently directing the state government to eliminate administrative delays and streamline the resolution framework to ensure the swift, time-bound redressal of grievances for this population.

Regarding the administrative modifications to the PM's Package-2008, the State Government submitted a comprehensive proposal to the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) seeking an upward revision of financial assistance for migrant self-employment. In tandem with these financial adjustments, the Parliamentary Standing Committee explicitly recommended evaluating the feasibility of providing 'one job per Migrant family' to support displaced households. Furthermore, the Committee urged a sympathetic and swift review to create 1,000 Class-IV posts dedicated specifically to unemployed migrant youths whose education did not progress beyond the matriculation level. This multi-pronged proposal for enhanced self-employment funding and targeted vocational post creation remains under active examination by the MHA (Para 2.1.82, 179)

Simultaneously, the structural funding and allocation of the mandated 6,000 government jobs for Kashmiri migrants underwent critical re-evaluation. While the Central Government already shoulders the financial expenditure for 3,000 of these positions,

the State Government formally requested a package revision due to its weak fiscal position and looming legal complications, proposing that the Centre also fully fund the remaining 3,000 posts. To streamline implementation and address the Committee's prior concerns, the State Government clarified that the recommended Class-IV posts for matriculate migrant youths would be directly absorbed out of this remaining pool of 3,000 centrally funded positions. This consolidated fiscal and administrative restructuring proposal is currently being examined by the MHA (Para 2.1.82, 179)

### **Improvement of Facilities in Migrant Camps**

The Sub-Committee was informed that the living conditions in the Migrant Camps were closely monitored by the Ministry of Home Affairs to make improvements. It was also stated that the relief package, employment plan by Prime Minister, housing assistance to Jagti camp, upgradation of voters ID, Cash Relief, Ration to eligible migrants were measures taken towards improvement of facilities in Migrant Camps.

Following the Prime Minister's 1996 announcement of a Rs. 6.6 crore special package for the improvement of facilities in the Jammu Camps, the allocated funds were fully utilised to upgrade regional camp infrastructure. The package successfully funded the construction of 800 one-room tenements alongside 19 Sulabh-type toilet complexes to improve living and sanitation standards. Additionally, the capital was deployed to implement drainage schemes across five camps and to construct three 10-room prefabricated school buildings to support local educational needs.

It was also stated that an expenditure of about Rs.70.00 crore was incurred annually towards providing cash assistance and rations to the migrants at Jammu. The total expenditure incurred for providing cash relief and ration since 1990 was Rs.689.21 crore. The expenditure was reimbursed to the State Government of Jammu and Kashmir by the Central Government under Security-related Expenditure (SRE). The expenditure for providing relief to the migrants at Delhi was borne by the Government of NCT of Delhi and was about Rs.20.00 crore annually. It was also stated that in addition to cash relief and ration, the details of expenditure incurred since 1990 for providing infrastructural facilities in the migrant camps at Jammu were 103 crores.

### **Institutional Frameworks for Migrant Repatriation**

The Ministry, in their written note further stated that the Sub-Committee constituted under the Apex

Level Committee finalised an Action Plan for the return and rehabilitation of Kashmiri Migrants in October 2000 involving a total amount of Rs.2589.73 crore to enable them to return to the Valley. The Action Plan envisaged return of migrants in phases. The Cabinet Committee on Security in its meeting held in May 2001 gave in-principal approval to the pilot project of rehabilitating 200 families of Migrant Kashmiri Pandits at Srinagar under the Action Plan. The State Government identified 166 houses forming 15 clusters in Srinagar and Budgam Districts, which were considered safe for the return of the owners of these houses. The list of these clusters was published in the newspapers and steps were taken to identify the families and find their willingness to return to their homes. It was further stated that about 50 families who were registered with the Relief Organization, Jammu were contacted personally to give their consent for return to the Valley on the basis of the package announced by the Government. Interaction meetings with some of these families were also held but none of the families agreed to return to the Valley. As a result, the Action Plan could not be implemented by the State Government.

The Ministry also informed the Sub-Committee that as indicated by the State Government, the shrines in Mattan and Kheer Bhavani had been proposed to be developed into two model clusters containing temporary shelters for Kashmiri Migrants, where the Kashmiri Migrants displaced from these places could be settled temporarily, till such time they can repair their existing residential houses. The Ministry of Finance provided a grant of Rs.10 crore to the State Government in December 2002 for the reconstruction/renovation of the houses and shrines at Kheer Bhavani and Mattan. The Sub-Committee was further informed that the Government of India also approved the proposal for the return of the Kashmiri Migrants to the Valley, on an experimental basis.

There is apathy on the part of the Government in implementing rehabilitation programmes for Jammu and Kashmir migrants and also in implementing directions of various High Courts and the Supreme Court. Kashmiri migrants should be provided conducive environment to return to valley. The committee has recommended regular meetings with the representatives of Kashmiri migrants to take their feedback and analysis the response for failure of return of migrants' scheme conditions of Kashmiri pandits living in valley.

### **PM's Employment Package and Financial Assistance for Unemployed Youth**

The Committee is disappointed to note the fact that there are no takers for the self-employment package of the Government. First, the conditionalities attached are harsh. Secondly, the amount is not sufficient for starting an enterprise. The Committee is also of the opinion that in today's world it may not be possible for the Government to create jobs for everyone. The youth should therefore look for self-employment avenues. The Committee feels that since the procures of the scheme are very little, the option of increasing the funds per individual for self-employment may be explored. This may be done to make the scheme more attractive. The Government should be more realistic in its approach if it does not want to remain satisfied with schemes just on paper. (Para 2.1.74 report 179)

### **The Slow implementation of Prime Minister's Package**

The Committee feels that the required modifications in the PMs Package may be carried out on priority basis so as to make the Package more attractive for the Migrant community. A critical point of parliamentary scrutiny highlights a significant 'implementation deficit' regarding the Prime Minister's Rehabilitation Package. While the 2008 package allocated Rs. 1,618.40 crore, legislative records reveal that only Rs. 104.52 crore had been utilised by mid-2013. This disparity suggests that administrative bottlenecks and a lack of 'sincere and sympathetic approach' hindered the transition from policy intent to tangible relief. In view of the Committee, these open facts do not reflect committed, sincere and sympathetic approach and course of action on the part of a responsive Government towards an aggrieved group of people of the State. (Para 2.1.51 Report 179)

The resettlement of migrants within the Valley remains a highly sensitive security and social issue. While the state government continues to provide active administrative and logistical support to guarantee a smooth transition for returning families, current assessments indicate low initial traction, with eligible migrant families demonstrating limited interest in immediate return at this stage. The government tried to incentivise returning migrants participation and systematically address economic and infrastructural barriers, the state government has formally submitted a comprehensive revision proposal for the PM's Package-2008. The subsequent proposal shifts the policy toward a

robust, high-impact financial support model where key interventions include increasing financial assistance up to Rs. 20 Lakh per family for housing construction and reconstruction, alongside a Rs. 900 Crore allocation dedicated to acquiring land for permanent cluster accommodations. Furthermore, the strategy targets long-term economic stability by creating 3,000 direct State Government jobs for migrant youth and providing Rs. 10 Lakh in financial assistance per venture to foster self-employment and business startups, while logistical support will be further reinforced by the construction of 2,000 transit accommodations within the Valley.

### Housing assistance and problems at Jagti Camp:

The provision of two room tenements for the residents living in Jagti camp was made for 5242 families. The state government's response that the development of permanent resident might negatively affect the Kashmiri Pandits return to valley was criticized by the committee. The committee took stand that if there is lack of confidence among Kashmir Pandits to return to Kashmir valley due to conducive atmosphere then the state government have to make necessary arrangements to address the issues of people living in Jagti Camp. Further partially accepting the demand of local residents about concession in the electricity bill due to their weak financial conditions but rejected the demand of camp residents for providing electricity with proper registration with respective authority. The Committee further suggested the state government to set up Notified Area Committees to monitor the civic infrastructural conditions from time to time.

The Committee feels that the grievances of the Migrant people residing in Jagati and Talwara are quite genuine. The Committee strongly recommended that the State Government should take all necessary steps required to improve the living conditions in the Migrant camps at Jagati and Talwara.

Political empowerment of Kashmiri Migrants and Simplifying Procedure of Voter ID upgradation: It was noted that while upgradation of electoral voters lists several Kashmiri migrants were excluded. The committee had suggested the state government to provide Registered list of Kashmiri migrants to election commission to avoid their deletion from electoral list. The existing three step procedure of registering voter ID is very cumbersome and results in discouraging the migrants registration in the voter list.

Religion Wise Registration Detail of Kashmiri Migrants in Jammu<sup>3</sup> (in July 2021) was comprises 40,142 Hindu families accounting for 135,888 persons, 2,684 Muslim families accounting for 12,157 persons, 1,730 Sikh families accounting for 6,559 persons, and 5 families belonging to other categories accounting for 19 persons.

The constitutional restructuring of August 5, 2019, fundamentally redefined the Indian state's approach toward displaced populations, shifting the legislative focus from passive relief management to a rights-based framework aimed at permanent socio-political reintegration, as detailed in the Department-Related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs reports (Parliament of India, 2021, 2023). This legislative evolution began with a structural overhaul of residency status through the *Jammu and Kashmir Grant of Domicile Certificate (Procedure) Rules, 2020*, which dismantled the restrictive 'Permanent Resident Certificate' (PRC) regime. By automatically qualifying any individual registered with the Relief and Rehabilitation Commissioner for a domicile certificate, the initial 2020 - 2021 framework democratized access to local government employment and land ownership (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2021). However, the true materialisation of this policy occurred after 2021, when the administration transitioned from mere registration to active asset reclamation. The launch of a dedicated online portal under the *Jammu and Kashmir Migrant Immovable Property (Preservation, Protection and Restraint on Distress Sales) Act, 1991*, effectively weaponised these newly acquired domicile rights, enabling displaced families to contest historical distress sales and illegal encroachments (Parliament of India, 2022). By digitising land records and legally mandating district magistrates to act as custodians of migrant properties, Parliamentary scrutinise highlighted that citizenship was transformed from an abstract status into a tangible mechanism of economic re-entry (Parliament of India, 2023).

Simultaneously, this legislative shift systematically dismantled the institutional architecture that had engineered the community's electoral disenfranchisement for over three decades. Historically, the political voice of Kashmiri migrants was muted by the cumbersome 'M-Form' verification process, a multi-step bureaucratic barrier that parliamentary panels consistently flagged for locking the diaspora out of the electoral roll (Parliament of

3 Relief and Rehabilitation of Migrants Government of Jammu and Kashmir online website: <http://jkmigrantrelief.nic.in/index.html>

India, 2021). The momentum for reform accelerated following the finalisation of the Jammu and Kashmir Delimitation Commission report in May 2022, which forced legislative bodies to confront the reality that boundary redrawing was incomplete if a vital component of the electorate remained structurally excluded. This realization culminated in a profound legislative breakthrough via the *Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation (Amendment) Act, 2023*, wherein Parliament constitutionally guaranteed the community representation by mandating the gubernatorial nomination of two Kashmiri migrant lawmakers, including at least one woman, to the Legislative Assembly (Lok Sabha Secretariat, 2023). The structural circle was finally closed in April 2024 when the Election Commission of India (ECI), acting on long-standing parliamentary recommendations, abolished the archaic M-Form requirement for major migrant hubs, mapping relief camps directly to special polling stations and integrating database networks (Election Commission of India, 2024). Ultimately, these synchronised interventions demonstrate a deliberate state strategy to transition Kashmiri migrants from a marginalised, scattered voting bloc into a legally protected, permanently anchored political constituency within the Union Territory.

It is essential to understand and recognise that analysis of parliamentary provisions and beyond legislator's deliberations the people suffering in Jammu and Kashmir and at different places forced to make sense of the reality often through discourses dominated by state and political narratives than their individual lived experiences. In this context, the work of anthropologists like Veena Das (2007) and Carolyn Nordstrom (1997), who argue that under prolonged conflict, violence becomes 'domesticated' and woven into the mundane fabric of life. Following the 1990 outbreak of militancy, variables of proximity, geography, and socio-cultural alignment dictated where displaced populations resettled, as seen when the minority Kashmiri Pandit community migrated southward into the Hindu-majority Jammu region or toward New Delhi, where their long-term reception and the subsequent 'discourse of return' became highly contingent on local political environments and shifting regional party agendas (Datta, 2017). Furthermore, administrative recovery has been paralysed by rigid, multi-tier classification systems and jurisdictional friction. This institutional delay is further exacerbated by the state's historical tendency to classify the 1990 exodus as a short-term, 'voluntary relocation' rather than a formalized internal

displacement, a bureaucratic distinction that reduces cohesive national rehabilitation to discretionary state welfare packages and inadvertently cements the permanency of displacement through early administrative decisions like setting up external camps rather than securing the homeland (Starosta, S. 2020).

Over a period of four decades *Aadat*, habitual familiarity scattered with unpredictable terror mirrors what Michael Taussig (1992) terms the 'nervous system', a state where the abnormal becomes normal, and survival relies on a highly flexible, daily calibration of risk and resilience. The ethnographic studies in the region further illustrate how even basic spaces of daily transition, such as checkpoints and bridges, systematically restructure the psychological and temporal realities of civilians living under military occupation (Oza, 2024). Koul and Deshpande (2026) document the lived experiences of non-displaced Kashmiri Pandit women who remained in the Valley after 1990. Their work shows that while these women face profound, multi-layered isolation due to the fragmentation of their socio-cultural community, they develop unique localised survival mechanisms. It highlights a distinct form of psychological endurance, where staying behind requires navigating continuous everyday vulnerability without the external support structures available to recognised migrant communities.

## Conclusion

The parliamentary record from 1985 to 2025 demonstrates an enduring, if sometimes slow, focus on the plight of the Kashmiri Pandit community. The initial phase focused on emergency relief, including cash aid and basic camp infrastructure. The subsequent two decades were dominated by the challenge of rehabilitation and return, epitomised by the failure of the 2000 Action Plan and the continuous revision of the PM's employment and housing packages. The key takeaway from the legislative debate remains that any meaningful reintegration requires establishing a conducive environment in the Valley, a condition that the displaced community felt was lacking for decades. The post-2019 era shifted the focus toward legal and political integration by streamlining domicile and citizenship rights, aiming to address the fundamental issues of political disenfranchisement and residency, setting the stage for the next phase of the enduring exile's resolution. This analysis shows that parliamentary debates and bureaucratic efforts have limits when it comes to truly understanding the human cost of conflict.

While political discussions and official labels shape the public narrative, they habitually overlook the actual lived experiences of the people in Jammu and Kashmir, consequently, are forced to navigate a normalised state of daily risk and deep isolation within the ordinary set up and social realities of their lives.

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# Strategies for Meaningful and Durable India's Southeast Asia Policy De-hyphenating China, Cultivating a Need-based Relationship and Nurturing Cultural-Ethnicities

Pfokrelo Kapesa\*

## ABSTRACT

*India and Southeast Asia shares cultural and civilizational ties that goes beyond material transactions and geographical proximity. This, was however, disrupted during the colonial period. Independent India attempted to recapture and renew this relationship but was soon pushed to the background as India got caught up in the domestic crisis and Cold War politics. In the early 1990s, the push for a renewed and stronger relation with the region was made in the form of 'Look East Policy'. The rebranding of the Look East Policy as the Act East Policy in 2014 was aimed at giving more vigor to the policy. India's Southeast Asia have largely been operating under the shadow the 'China threat' and other geopolitical necessities. This paper calls for a critical re-evaluation of India's Southeast Asia in the face global geopolitical reconfigurations, to look beyond threat perception and explore mutually beneficial partnership. The paper argues that India needs to de-hyphenate China from its Southeast Asia policy, cultivate a differentiated need-based policy with individual ASEAN countries both in the security and economic domain. The paper also argues the significance of cultural and ethnic ties to by exploring common heritage and strategically cultivating ethnic ties.*

**Keywords:** Act East Policy, Southeast Asia, China Factor, Differentiated Relation, Cultural and Ethnic Ties

### 1. Introduction

The Look East/Act East policy which started in the 1990s has become the lynchpin of India's Southeast Asia policy today. India and Southeast Asia's relationship, however, is nothing new. The two regions have been historically interacting culturally as evidenced by the spread of Hinduism and Buddhism, archeological structures and Indian epics. The interaction through trade and commerce dates to ancient times too. This cultural and historical interaction provide the foundation for a synergetic and strategic partnership between India and Southeast Asia. It is in this context that the current India-Southeast Asia relationship should be viewed and understood.

The colonial rule, however, disrupted the India-Southeast Asia ties. Independent India attempted to recapture and renew the historical and civilizational ties, but this attempt was soon pushed to the background as India got caught up in the domestic crisis and Cold War politics. From this perspective then, the India-Southeast Asia relation is more about recalibrating and nurturing an already existing relationship and less about creating new relationships. In the early 1990s, the push for a renewed and stronger relation with the region was made in the form of 'Look East Policy' under Prime Minister Narasimha Rao. Since then, the policy has undergone several changes and phases as each new regime (government) in India sought to revitalize the policy with more vigor. The latest in this series is

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the rebranding of the Look East Policy to the Act East Policy in 2014 by the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government in power since 2014 under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Much has been said and written about the policy, its origin, significance and potential. This paper will underline the need to move beyond rhetoric and symbolism to cultivating and nurturing the India-Southeast Asia relation from a need-based relationship. In doing so, a partnership that can both withstand and act as a safety valve for the rise of China and the geopolitical tensions in the Indo-Pacific can be pursued. On the economic and security front, India-Southeast Asia relations need to be de-hyphenated from China. To consolidate and stabilize the security and economic partnership, cultural and ethnic ties, particularly between Northeast India and Southeast Asia, should be promoted for a more sustainable and meaningful engagement with the region.

The paper is divided into four sections, with an introduction and a conclusion. The first section 'The Road to Look/Act Policy' is a brief overview of the evolution of the policy. The second section 'Putting the China factor debate to bed' examine the 'China factor' in India's Southeast Asia policy and the need to move from rhetoric to pragmatism. The third section make a case for 'Engaging Southeast Asia' for its intrinsic value to India and taking India's Southeast Asia policy out of the shadow of China. The section makes two primary arguments: 1) to de-hyphenate China and expand India-Southeast Asia partnership beyond threat perception emanating from an ever rising China; and 2) the need to cultivate and nurture a differentiated need-based relationship with individual ASEAN countries. The section highlights that by de-hyphenating China and cultivating and nurturing a relationship based on need, it can undercut or eliminate the fluctuations because of the rising influence of China and the geopolitical tensions in the Indo-Pacific. The fourth section 'A case of striking bonhomie' argues that India's cultural and ethnic ties should not only be promoted but strategically cultivated to ensure long-term relation with Southeast Asia. Re-configuration of economic, political and security conditions is the constant in international politics, but meaningful and respectful cultural and ethnic connections can be the glue that will hold together relationships.

### 1. The Road to Look/Act East Policy

India and Southeast Asia are connected by civilizational ties, as evident from the remnants of

Hinduism, Buddhism and archaeological structures in Southeast Asia (Cœdès 1968, p. 34). There are clear indications and historical evidence of exchanges through trade, Sanskrit and Indian epics dating back as early as the 3rd century A.D. (Wadhwa, 2019). Such historical and civilizational interaction serve as the basis for a synergetic relation and the current push for a stronger and more meaningful ties with the region. These ties between India and Southeast Asia were disrupted during the colonial period.

Soon after independence, India showed clear interest in "drawing close to its Southeast Asian neighbours" but this did not last and drifted apart gradually (Sridharan, 2008, p. 71). India's Southeast Asia outreach was derailed by its preoccupation with domestic crisis even as "its external policy remained firmly oriented towards the West and the Soviet Union" (Sridharan 2008, p. 71). The 1962 India-China conflict ended India's optimism for a pan-Asian ideals which was further exacerbated by the rise of Pakistan as a regional challenger. This condition would most probably have continued "if it were not for the dramatic success of China and Southeast Asian economies" (Tellis, 2004, p.163). In short, India's policy towards Southeast was marked by lack of clarity and interest despite longstanding historical links, trade networks and huge presence of Indian diaspora in the region (Gungwu 2008, pp. 3-4).

Attempts to revive this relationship is made through the Look East Policy in the early 1990s, now rechristened as the Act East Policy in 2014, and has since become the lynchpin of India-Southeast Asia relation (Majumdar, 2021). The question, however, remains: Has India's relationship with the Southeast Asian countries deepened as intended? A quick survey of India's ties with ASEAN and individual Southeast Asian countries indicates the increase in trade relations both in volume and sectors. A deeper analysis of India-ASEAN/Southeast Asia relations, however, indicates that the engagement has largely been influenced by the rise of China, its growing assertiveness in the region, and the ever-increasing significance of the Indo-Pacific, leading to similar threat perception and shared regional identity.

Thus, the India-Southeast Asia relationship requires a critical re-examination.

### 2. Putting the 'China Factor' Debate to bed

The Look/Act East policy has undergone multiple phases and each phase, corresponding to new regime, is also considered more vigorous, in-depth

and increasing sectoral ties with Southeast Asia. The first phase under the Narasimha Rao (Congress) government, the second phase unveiled by the Atal Bihari Vajpayee (BJP-led) government from 1998-99, the third phase under the Manmohan Singh (Congress-led) government from 2004 and the latest phase rebranded as the Act East policy under the Narendra Modi (BJP) government from 2014. The repackaging and rebranding of the policy by new regime/government was more about “new government seeking to rhetorically distinguish themselves from their predecessors” (Bajpae, 2017, p. 364) and less about changing the content and substance of the policy. The continuity of the policy is evident in the ASEAN centrality despite the rebranding and recalibration of the policy by different governments since its inception (Bajpae, 2017, 365).

The LEP was initially ‘projected’ as a move at “reconnecting India with Asia’s economic globalisation” to fund the reforms undertaken by the Rao government (Grare, 2017, p. 2). All official and government’s position consistently projected the LEP as “rooted in economic compulsions” (Bajpae, 2017, p. 8). This line of argument claims that the strategic dimensions of the policy only gained relevance during its later stage. By the same logic, with the rise of China and its assertive regional identity, the policy “rapidly evolved into a comprehensive strategy with political and military dimensions” (Grare, 2017, p. 1). In other words, the policy was devised to link India with the booming market in Southeast Asia but “strategic dimensions for engagement also developed soon after” (Joshi, Nishida and Rajeev 2021, p. 7).

Others argue that the broader prism of the Sino-Indian reaction was the ‘driving and sustaining’ factor of India’s engagement with Southeast Asia in the aftermath of the Cold War (Bajpae 2017, p. 8). This merits attention, keeping in mind the precarious international scenario and the timing of the launch of the Look East policy. With the end of the Cold War, India lost its most important ally, the Soviet Union. The end of the Cold War created ‘a strategic void’ (Bajpae, 2017) which was likely to be filled by the major powers of the region. As such, the timing of the Look East couldn’t be a mere coincidence however important the economic calculus.

The policy was initiated at the cusp of a new dawn. With the end of the Cold War, India must quickly etch out a new framework of relations and foreign policy directions. It was natural for India to look

out for new opportunities which would best serve its national interest (Mehrotra, 2012). The policy was clearly a strategic consideration rooted in the ‘China Factor’. While the economic factor was equally true, the LEP was a strategic maneuver aimed at thwarting the Chinese threat without engaging China directly (Ollapally, 2018). Naturally, India did not openly declare that the China threat in the region was behind the reason for launching the policy.

The ‘China Factor’ continues hang over India’s Southeast Asia policy. Tellis (2004) argues that India’s strategies in Southeast Asia are based on the conviction that a rising and assertive China is a threat to India’s security and potentially its prosperity. The Look/Act East policy can be interpreted as an attempt by India to create a ‘virtuous circle’ (Grare, 2017) to overcome the capacity gap vis-à-vis China. A measured and dynamic relationship with the region will ensure the necessary economic, political and military resources to neutralize the power asymmetry in the region (Grare, 2017). Though public statements continue to make little or no mention of the ‘China factor’ in India-ASEAN relation, India’s push towards ASEAN and individual Southeast Asian countries from the very beginning is aimed at creating a bulwark to prevent a Sino-centric regional order (Bajpae, 2017).

Thus, there is little doubt that the increasing influence of China in the region is a fundamental motivation behind India’s engagement with Southeast Asia (Zhenming and Anderson, 2015). Likewise, most Southeast Asian countries also look to India as an alternative economic partner and a counterweight to China (Naidu and Sachdeva, 2018). Thus, the debate on the ‘China Factor’ in India’s Southeast Asia policy should be put to bed once and for all. Only when the debate on the ‘China Factor’ in India-Southeast Asia relation settled, a critical re-evaluation of India’s Southeast Asia policy can take place.

### 3. Engaging Southeast Asia

A fundamental flaw in India’s Southeast Asia policy remains its failure to see the region for its intrinsic value to India and continues to be measured in the context of a rising China (Tellis, 2004). Naturally this is a point of concern for Southeast Asian nations and the reason why India continued to be viewed as peripheral actor in the region. Even after a decade of the Act East policy (since 2014), the structural and functional aspects of the policy is far from desirable. The policy has become “increasingly detached from current geopolitical and economic realities” (Louis

and Singh, 2024). This calls for a reevaluation of the policy. To shape its future presence and secure strategic outcomes in Southeast Asia, "India must remain comprehensively engaged in the region".<sup>1</sup>

Unless New Delhi shows more commitment, intent and ability to take a more determined position with clarity, the Southeast Asian countries are unlikely to take India seriously. This is demonstrated in the declining perception of India as a global and regional leader. In the 2024 'State of Southeast Asia' Survey<sup>2</sup> in which nine major powers were surveyed and ranked, India emerged as the least influential economic, political and security power. Although this has been the case since 2019, the 2024 report showed India slipping further (Lin, 2024). To overcome the China shadow, the India Southeast Asia needs to de-hyphenate China from its dealings with the region and cultivate a need-based relation with individual ASEAN countries for a meaningful and long-term strategic partnership.

### 3.1: De-hyphenating China

For a durable and meaningful engagement with the region, India's Southeast Asia policies should not be determined under the shadow of the 'China Factor'. The important question is if the India-Southeast Asia relations can transcend the threat perception emerging from an assertive China and the geopolitical entanglements in the Indo-Pacific. If so, what are the strategic areas that India and Southeast Asia can engage and mutually benefit from? For this, India and Southeast Asia must redefine and reorient the nature and trajectory of the pathways to their relationship by cultivating partnerships in sectors which will not be directly impacted by China. Such partnership can withstand the geopolitical tensions and reconfiguration including that of China.

While it is not possible to remove or disconnect the existing common threats and concerns of India and Southeast Asia in their partnership, the two partners can and must explore areas of cooperation beyond the existing concerns. International politics and geopolitics are highly volatile, and change is constant and, thereby, reconfigurations are the only constant. However, India and Southeast Asia will continue to be neighbors. The words of former

1 <https://www.csis.org/analysis/south-asia-monitor-india-looks-east-july-06-2000>. (last visited: 10 September 2024).

2 The 'State of Southeast' is a comprehensive survey conducted annually by the ASEAN Study Centre at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute since 2019 which captures the region's sentiments and concerns regarding ASEAN's cohesion and ability to handle external pressures.

Indian Prime Minister that "You can choose friends but not neighbors" is a good reminder here. Given the history and cultural affinities, the flow of goods and people across borders, India and Southeast will stand to benefit from a relationship/arrangement beyond the current concerns, one that will withstand the changing power dynamics in the region. A relationship between two partners designed by the partners and not conditioned by an external factor, in this case, China.

So, what would it take for India and Southeast Asia to forge a proactive and all-weather partnership? How can India and Southeast Asia transcend the China threat without engaging China directly? There is no consensus on this. The general perception amongst scholars and political analysts, however, is that India needs to shoulder more responsibility and demonstrate resolve in regional and global matters.

**Regional Affairs:** On regional matters, the Southeast Asian nations expect India to take principled position on China's aggressive activities in the region or demonstrate counter-balancing role in institutions and forums like the ASEAN and SCS. Without a clear demonstration of India's intention and capability as an important actor in regional affairs, Southeast Asian nations will "continue to view India as an unreliable security partner" (Kipgen, 2020, p. 207). For most countries in the region, especially countries that are directly involved in the Spratly Islands (South China) sea dispute, India need to demonstrate commitment and present itself as an alternative to China. The recognition of the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling in favor of Philippine sovereignty claims over China in the South China Sea (Grossman, 2023) during the June 2023 Philippine Foreign Secretary Enrique Manalo's visit to New Delhi is a welcome step towards this.

**Trade and Commerce:** The trade volume between India and Southeast Asia has considerably increased with the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the two partners. The Indian Minister of State for Commerce, C.R. Choudhary, at the 2018 ASEAN-India Business and Investment Meet and Expo, stated that "once the full implementation of tariff (or basic customs duties) reduction scheduling is done", the trade will increase even more and create more trade opportunities for both the sides.<sup>3</sup> Even before the formalization of the long, tedious India-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (FTA), India began to look beyond its immediate locale by forming

3 <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/full-implementation-of-india-asean-fta-to-boost-trade/articleshow/62618818.cms>.

groupings like the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IORARC) and Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and Bay of Bengal Community (BOBCOM) which would include India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Malaysia, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

Such initiatives and arrangements can be perceived as indications of India's commitment to expanding its neighborhood and a step towards becoming a more pro-active player in the region. These initiatives can also be considered as corrective measures for India's Southeast Asia policy which recognizes the importance of the region for India's economic growth and development (Rao, 1996) or for its intrinsic value to India.

This has yet to take place though after almost a decade.

Although India continues to be a crucial partner for the US and other countries in their bid to counter China, Southeast Asian countries are more concerned about the "concrete benefits it can derive from its engagements with India" and less about its alignment (Lin 2024). This is in India's interest. Without having to take ideological position and being bound by rigid alliance system, India can demonstrate commitment and capability in its Southeast Asia policy.

While it is important to acknowledge that the 'China Factor' will continue to influence the India-Southeast Asia relationship, there is definitely scope to maneuver the China shadow. The important task before India is to reinvent a partnership with its Southeast Asian partners that will withstand the 'China Factor' by de-hyphenating China from India-Southeast Asia relationship. To establish itself as a meaningful economic partner with Southeast Asia, India's policy objective should align with the aspiration of the region. India can strengthen economic relations with Southeast Asia by integrating into the "supply and value chains of ASEAN as multinationals are diversifying their manufacturing away from China" (Lin, 2024). This can be complemented by the opening of India's growing market coupled with trade liberalization and better connectivity. For instance, in the case of India and Malaysia, one of the most significant initiatives for economic partnership was the institution of the Malaysia-India Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (MICECA) in 2011. But the tariff cut and liberalisation promise failed to materialise.

Integrating the Indian economy with the Southeast Asian markets can go a long way to enhance transport

and communication between India and Southeast Asia while also demonstrating India's commitment to the partnership. In this context, many Southeast Asian countries have been pushing for better air connectivity. In early 2024, the Malaysian airline Air Asia's announcement for a new route to Guwahati was resisted by domestic players (Louis and Singh, 2024). A direct connectivity between Guwahati and Malaysia would demonstrate a potential for seamless connect to Northeast India as a gateway to Southeast Asia even for other countries in the region. The Malaysia experience is illustrative that country-to-country ties have become increasingly detached from current geopolitical and economic realities.

The India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway project (with extension to Laos and Cambodia) already underway is another important step towards enhancing connectivity between India and Southeast Asian countries. Improved connectivity will not only increase the trade volume between the two but also effectively ensure 'supply chain resilience' (Lin 2024). For most Southeast Asian countries, India presents a counterweight and an alternative partnership to China. As such, India must demonstrate not only intent but capability before the Southeast Asian countries can shed the China weight.

### 3.2: One size does not fit all: Cultivating a need-based relationship

Southeast Asian countries are at different stages of economic development with different political and social structures. Despite the various changes, recalibration and rebranding, what has remained consistent in India's Southeast Asia policy is the ASEAN centrality (Bajpaee, 2017, 365). The global geopolitical shift to Indo-Pacific has both complicated the landscape for Southeast Asian countries while also improving their bargaining position.

In the 2024 'The State of Southeast Asia' Report India was the third most preferred strategic partner. India's longstanding policy of non-alignment has historically enabled India to "maintaining the regional balance of power and to play a greater role as a leader in the Global South" (Lin, 2024). This positive attitude towards India did not repeat in the 2025 Report which reveals a disconcerting moment for India. A quick look at the 2025 report shows that India did not figure in any significant position on any of the eight major areas of the survey. On the issue of 'the most trusted major power in Southeast Asia' Japan remains at the top followed by EU and the US. Interestingly many respondents (41.2%) expressed distrust towards China and an even higher

47.6% feared that “China could use its economic and military power to threaten their country’s interest and sovereignty” (State of Southeast Asia 2025, p. 5). China remains the most influential economic and political-strategic power in the region in terms of strategic relevance.

While attempting to establish itself as a security partner in Southeast Asia, India should take care to address the concerns of Southeast Asian countries who perceived its actions “to be driven by strategic considerations, including the need to counterbalance China’s growing influence in the region” (Lin, 2024). Southeast Asian countries and ASEAN remain cautious of India’s larger strategic gambit. This shows that the India-Southeast Asia relationship must be forged on mutual benefit and not conditioned by external threat. This is not to say that the ensuing common threat or the geo-political tensions in the Indo-pacific are not important, but, that they should not be the sole determining factor for and India-Southeast Asia partnership. The partnership should transcend beyond the threat and current go-political exigencies

In short, on both the economic and security front, India-Southeast Asia relations need to be re-evaluated to cement the ties between the two partners. In other words, India-Southeast Asia partnerships should be curated to the needs of the two partners, revolving around their interests. India should also come up with a differentiated need-based relationship with individual Southeast Asian countries for a more meaningful engagement with the region. This is extremely important as the Southeast Asian countries vary greatly in terms of their development stage and, therefore, require or are on the lookout for different types of partnerships. Singapore, for example, is India’s largest source of foreign direct investment (FDI), and India can offer Singapore services in health care, green energy and tourism (Aggarwal and Bharadwaj, 2024). On the other hand, in India’s relations with countries like Brunei, Vietnam, Philippines, etc., the India strategy can focus on defence cooperation and the transfer of defence technology (Grossman, 2023).

Economic and security cooperation will continue to be the core focus of this partnership. The partnership however can greatly benefit from consolidating cultural and ethnic linkages, and this is an area the two partners ought to give more attention.

#### 4. A case of striking *bonhomie*: Capitalizing Historical, Cultural and Ethnic Linkages

Consolidating cultural and ethnic linkages will cement the economic and security partnership. Nurturing cultural and ethnic ties can give a more organic and human approach to building stronger ties. India shares deep-rooted cultural and religious ties with Southeast Asia. India-Southeast Asia relationship is one of striking *bonhomie* and there is no record of ‘menacing neighbor’ (Majumdar, 2021). There is no reason why this cannot be the future as well. This track record should be capitalized as the basis for India-Southeast Asia partnership based on mutual respect and mutually beneficial pathways for cooperation.

##### 4.1: ‘Shared inheritance’

India shares religious, cultural and ethnic ties with Southeast Asian countries. Remnants of Hinduism, Buddhism and archaeological structures in Southeast Asia (Cœdès, 1968) are proof of historical connection between the two regions. The expansive power of Indian influence over the culture and religion, both Hinduism and Buddhism, over Southeast Asia is something Indians have yet to fully comprehend (Cœdès, 1968, p. 251). This is one area where India can tap into and establish closer ties with the region. For instance, Bodh Gaya, the seat of the Mahabodhi temple- ‘the spiritual axis of the Buddhist world’ is revered by Buddhist from all over the world as the most sacred place. The rural hamlet in eastern Bihar (India) receives countless Buddhist pilgrims every year. Many countries from Southeast Asia have donated peace bells and constructed Buddhist temples including Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam from Southeast Asia.<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, there are many Hindu temples in Southeast Asia including Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam (Chaturvedi, 2024). The strong religious connect and cultural influence that India has over the Southeast Asian nations can become a very useful and effective channel to consolidate the relation. The concept of ‘shared inheritance’ should become an elemental part in shaping India-Southeast Asia relationship (Marwah, 2020) encompassing religious, cultural and philosophical values and moving beyond the geographical proximity.

4 [https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Bodh\\_Gaya](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Bodh_Gaya)

#### 4.2: Geographical proximity, no competing territorial claims

It helps that there are no competing territorial claims between India and Southeast Asia in principle, although there is a murky sense of border along the India-Myanmar borderland. India has multiple border disputes of competing territorial claims with China and Pakistan. Southeast Asian countries, including Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia, have territorial disputes with China over the Spratly Islands (South China Sea) (Sutter, 1999). India shares land border with Southeast Asia primarily through Myanmar while the Andamans islands shares maritime boundaries with Thailand, Myanmar and Indonesia.<sup>5</sup>

Border disputes or competing territorial claims is one of the biggest obstacles for a meaning partnership as evident in the case of India-China relation or the various Southeast Asian nations vis-à-vis their relations with China particularly in the Spratly Islands (South China Sea). The absence of competing territorial claims between India and Southeast Asia thus put the two regions in a very advantaged position.

#### 4.3: Ethnic and Cultural Linkages

Ethnic and cultural linkages constitute another important aspect where India and Southeast Asia can build relations. Communities living in the border regions have been trading with each other for centuries. The Indian citizens living along the borderland (India-Myanmar border) share common cultures and ethnic affinities to the extent that they share more commonalities with Southeast Asians than with the rest of India (Majumdar, 2021). This often have been perceived in a negative way until now, a result of the narrow security centric policy. To build an enduring and meaningful relationship with Southeast Asia, Indian policy and perception of ethnic and cultural affinities needs a new direction. Affinities and connections should be valued and nurtured for lasting relationships and not viewed as a liability. Along with this, India has a strong diaspora presence in many Southeast Asian countries which provides a unique opportunity for India to cultivate soft power influence (Lin, 2024) in the region.

#### Conclusion

The India-Southeast Asia relation, as evident from the discussions, is a case of striking bonhomie with historical and civilizational ties. Independent India

attempted to re-establish links with the region which was disrupted during the colonial period but soon got caught up with domestic crisis and Cold War politics. In the early 1990s, Prime Minister Narasimha Rao attempted to remedy the situation through the Look East Policy. This occur at a time when the global re-configuration was unfolding in the aftermath of the Cold War. The Indian leadership was swift and tactful in not only managing the looming crisis and vacuum but made a strategically calculated move to capitalize a crisis. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, India had lost its most powerful and trusted ally which also coincided with the increasing influence of China in the regional dynamics. Thus, there is no doubt about the China element in India's Southeast Asia policy.

The principal concern then is about not holding India's Southeast policy captive to the 'China factor'. Accepting that the 'China factor' is part of the larger strategic gambit of India's Southeast Asia and the Indo-pacific gameplan would be a good place to start. It is only then a serious discussion on how to maneuver China can begin. The fundamental flaw in India's Southeast Asia policy is in not recognizing Southeast Asia for its intrinsic value but rather assessed only through the 'China prism'. The 'China factor' will never cease but India sure can reduce its influence by engaging with Southeast Asia for its intrinsic value to India, in essence to de-hyphenate China from India's engagement with the region. This can be further consolidated by cultivating a differentiated and need-based relation with individual Southeast Asian nations.

Nurturing cultural and ethnic relation is indispensable for a stable and sustainable partnership. Economic and security sector will continue to dominate India-Southeast Asia relationship, but the cultural and ethnic connections will ensure durability and act as a safety valve for when the going gets tough. For this India should revitalize its cultural and philosophical ties with the region. A very pragmatic and ideal way to do so is by exploring and consolidating common heritage through Hinduism and Buddhism. Towards this end, the cultural and ethnic ties between the Northeast India region and Southeast Asia should not only be promoted but strategically cultivated. This will require commitment and political will. It will require the shift in viewing the region's proximity to Southeast Asian nations geographically, culturally and ethnically not as a liability but as a vantage point, something to capitalize on.

<sup>5</sup> <https://csames.illinois.edu/sas/sa-resources/countries/india>

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# Resuscitating Ashoka's Foreign Policy Principles in India's Act East Policy

Dr. Aparna Chaudhary\*

## ABSTRACT

*Mauryan Empire, Ashoka renounced violence and avoided direct military attack after the Kalinga War. He did not disband the army; rather, it was one of the largest standing armies at that time. However, he did not go for military invasion. His rule is known for Dhammaghosha, replacing Bherighosha. People-to-people contact, trade, and cultural exchanges were at the core of his way of dealing with other states. A few explain that Dhammaghosha, connectivity, commerce, and culture during his rule do not go with the promotion of national interests. Adding to this, the weakening of the Mauryan Empire and its collapse trace their roots to Ashoka's non-violent politics; also, soft-power politics alone cannot guarantee the protection of national interests. However, such views are countered by a few other scholars, who interpret the Ashokan-era foreign-policy principles as a sign of a diplomatically mature and progressive state. Several countries have introduced these soft measures in their foreign policy priorities. Its resemblance is visible in the Act East Policy, launched by India in 2014. Act East Policy is the upgraded version of the Look East Policy. Act East Policy has three main focus areas- commerce, culture, and connectivity, along with pushing India's security and strategy. This research paper addresses all these dimensions .*

**Keywords:** Dhammaghosha, Act East Policy, Look East Policy

## 1. Introduction

In Indian history, a remarkable shift was witnessed after the Kalinga War. After this war, Emperor Ashoka (c. 268-232 BCE) renounced the abandonment of military invasion. His preferences, priorities, and goals for his empire underwent several restructurings and reinvigoration. The reason for this is cited as a large number of casualties, including human life, infrastructure damage, violence, etc., which made him rethink the art of state. So, he decided that rather than pursuing a military-based victory (Bherighosha: the sound of war drums), his empire would prioritize the victory of dharma (Dhammaghosha: the sound of righteousness). It refers to moral persuasion, peaceful coexistence, and transregional engagement. In other words, it symbolizes the preference for persuasion over coercion. Afterward, his rule revolved around this. It not only provided a new perspective on diplomacy, statecraft, and soft-power politics but also paved the way for redefining and restructuring moral, ethical, and social values. This

normative framework shaped/s a new discourse, suggesting that violence is not required every time; rather, a few shared goals that serve humanity can guide international relations.

Ashoka's realization about violence and army-based expansionist politics is often attributed to the influence of Buddhism and explained as driven by idealism that ultimately weakened the Mauryan empire and led to its collapse. However, this view is countered by several scholars who argue that a combination of other factors contributed to the stagnation and later the collapse of the Mauryan Empire. A few other scholars add that Ashoka's preference for Dhammaghosha is grounded in realism, rather than idealism. It is also a counter-narrative and discourse that opposes the arms race and violent politics. To make the world more peaceful, to ensure cooperation among nations, and also to promote disarmament, such a version of past decision-making must be encouraged.

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Ashokan Dhammaghosha is based on promoting people-to-people contact, boosting trade and business activities, and exchanging cultural values. His interaction with countries relied on diplomacy, trade, religious missions, and people-to-people interactions. In modern politics, it is referred to as soft power politics. Soft power is not about endorsing idealism; rather, it is the continuation of politics and the promotion of its national interests through mutual benefits. It believes that despite several conflicts, there are grounds for cooperation among countries. Also, soft power strategies are cost-cutting and peace-promoting.

Not only in modern times, but also in the past, such values based on mutual cooperation existed across the world. These were/are endorsed by almost every country in different forms. Variation might be possible, but non-existence is not, in this regard. The foreign policy-making and implementation are largely driven by this. Even countries that pursue aggressive politics also, in other ways, subscribe to soft measures, so that they can paint themselves as peace-loving and as promoters of peace.

In India's foreign policy principles and objectives, it has clearly stated that it would follow a non-aggressive policy and would raise its voice against any injustice. India's foundation is the promotion of peace and the pursuit of its national interests without harming any other country. It has commerce, culture, and connectivity relations across the globe. In the past, it also interacted with several empires, kingdoms, and states. Over time, this interaction underwent several changes. The reasons for this are changes in the form of government, domestic factors, growing complexities in international politics, and technological advancements. In statecraft and the art of war, such changes make a remarkable shift. India has adopted them and made the required changes to its foreign policy, indicating a shift in its approach. However, this shift does not stray from its principles and objectives, which are deeply rooted in mutual non-interference, the promotion of peace, and raising voices against injustice. In other words, India has changed its approach, not its priorities and preferences.

One such change in its foreign policy is witnessed in the Act East Policy. It was launched in 2014 as an upgraded version of the Look East Policy. Look East Policy emphasized boosting trade relations with countries located in India's east. Act East Policy has broadened its horizons and designated the entire Indo-Pacific region as a priority. It listed three main focus areas- commerce, culture, and connectivity,

along with security. To elaborate on this, with the assistance of these three Cs, India would push for its national interests, which also include security. As discussed above, India has had such interactions with the world in the past too. Ashoka's foreign policy principles and objectives as articulated in Dhammaghosha and India's Act East Policy share several similarities. However, it also raises some observations, apprehensions, and reservations.

Additionally, Ashoka's foreign policy principles find place in contemporary India's foreign policy. Act East Policy resembles this. The study of these two underscores the role of normative traditions, historical narratives, and civilizational memories in shaping contemporary state behaviour. Within a constructivist approach, this study provides a theoretical lens. Constructivism refers to the social construction of the world; it can be changed with new norms, beliefs, identities, and traditions. The roles of agents, agencies, and institutions are vital, and together, they all shape identities. Muscular politics, arms race, military preparedness, territorial expansion, geopolitics, etc., are concepts that also trace their origins to a particular identity deeply rooted in a specific social construction. Interestingly, this identity can also be changed with the new social construction. In its place, if an identity based on shared historical narratives, civilizational ethos, and mutual non-aggression is socially constructed, it will become the new reality founded on new perceptions and a new image.

Under Emperor Ashoka, Dhammaghosha-based identity shaped contemporary social construction and served as the basis for his foreign policy principles. However, with time, this identity underwent several changes. The reason lies in the new beliefs, norms, traditions, and identities. Meanwhile, the social construction of the world is not fixed; rather, it changes across space and time. So, if a realist approach based on power politics has dominated mainstream international relations, a constructivist approach might be influential and create a new reality. The continuity between Ashoka's foreign policy principles and Act East policy must be explained in this light.

This research paper explains these similarities and examines the points of critical scrutiny in the context of diplomacy.

## 2. Literature Review

The literature review for this research paper discusses: Ashoka's diplomatic philosophy and Dhamma; debates surrounding the effectiveness of

Ashokan statecraft; soft power as a tool of foreign policy; the strategic and cultural dimensions of India's Act East Policy; and the social construction of Ashoka's foreign policy principles and Act East Policy. It provides important insights into the relationship between ancient political thought and contemporary foreign policy.

Ashoka's Dhamma is primarily known from his edicts. It reveals that after the Kalinga War, Ashoka's governance underwent a transformation. Thapar (2012) writes that his Dhamma should not be misunderstood as a promotion tool for Buddhism; rather, it was a political and ethical framework. Its objectives can be divided into two: maintaining social harmony and imperial integration. In fact, it was a detailed description of governance, free from territorial boundaries and sectarian divides. Through this, Ashoka not only communicated to his subjects but also to the world. It is an account of his Empire's policy preferences. Historians have also highlighted that Ashoka's rule witnessed extensive engagement with neighboring regions. She writes that he deployed several missions for cultural exchanges that also had diplomatic significance. He sent emissaries to several countries such as Sri Lanka and Central Asia. It is interpreted as one of the earliest examples of transnational cultural diplomacy. These interactions promoted religious exchange, trade, and people-to-people contacts. Such networks of influence extended beyond the Mauryan Empire's territorial boundaries.

Adding to the significance of Ashoka's Dhamma, Singh (2017) lists Ashoka's reign as a landmark in the evolution of Indian political thought. The reason lies in its novel approach that presents new tactics in interstate relations. It emphasizes persuasion, moral legitimacy, and welfare-oriented governance. Ashoka practiced it in strengthening his empire. Initiatives such as diplomatic missions, cultural exchanges, and religious networks were utilized in this regard. His rule extended its influence across South Asia and Southeast Asia without relying exclusively on military expansion. His preference for Dhammaghosha over Bherighosha symbolized this shift toward moral diplomacy.

Despite being an Empire, Mauryan rule loosened, and it declined. The reasons for the decline of the Mauryan Empire are widely discussed. There are two views. One is by historians such as Sarkar (1988), who argue that ethical diplomacy played a crucial role in it. Ashoka relied heavily on non-violence and undermined military preparedness. So, a few

categorize him as a pacifist. However, Kumar's (2024) findings go against this view. He argues that Ashoka was not a pacifist and his Dhamma must not be interpreted as driven by any idealism; rather, it was a sophisticated political tool. It helped him integrate and strengthen the Mauryan Empire. By Dhamma, he did not intend to sacrifice the safety of his people and state. By this, he endorsed ethics in governance that increased the efficiency of his administration. It also led to increased acceptance of his rule and authority. The second thought held by historians such as Thapar (2012) contrasts with the first. She argued that even after the Kalinga War, Ashoka did not completely dismantle his army. His statecraft did not undermine security concerns. In fact, he retained substantial administrative and military capabilities throughout his reign. The reasons for the decline of the empire occurred after Ashoka's death. The contributing factors to this include multiple political, economic, and administrative factors. Extremely centralized administration, the inability of the post-Ashoka kings, misuse of economic resources, and the rise of several other regional kingdoms are cited to substantiate this argument.

Diplomacy is not merely about hard power politics; it also encompasses aspects related to day-to-day life. Ashoka's engagement with its neighboring countries and the rest of the world under Dhammaghosha must be seen in this light. People-to-people contacts, cultural exchanges, and trade-business activities are a few harbingers of such engagements. The concept of soft power is a resemblance of such efforts between countries. Nye (2004) has defined it as the ability of a state to influence others through attraction, persuasion, culture, and values rather than coercion.

India's Act East Policy is an example of soft power strategy. It was launched in 2014 for the Indo-Pacific region. It is slightly different from the previous Look East Policy. Look East Policy was formulated in 1991. Three Cs formed the basis of LEP: Commerce, Culture, and Connectivity. It helped India integrate with the world economy. It also paved the way to fill the vacuum left by the fall of the Soviet Union and its major trading partners, and supported regionalism. Southeast Asia and East Asia were the targeted regions for its implementation. Chaudhary (2017) underlines that geographically, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and culturally, the North-Eastern states of India are considered close to this region. Secondly, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) are two organizations with big markets and manufacturing capacities. Membership in them

or good relations with them would open doors for bilateral relations. Thirdly, economically, Southeast and East Asian countries follow economic dynamism, and a large number of Indian diaspora live in these countries. Together, they play an important role in strengthening economic ties. Fourth, Southeast Asian countries lie along the intercontinental routes connecting Europe, the Americas, East Asia, and Australia. Hence, they provide scope for a break in a journey for Indian exporters. With low transport costs and a short delivery timeline, this region benefits Indian exporters. Hence, the Look East Policy was a major breakthrough.

Chaudhary (2017) concludes that the Look East Policy lacks a strategic vision. It does not mention a detailed outlook for defense cooperation. Considering strategic needs and security aspects, the Act East Policy was announced in 2014. It is wider than its predecessor, the Look East Policy. It focuses on political and strategic dimensions. It highlights the need for establishing institutional mechanisms for dialogue and cooperation. Also, it emphasizes wider engagement at bilateral, regional, and multilateral levels. Ngaibakching and Pande (2020) argue that it has evolved into an action-oriented policy. It differs from the Look East Policy. Bajpae (2023) construes that the Act East Policy is a required step in light of the changing geopolitical realities in the Indo-Pacific. India requires a new strategic partnership to deal with the growing Chinese influence in the region. Hence, mere security preparation or economic engagement alone is not sufficient; rather, both together would be more effective. Hence, this policy combines economic integration and cultural diplomacy with security cooperation and strategic balancing. The cultural dimension of the Act East Policy is important here. Bunthorn (2023) argues that India had cordial relations with several countries including Southeast Asia. The reasons lie in the civilizational linkages, cultural heritages, and Buddhism. These are instruments of cooperation between them. In this regard, initiatives such as educational exchanges, cultural programmes, temple restoration, and Buddhist diplomacy are prioritized. Chaudhary (2026) notes: first, the unfolding geopolitical environment in the Indo-Pacific region has renewed power politics; second, growing Chinese influence in the region is not limited only to the economic sector but also to military presence, territorial disputes, and diplomatic channels as well; third, the shifting global power structures call for a robust response from India to push its national interests; fourth, economic

and technological integration within ASEAN is also indicative of the new thaw, and it was felt that an inevitable intervention with contemporary dynamics is needed.

Pant (2023) in his study elaborates on how social media aligns with the aspirations of India's Act East Policy. These platforms help promote India's cultural lineage. Meanwhile, it should be seen not only as a medium for cultural ties but also as a means of conveying a message to a global audience, particularly in Southeast Asia. Its significance lies in establishing joint ventures for public diplomacy. He underscores that these informal platforms of interaction reinvigorate the government-level diplomatic discourses. Significantly, it also helps in perception management. Chaudhary (2026) argues that the increasing use of social media has positively contributed in people-to-people contact. Also, artificial intelligence has emerged as a new area of cooperation and trade among them. By working on these two, India can contribute to the region's economic growth and security architecture while furthering its own strategic interests. Virtual connectivity includes the expansion of internet infrastructure, digital trade platforms, and cybersecurity partnerships. Haider (2022) finds that the ties between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and India strengthened through the India-ASEAN Digital Economy Partnership. Such initiatives indicate that informal interactions also play a significant role in diplomacy. Pathak (2022) gives an optimistic view about AI-driven trade and economic policies. According to him, they together enhance supply chain efficiency, upgrade resource management, and enable better governance structures in the region. It underlines that the medium of communication and interaction has changed, but the gist of connectivity remains the same.

A constructivist approach describes the influence of soft power strategies on diplomacy and foreign policy. Wendt (1992) writes that constructivism emphasizes the social construction of identities and interests. It believes that realities are not fixed, unlike the views of neorealists and neoliberals. Neorealists' explanation of world politics is driven by the anarchic nature of the system; however, neorealists are more inclined to institutions. Constructivism argues that although the international system is anarchic, it doesn't determine state behaviour. Instead, shared meanings and practices shape international politics. Identities and interests are formed through social interaction and influenced by shared

understandings over time. Hurd (2008) substantiates these arguments and adds that international politics is shaped by ideas, identities, and norms. The process of interest formation occurs through social interaction, and institutions influence behaviour. Significantly, cooperation or conflict depends on state interpretation of these identities, interactions, and institutions. Also, politics is a social construction comprising ideas, identities, and norms as well as material power. State interests develop through social interaction. International institutions matter because they're accepted as legitimate. Anarchy doesn't necessarily lead to conflict; outcomes depend on shared meanings. Constructivism complements, not replaces, realism and liberalism by emphasizing often overlooked dimensions.

### 3. Research Gap

The literature review describes the various aspects of Ashoka's Dhamma and the need for the Act East Policy. However, there seems to be a lack of literature that talks about the similarities between these two. To understand how historical narratives, civilizational memories, and normative traditions shape contemporary foreign policy preferences and state behaviour, a constructivist approach is helpful. Such an engagement would enhance the analytical depth of the study and situate its arguments more effectively within broader debates in International Relations theory. Its attempt to connect Ashoka's diplomatic philosophy with India's contemporary Act East Policy offers a valuable perspective on the continuity of indigenous traditions in foreign policy discourse.

### 4. Research Questions

This research paper examines-

1. how do Ashoka's principles shape India's foreign policy discourse;
2. how does the Act East Policy closely link to it;
3. and finally, whether soft power politics assist in diplomacy and protect national interests.

### 5. Research Methodology

This research paper has adopted a qualitative research method, and it is exploratory and analytical. It examines the continuity of Ashoka's principles on India's Act East Policy and the relationship between soft power and national interests. It has not used data, surveys, or interviews.

### 6. Discussion

Thapar's (2012) account is important because it gives a clear picture of the objectives of Ashoka's Dhamma. On the diplomatic front, to make allies and friends, the first hurdle is a trust deficit. To overcome this, it is advised to be precise and clear about the objectives and expectations. If there is transparency and no suspicion about what the other party is preparing, relations among countries go smoothly. Ashoka's Dhamma had listed all these points; hence, it became easy to align with his Empire. Significantly, his preference for peace and non-violence had made clear that he would not go to war, and this certainty and assurance helped other countries form a positive perception of his Empire. Adding to this, most problems, challenges, and issues persist among countries due to uncertainties and suspicions about others' preparedness, but when countries are clear about these points, the complexities of international relations are reduced. She indicates that a state can exert its influence even through soft power strategies. This point is very important considering the muscular nature of international politics. Within this, power means aggression that ultimately results in a country's invasion. However, here it is highlighted that Ashoka made his presence felt without the use of military power. Hence, Ashoka initiated a new discourse through his Dhamma. Particularly, in international politics, such discourse must be encouraged to make, keep, and build peace.

Kumar's (2024) interpretation suggests that Ashoka's diplomacy was not divorced from national interests. In fact, it found an alternative means of advancing them. This point must be explained in the light of diplomacy. The promotion of national interests does not depend solely on hard power politics; soft power politics is also a tool for achieving it. Adding to this, finding an alternative based on persuasion, rather than hard power, is the biggest contribution to a war-fragile world. It offers hope and practical solutions to address the growing global complexities and suggests that the maddening scramble for arms is not a remedy for every challenge that exists in today's world. In a way, it also highlights the relevance of Ashoka's Dhamma in modern times.

Sarkar's (1988) view indicates that moral principles may have undermined strategic effectiveness. It also underscores that non-violence might be a good choice at the individual level, but at the state level, it might be suicidal. Secondly, ethical diplomacy may

not be a better option in the long run in dealing with state affairs. However, contrary to this, Thapar's (2012) writing highlights two significant points: one, Ashoka, in the name of non-violence, did not compromise the security of his Empire; two, non-violence alone was not the factor in the decline of the Mauryan Empire. The first view connotes that statecraft is possible even with non-violent tactics. It also refers to the art of persuasion to ensure the security of the state. This conclusion is of utmost importance because it does not perceive security as dependent on violence; rather, there are multiple ways to achieve this, including non-violence. Hence, when states seek violence in the name of securitization, it is not appropriate. The second view that sees non-violence as not an exclusive determinant in the decline of the Mauryan Empire indicates that a state's survival is not based on one factor only. Also, by adopting non-violence, a state would not decline. Both of these views underscore that there are multiple ways of statecraft. Only rationalizing violence and arguing that in its absence, the safety of a state is not possible is actually a biased conclusion. Hence, Ashoka's foreign policy principles demonstrate how moral principles may be incorporated into statecraft without necessarily abandoning considerations of power and security. Adding to this, soft power is often viewed as a complementary rather than an alternative source of influence. It means that military capability, economic strength, and culture together can achieve the goals and objectives of foreign policy. This perspective is relevant for India since its civilizational legacy, democratic values, and cultural diversity advocate a strong case for this. Singh's (2017) writing underlines two important aspects of Ashoka's Dhamma: one, backchannel diplomacy works; two, through soft-power strategies, empire can be strengthened.

In backchannel diplomacy or Track 2 diplomacy, the concept of soft power comes at the forefront. In this regard, Nye's (2004) framework has inspired numerous studies examining the role of culture and heritage in foreign policy. He popularized the term "soft power". Ashoka's efforts to cultivate goodwill and legitimacy beyond his empire must be seen as an example of this. Significantly, boosting economic ties between countries is not merely about trade and business. Ngaibiakching and Pande's (2020) writings indicate that soft power strategies are complementary to cooperation, national interests, and hard power politics. They must be seen in

connection with each other. Bajpae's (2023) writings highlight two aspects: first, economic or cultural relations between countries not only have monetary benefits but also entail a strategic dimension; second, soft power strategies combined with this strategic dimension become more effective.

Bunthorn (2023) argues that India's relations with several countries are cordial due to ancient roots. In fact, Ashoka's diplomatic practices are similar to many contemporary soft-power mechanisms. To list a few: the promotion of Buddhist values, restoration of cultural monuments, educational exchanges, tourism, support for cultural institutions, and international cultural exchanges demonstrate diplomatic influence based on shared civilizational values rather than coercion. It shows the continuity of Ashoka's policy; however, it does not necessarily mean direct policy replication. Actually, Indian foreign policy-makers are drawing upon elements of India's historical experience to enhance diplomatic engagement. Another important area of continuity of Ashoka's policy is the role of connectivity in foreign policy. Ashoka's empire depended upon extensive communication networks, trade routes, and administrative infrastructure. Roads, rest houses, commercial exchanges, and diplomatic missions connected different parts of the empire and linked the Mauryan state to neighboring regions. Act East Policy, launched in 2014, includes these dimensions.

Act East Policy is also based on three Cs- commerce, culture, and connectivity. It has taken several efforts to align the objectives of this policy. It includes the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway, the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project, and various maritime connectivity programs. They facilitate economic growth and strengthen India's influence in the region. Significantly, connectivity projects are not merely important due to the material infrastructure and formal political agreements, but they create opportunities for cultural interaction, economic cooperation, and political trust-building too. It enhances interdependence. In both Ashokan diplomacy and the Act East Policy, connectivity serves as a mechanism for creating networks of cooperation. Commerce also occupies a position in Ashoka's reign and the Act East Policy. Ancient Indian trade routes facilitated people-to-people interactions and cultural exchanges.

Additionally, Chaudhary (2026) writes that the East Asian economies are booming with efficiency in manufacturing, automobiles, and mobile phones.

India's collaboration in these areas with East Asian countries is beneficial for technology transfer and increased connectivity with the assistance of virtual platforms such as social media and OTT platforms. This interaction is not merely limited to a professional-level partnership, but it is a way of cultural exchanges in which people across borders learn each other's ideas, values, faith and belief systems, and explore the inter-dining and inter-marrying options. This entire process adds value to the adoption of a cosmopolitan culture and also regional integration. Concerning regional integration (not limited to geography only) and perception formation, along with engaging various agents, agencies, and institutions, and an emphasis on collaborative activities, virtual connectivity works as a soft power strategy. Pant's (2023) arguments add an important dimension to this discussion. His writings indicate that in the political socialization process, the interactions at these virtual platforms are both vertical and horizontal. It makes the political system pro-people. India and the entire Indo-Pacific region will benefit a lot if these virtual mediums of connectivity are formalized. Haider's (2022) argument highlights the need to utilize advanced technologies for diplomatic engagements. A successful illustration is the India-ASEAN Digital Economy Partnership.

Under the theoretical framework, it is explained through a constructivist approach. Wendt's (1992) and Hurd's (2008) writings indicate that neither realities nor the meaning of identities and interests is fixed. This means that a system that we perceive as a threat or a tool of cooperation largely depends on how it is interpreted in a process of social interaction. Ashoka's Dhammaghosha was responsible for the decline of the Mauryan Empire depends on what meaning has been given to the Dhammaghosha, secondly, how the term "decline" is being understood now; thirdly, how the term national interests was defined by the Mauryan Empire; fourth, to find the continuities between Ashoka's foreign policy and India's Act East Policy is driven by the meaning of various identities, norms, values, and traditions. To begin with, the meaning and significance of the Dhammaghosha were not limited to a separate religious sect, politics, or diplomacy; rather, it was a codification of a few laws to regulate the behavior of royal as well as ordinary people. It was a code of ethics. If understood in this larger perspective, it has been successful in contributing to good governance and administration during the Mauryan Empire. Next, the term decline again depends on how it is explained. Is it only being explained in terms of

territorial expansion or the spread of Mauryan-era Dhammaghosha values to the Southeast, East Asia, Sri Lanka, and other parts of the world? The answer to this question determines whether the Mauryan Empire really declined after Ashoka or it was an expansion in another way. Further, contextualizing the meaning of national interests is significant since the tools, techniques, strategies, networks, channels, and the process of formation are not fixed. In other words, for any state, national interests are constant, but the priorities and preferences under it are not constant. They vary in time and place. They largely trace their methodology to domestic, regional, and international factors. Hence, to understand the national interests of Ashoka's foreign policy under Dhammaghosha in contemporary times requires information about the social identities of his time; it cannot be understood considering the present identity formation. After the Kalinga War, Ashoka's national interests did not include territorial expansion; rather, they included spreading a code of ethics that would serve humanity, and he succeeded in it. Finally, to this day, these values are celebrated and serve as the foundational pillars to establish relations with several countries.

Most importantly, the literature review indicates that economic interests and soft power strategies are interconnected. They complement each other, and together serve national interests too. Also, trade relations facilitate political and diplomatic ties. Mauryan Empire under Ashoka understood it well; hence, it utilized such linkages. Additionally, there is a view that soft power is not sufficient for the safety and security of states. However, the findings of this research paper suggest that Ashoka's foreign policy and Act East Policy both provide the case against this view.

## 7. Limitations and Scope of the Study

This research paper's findings highlight a few important aspects as well as few limitations. The scope of the study includes: first, it is an indigenous perspective and contribution to the soft power strategy, countering Western hegemony; second, it shows how ancient diplomatic traditions can be reinterpreted to address contemporary challenges without sacrificing strategic effectiveness; and finally, it provides a theoretical framework to understand the continuity between Ashoka's foreign policy principles and Act East Policy.

Along with this, it also has a few limitations. To begin with, the international system today is not equivalent to the Mauryan Empire and its neighboring states.

Several strategic competitions, technological advancements, economic interdependence, and non-state actors, etc., increase the complexities of world politics. Additionally, soft power strategies alone cannot address several challenges, including maritime disputes, border conflicts, cybersecurity threats, terrorism, and military competition. It requires a balance between normative aspirations and strategic imperatives.

Despite certain limitations, this study is significant as a new approach to address today's foreign policy challenges and highlights the relevance of the ancient normative framework.

## 8. Conclusion

This research paper summarizes that Ashoka's principles have greatly influenced India's foreign policy. In fact, there is a continuity between Ashoka's foreign policy principles and contemporary India's foreign policy. Act East Policy is a resemblance of this. Several similarities are found between these two. However, due to the different time period, there are certain limitations that encourage understanding it in a broader framework. A constructivist approach to explain international politics helps in understanding it. The paper concludes that soft power strategies assist in diplomacy and protect national interests .

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# Old Allies, New Realities: Contextualising India-Russia Relations through Naval Cooperation

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## ABSTRACT

*The present world order is characterised by uncertainty and competing visions for global influence. Rising powers such as China, Russia, and India are reshaping the new realities of global institutions and governance. In the new realities of world politics, Old Allies are breaking and new Allies are coming closer. Both India and Russia are playing prominent roles in this changing world order and sustaining their relationship in new realities.*

*After the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia remains a major actor in international politics due to its military strength, nuclear capabilities, vast natural resources, and a prominent energy exporter with an assertive foreign policy. It is challenging the Western dominance in international institutions and playing an important role in the emerging world order. India, the world's largest democracy, has emerged as a major actor in international politics. It stands with the strategic autonomy and balance between major powers like the United States and Russia. India and Russia are standing with the Global South, promoting multilateralism and supporting each other in the United Nations on international issues.*

*The paper analyses the defence ties between India and Russia, specifically the aspect of bilateral naval exercises, for evaluating the India-Russia relations in a changing world order. It argues that India-Russia naval exercises show India's commitment to strategic autonomy and represent a strategic continuity in bilateral defence ties. The exercises function primarily as tools of controlled strategic signalling, enabling both countries to demonstrate continuity in their relationship without committing to deeper operational integration.*

## Introduction

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Russia lost its role in international politics as a superpower.<sup>1</sup> But still, Russia was playing a prominent role as a major world power, and it was important in the global order because of its veto and location.<sup>2</sup> To deal with the political and economic crisis, President Boris Yeltsin and his Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev built close cooperation with the USA and adopted an Atlanticist foreign policy.<sup>3</sup> In the beginning, the India-Russia relationship was in a downturn. Even in January 1992, the Indian delegation could not meet either the President or the Russian Foreign Minister. It was asserted by the Russian press that 'The relationship between Russia and India at the crossroads. The sooner we

get through the difficult period of establishing them, the better for our countries' peoples.<sup>4</sup> Yeltsin visited India in January 1993 and said that the two countries had ended the prolonged interruption.<sup>5</sup> The Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation was replaced by the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, and the contentious issues on debts and the Ruble-Rupee exchange rate were also resolved. It was confirmed by Yeltsin that, despite the United States' objections, Cryogenic rocket engines will be supplied to India.<sup>6</sup> Indian Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao visited Russia and signed a unique Moscow Declaration on Protecting the Interests of Multiethnic States.

During the mid 1990s, Yevgenyi Primakov became the Russian Foreign Minister and Prime Minister in 1998. He shifted Russian foreign policy from

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Western to Eurasian-oriented.<sup>7</sup> His foreign policy was based on three principles: 'integration in the global economy, establishment of a multipolar world order, and implementation of an alternative line to the US policy in strained global issues'.<sup>8</sup> He came to India in 1998 and signed various agreements comprising a joint document on the development of Russian- Indian Trade and Economic, Industrial, Financial, Scientific and Technical Cooperation and Long-term Programme of Military Technical Cooperation to the year 2010.<sup>9</sup> He also proposed his well-known strategy for creating a Moscow-Beijing-Delhi strategic triangle. Indian Prime Minister Deve Gowda visited Russia in 1997 and signed prominent agreements on military cooperation. Moscow agreed in principle to revive the 1988 agreement to supply two nuclear power reactors to India.<sup>10</sup>

Russian President Vladimir Putin came to India in 2000 and signed the Declaration on Strategic Partnership. This declaration created a new momentum in the India-Russia relationship. The annual meeting for summit-level talks was also decided by the leaders of the two countries. The Declaration on International Terrorism was signed by the Indian PM Atal Behari Vajpayee in 2001. It condemned the dual standard adopted by the West on terrorism. The annual meetings were continued by the leaders of the two countries. In 2010, during the visit of the Russian President to India, the Strategic Partnership was elevated to the level of a 'Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership'.<sup>11</sup>

All the above-mentioned ties between India and Russia showed their commitment to stand with each other on several global and regional issues.<sup>12</sup> These historical ties developed the political trust and commitment to support each other. They promoted a multipolar world order, belief in international law, equality, mutual respect, and non-interference in the internal issues of countries. India and Russia want to reform the United Nations Security Council to represent the geopolitical realities of the world (India- Russia Joint Statement, 2016).<sup>13</sup>

### New Realities

The Western liberal world order got a major challenge from the Crimean crisis of 2014. The Russia-Ukraine crisis has deep historical, cultural, geopolitical and geoeconomics antecedents.<sup>14</sup> It was further aggravated by the Ukraine war of 2022. It has serious implications for the Western liberal world order, which is based on globalisation, multilateralism, and financial mechanisms.<sup>15</sup> There

are three lenses to see the Russian action against Ukraine: Russia as a 'revanchist power', Russia as a 'defensive power', and Russia as an 'aggressive isolationist'.<sup>16</sup> The liberal international order was "flawed from the start and thus destined to fail".<sup>17</sup> According to Blackwill and Wright, the old order has been replaced by multiple orders, "which in effect is disorder". In this new order, "countries choose their own paths" compared to the old order in which countries worked in the same set of constraints and rules.<sup>18</sup> The idea of Multiplex World explains a more de-centred world. In this, several middle and small powers have a role, together with the USA and other great powers.<sup>19</sup> The challenges are not coming from the outside, but also exposing deep contradictions within it. During the Donald Trump Presidency, the USA distanced itself from the liberal world order. The year 2014 was a milestone for India's domestic politics and foreign policy. The Bharatiya Janata Party was the first to have a clear majority in the Lok Sabha after a gap of 30 years. The Prime Minister Narendra Modi made major changes in India's foreign policy. Some scholars believe that it was a major shift from the past in India's foreign policy, and some believe that it was continued with some changes.<sup>20</sup> India has become an active global player with a proactive foreign policy to leave a "greater global footprint", with "an ambition to be a rule-maker, not merely a rule taker".<sup>21</sup>

The changing geopolitics and world order had a stronger influence on the India-Russia relationship. With its historical ties with Russia, it was not surprising that India abstained in the UN vote condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022, and also didn't join the sanctions against Russia. India-Russia defence cooperation is one of the prominent parts of the strong relationship. The ten-year agreement on the military-technical cooperation for 2021-2031 guides all their military and defence technology cooperation. The cooperation in the defence sector moved from a mere buyer-seller dynamic to include joint research, development, and co-production of advanced systems.<sup>22</sup> According to the SIPRI Report, Russia is India's top military supplier, accounting for 34% of total defence imports during 2019-23. Even though India was the largest recipient of Russian arms in 2014-2018, the exports declined by 34 % between 2014-2018 and 2019-23.<sup>23</sup> India-Russia traditional security domain is declining in changing world order but they are cooperating and supporting each other in non-traditional security domains.<sup>24</sup> In the energy security domain, India imported a large volume of oil, which increased

every year after the war in Ukraine. In 2021, it was US\$ 2.3 billion, in 2022- \$ 25.5 billion, in 2023- \$ 48.6, in 2024-\$52.7. India-Russia trade increased at \$68.7 billion in 2024-25.<sup>25</sup> President Putin's visit to India in Dec, 2025 for the 23<sup>rd</sup> India-Russia Annual Summit signals the importance of India-Russia relations. S. Jaishankar, the External Affairs Minister, explained the India-Russia relationship as it is not just about politics or diplomacy or economics, it is something much deeper. It is a "valued, time-tested partner" of India. Russia, and the Soviet Union before, has been the most consistent geopolitical partner.<sup>26</sup>

### India and Russia Defence Ties: A Case Study of Naval Exercise

India-Russia defence ties have historically been anchored in long-term defence industrial cooperation, with Russia (and the former Soviet Union) serving as a principal supplier of major platforms across all three services. While this relationship has traditionally been driven by defence trade and co-production, joint military exercises have emerged as an important, though relatively under-examined, dimension of bilateral engagement. In particular, naval exercises provide a useful lens to assess the evolution of this partnership, as they combine operational interaction with diplomatic signalling. Unlike arms transfers, which reflect capability dependence, such exercises reveal the extent of mutual trust, interoperability, and flexibility of alignment. At the same time, their fluctuating scale, frequency, and complexity offer insights into the broader political and geopolitical constraints shaping India-Russia defence cooperation over time.

#### Symbolic Beginnings and Limited Engagement (1993-2003)

In the post-Cold War period, many countries started conducting joint military exercises at the bilateral and multilateral levels (naval exercises more so) to support their foreign policy and national security objectives.<sup>27</sup> But due to internal problems facing India as well as Russia, it was not possible to conduct any large-scale military exercise in the immediate period that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>28</sup>

Joint military exercises between the countries were initiated in the year 1993.<sup>29</sup> These exercises were based on a PASSEX format. PASSEX is a passage exercise that involves traversing through the ocean side-by-side and conducting basic drills and movements.<sup>30</sup> It also involves engaging in flag showing and communications drills at sea. The objective of conducting a PASSEX is to signal trust

and cooperation. PASSEX format serves as a benign beginner because it needs very basic planning and coordination among the partners.<sup>31</sup> Since no data exchange happens, nor is any war drill practised, the PASSEX is the most non-controversial type of exercise from any perspective.<sup>32</sup> It is more of a symbolic activity that showcases concurrence of a broad strategic level among participating countries to engage with each other, trust building, and the 'feel-good factor'.<sup>33</sup> Neither India nor Russia released any details about the ships participating in the first PASSEX. Next year, in 1994, the Indian Navy held another PASSEX with Russia, building on the previous edition of the exercise.<sup>34</sup>

The conduct of a PASSEX in times of trouble can be assessed as an act of messaging that both countries wished to continue their defence relationship. For the Indian Navy, it marked the beginning of increased engagements with foreign forces. This was important since just a few months before, the first MALABAR exercise had been conducted with the US Navy in May 1991, in a similar PASSEX format.<sup>35</sup> Naval exercises thus functioned as a tool of signalling our own presence, showing our capabilities out in the sea and interacting with foreign navies while being deployed in the region.<sup>36</sup> In this context, military exercises have a deeper political message and a strategic signalling value.

While the natural course of events after the two PASSEX would have been to continue the format, on the contrary, neither side conducted any military exercise for the next eight years. Veterans of the Indian Navy interviewed on this issue mentioned two major reasons behind this gap.<sup>37</sup> Primarily, they said that "Russia lacked the finances to sponsor advanced formats of exercises." Second, while "the main platform (ship/submarine) imported by India was of Russian origin, they were fitted with many systems and sub-systems that India imported from other countries, including Western countries. Russia was not comfortable working closely with that equipment."

At one level, initiating the joint exercises indicated a willingness on both sides to sustain defence ties despite systemic disruptions. However, their limited complexity, partner constraints, and absence of institutionalisation suggest that these engagements functioned more as low-cost signalling mechanisms rather than indicators of deep operational cooperation. The absence of regular exercises through the 1990s further reinforces this assessment, pointing to constraints arising from Russia's economic difficulties and a lack of political prioritisation.

### Institutionalisation, Operational Expansion and the Limits of Partnership (2003–2012)

A significant shift occurred in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the launch of the INDRA series of bilateral military exercises between India and Russia. INDRA is an acronym of India and Russia. Under this name, joint exercises were institutionalised.

In the year 2003, the first exercise of the INDRA series was held between the navies of both countries. Unlike earlier PASSEX-level engagements, the INDRA NAVY of 2003 involved complex naval exercises including anti-submarine warfare, air defence, and coordinated fleet operations.<sup>38</sup> This exercise was important not only because it was being held after a gap of years but also due to the fact that the pre-exercise planning conferences had finalised an elaborate level of engagement.<sup>39</sup> The choice of location of the exercise was reflective of India's concerns in maritime security in the region. By conducting the first formal exercise in this location, Russia emphasised the importance of the Indian Ocean.<sup>40</sup> The exercise was also strategically timed, with Russia deliberately delaying it until after the active phase of the Iraq War to avoid 'technical problems' with the US-led coalition's activities in the region.<sup>41</sup> Technical problems here refer to intelligence gathering that countries usually do when a large-scale exercise is ongoing in areas of interest. A Vice Admiral from the Russian Navy emphasised that "this exercise was not intended to counter the growing presence of the United States and British navies in the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf".<sup>42</sup>

This complements the assessment that military exercises have a strong symbolic, signalling, and political messaging value. Russia has also used military exercises as a diplomatic tool for communication, signalling abroad, and to maintain influence. While India and Russia had previously collaborated on several defence projects, *this exercise* marked the first time the two nations conducted an institutionalised joint naval exercise.<sup>43</sup>

The second edition of the INDRA NAVY exercise featured a more advanced profile, incorporating intermediate and high-level drills in anti-submarine warfare (ASW), maritime interdiction operations (MIO), as well as boarding procedures for both compliant and non-compliant vessels, along with live firing against surface and aerial targets.<sup>44</sup> Compared to its earlier iteration, this edition was broader in scope. The MoD mentioned that the exercise provided a strong foundation to develop professional skills, 'establish interoperability

regimes' and procedures, and, above all, served as an excellent confidence-building mechanism.<sup>45</sup>

The third edition of the INDRA NAVY saw a change of location when it was held at Vladivostok,<sup>46</sup> a location that was significant not just because of its geography but also because Russia had held many of its naval exercises with other countries (including China) in this location. This was also the first time that the Indian Navy travelled to a far-off location for a long-distance cruise and exercise.<sup>47</sup> The Indian Navy utilised this opportunity as a part of its overseas deployment to conduct formal exercises with three other countries - Japan, Singapore, and the USA, while en route to Russia.<sup>48</sup> In support of India's diplomatic outreach to countries like Vietnam, China, Singapore, Philippines etc. the Indian Navy held port calls in these countries before landing up at Vladivostok in April.<sup>49</sup> The joint drills showcased a wide spectrum of 'operational interoperability,' including live surface-to-surface ammunition firing, air defence operations, anti-submarine warfare tactics, and mine-clearing activities aimed at securing commercial shipping lanes.<sup>50</sup> They conducted coordinated operations focusing on maritime law enforcement, anti-piracy patrolling, and counter-terrorism and anti-narcotics exercises reflecting a shared interest in combating mutual non-traditional maritime threats.<sup>51</sup> These activities reflect that both sides practised threat scenarios faced while operating in the open seas - securing commercial shipping lanes being a part of official mandates of both navies, where forces simulated the liberation of a hijacked vessel taken over by terrorists in the ocean.

Subsequent editions of the INDRA NAVY prioritised enforcing maritime law, combating piracy, tackling terrorism, escorting commercial vessels, and tackling drug trafficking. The locations of these exercises ranged from the Somali coast to the Gulf of Aden. The Indian Navy regularly fielded the *Tabar* missile frigate (imported from Russia some years ago) in these exercises.<sup>52</sup> Later, this frigate and its crew were deployed in the Persian Gulf in counter-piracy missions, bridging the gap between an exercise and actual operations.<sup>53</sup> There was a marked qualitative difference since each edition of INDRA NAVY was pushing the operational limits and included more real-life scenarios. This indicates that both navies planned the exercise routine in the context of the current and future threats they would encounter. While holding an exercise together to prepare for such contingencies does not automatically mean that both navies will respond to such events in a joint manner, the regular practice sessions do help build

capabilities and generate training value through exposure and interactions. Especially in a scenario where there is commonality of equipment on both sides and basic interoperability formalised, exercises like INDRA at the strategic level also reflect broader governmental convergence of interests and the confidence to let military officers talk to each other.

This trajectory of expanding cooperation was abruptly disrupted in 2010, when the scheduled INDRA NAVY exercise was effectively cancelled after Indian naval ships were routed back by Russia. Russia's unprofessional behaviour in refusing deployment of vessels for the exercise at the last moment reduced the engagement to a symbolic tabletop interaction.<sup>54</sup> The timing of this decision coincided with India's announcement of the shortlisted contenders for a \$10.4 billion multi-role fighter aircraft deal, which prominently featured two European jets. This development led to remarks that Russia's sudden disinterest in conducting joint military drills was linked to its dissatisfaction over not being selected as a finalist in the major Indian defence contract.<sup>55</sup>

This does not suggest that exercises and defence trade have any direct interdependence, but it shows that both activities can be influenced by each other to some level. Both countries made a move to prevent the situation from escalating further and did not release any official statement regarding the exercise. This episode is critical in understanding the limits of the partnership. It demonstrated that military exercises are not insulated from broader political and commercial considerations, including tensions in defence trade and shifting priorities within Russia.

The subsequent downgrade of the 2012 exercise further underscored the fragility of the relationship. In 2012, the INDRA NAVY exercise was resumed, but conducted in a PASSEX format.<sup>56</sup> This was a significant tone down from the previous high-intensity operational drills.<sup>57</sup> No information was officially released by either side regarding this exercise. This incident once again highlighted the influence of larger political dynamics on military exercises – a lot can happen in an exercise, if both sides are willing to do so, while the absence of trust, respect, and willingness for deeper engagement can abruptly spoil a carefully constructed relationship. Exercises then become just one of the tools used to signal political commitment and resentment.

Rather than representing a linear progression of cooperation, this phase of India-Russia defence cooperation highlights the susceptibility of bilateral exercises to disruption, raising questions.

### Managed Continuity (2014–2019)

From 2014 onwards, India–Russia naval exercises resumed with a degree of regularity, including engagements in the Sea of Japan, Bay of Bengal, and Baltic Sea.<sup>58</sup> These exercises incorporated a mix of traditional and non-traditional security scenarios, including anti-submarine warfare, counter-terrorism, and maritime security operations. This resumption coincided with the presence of a new government in India at the centre, which took a fresh re-look at India's foreign engagements.<sup>59</sup>

During the eighth edition of the INDRA NAVY December 2015, naval leadership from both sides fine-tuned various operational aspects, including drill scenarios, coordination of boarding teams, planning of naval gunfire, and joint operational procedures with a focus on counter-terrorism operations.<sup>60</sup> In a parallelly held visit to India, Russia's Vice Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin emphasised that both countries are at the forefront of the global fight against terrorism. His remarks added a diplomatic layer to the operational significance of the ongoing exercise, highlighting how maritime security cooperation is part of a larger shared approach to regional and international stability.<sup>61</sup>

From 2015 to 2019, the INDRA NAVY editions witnessed a shift in platform composition from a balanced fleet that earlier included a frigate, destroyer, corvette, and submarine, to a corvette-dominated grouping, indicating a strategic recalibration in exercise objectives.<sup>62</sup> By deploying a larger number of smaller, agile platforms such as corvettes, the Indian Navy appeared to focus more on littoral operations, coastal security, and rapid-response scenarios. However, this phase is better characterised as one of managed continuity rather than qualitative expansion.

While exercises continued to be conducted on a biennial schedule, there is limited evidence of sustained escalation in complexity or strategic ambition. Instead, they appear to have stabilised at a certain level, reflecting the persistence of institutional ties without significant deepening. This period also coincided with India's expanding naval engagement with other partners, particularly the United States, France, Japan, and other Western countries.

### Flexibility of Naval Exercises and Impact of Geopolitics (2020–2025)

During the coronavirus pandemic, restrictions were imposed on the physical movements of soldiers and military equipment. Therefore, INDRA exercises

at the army and air force levels could not be held. In the Navy’s case, the exercise was held following social distancing norms in September 2020 in the Bay of Bengal.<sup>63</sup> In December 2020, another naval exercise was held in a PASSEX format between both countries to symbolically mark Indian Navy Day.<sup>64</sup> These exercises underscored a flexible and responsive approach to defence cooperation amid evolving regional security dynamics, allowing both navies to maintain operational engagement despite the global constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>65</sup> In the following year, the INDRA NAVY was conducted in the Baltic Sea following protocols.<sup>66</sup> This iteration reflected the expanding geographical scope and deepening maritime cooperation between the two navies.<sup>67</sup>

By early 2022, Russia had invaded Ukraine and was sanctioned by Western countries for the same, led by the USA.<sup>68</sup> A significant amount of pressure was put on India by these countries to condemn Russia and to join the war effort against Russia.<sup>69</sup> India refused to reduce petroleum imports from Russia and avoided open condemnation. But India postponed the INDRA NAVY exercise of 2022 to next year. This avoided the optics of conducting overt military activities with a country that was engaged in war. This can be interpreted as a non-provocative but significant action on the part of India, since never before had India cancelled any of its scheduled military exercises. The Indian embassy in Moscow posted that the 2022 edition was ‘deferred to 2023’.<sup>70</sup> But in the year 2023, a quiet naval exercise was held in the Bay of Bengal.<sup>71</sup> No official statement was released by either side on this activity, nor was media reporting involved.

These incidents reiterate that military exercises are not immune to political and geopolitical influences. INDRA NAVY editions of 2020 and 2021 showed the flexibility of modifying exercise formats. India and Russia seem to have signalled a continuation of their defence cooperation in the least controversial format available during times of crisis. Both countries also avoided negative publicity over the exercises. Thus, the quiet exercises offered a mid-way out. Therefore, military exercises are not just a purely military-level activity – they have a strong political context and diplomatic utility along with deeply attached symbolism and optics.

Military exercises, hence, do not necessarily reflect strategic alignment, but may instead function as a tool of controlled signalling under geopolitical constraints. These constraints continued in the year

2024 when the Indian Navy ships visited Russia to mark the 328<sup>th</sup> Russian Navy Day. The ships, while on the return voyage, held a basic exercise that was termed ‘Maritime Partnership Exercise (MPX)’.<sup>72</sup> But as can be inferred from primary sources, in all probability, this MPX was a PASSEX format exercise. In the most recent edition, the INDRA NAVY was held in the year 2025 with the objective of “enhancing interoperability towards countering common **maritime threats**.”<sup>73</sup> Official sources call the exercise “a cornerstone of India-Russia Defence relations since its inception in 2003.”<sup>74</sup>

The major highlights of India-Russia naval exercises of the INDRA series in the period 1991 to 2025 are summarised in the table below:

Editions	Host Country	Year	Highlights
	Russia	1993	First exercise held as PASSEX.
	Russia	1994	Second PASSEX held.
	India	2003	First formal exercise of the INDRA series.
	India	2005	Intermediate and high-level drills in anti-submarine warfare.
	Russia	2007	First long-distance cruise and exercise of the Indian Navy.
	India	2009	Anti-piracy and commercial vessel escort operations.
	Russia	2010	Tabletop format due to controversy.
	India	2012	Toned down to PASSEX only.
	Russia	2014	Air assets of the Pacific Fleet and the Indian Navy are actively involved.
	India	2015	Simulated real-world counter-terrorism scenarios.
	India	2016	Tactical manoeuvres were conducted to test the coordination and combat-readiness.
	India	2018	Shift in platform composition for littoral operations.
	India	2020	Held under COVID protocols.
	Russia	2021	First time held in the Baltic Sea.

	India	2023	Held in a far-off location.
	Russia	2024	MPX held after 328 <sup>th</sup> Russian Navy Day celebrations.
	India	2025	Enhanced interoperability towards countering common <b>maritime threats</b> .

### Challenges and The Future Scope of India–Russia Bilateral Naval Exercises

#### Challenges

The primary challenge that India-Russia defence relations have to confront is the expected level of outcomes on both sides. While bilateral defence cooperation is unlikely to cease, its scope, visibility, and operational significance need to be clearly defined not just in the domain of exercises but also in other defence cooperation engagements. At the strategic and military levels, both sides need to have a coherent understanding of mutual interests, capabilities, intentions, and constraints. A clear articulation of expectations at the highest political levels is needed.<sup>75</sup> It would go a long way in defining the future roadmap of India-Russia military exercises.

The second major challenge confronting India-Russia defence cooperation comes from the geopolitical positions and interests of Western countries. On multiple occasions, the US and European nations have publicly communicated that they would like to see India-Russia defence cooperation being downgraded. The threat of economic sanctions and other measures continues to persist. The West needs to realise that such punitive measures may instead backfire and lead to greater collaboration between India and Russia. In a multipolar world, both countries are bound to take their own independent views and decisions, without consulting Western perspectives. In that context, as highlighted above, the India-Russia military exercises are expected to acquire strong geopolitical significance in the coming days. Both countries have maturely handled the optics of such exercises.

The third challenge for India-Russia naval exercises comes from differing primary areas of operations and the capacity of both navies. The Indian Navy is orienting towards the Indo-Pacific with its operational requirement ranging from the Gulf of Aden to the Malacca. On the other hand, the Russian

Navy is looking at the Arctic region to safeguard Russian foreign policy interests. India’s defence posture is increasingly oriented toward the Indo-Pacific, with a clear emphasis on managing the China challenge in coordination with partners such as the United States, France, Japan, and Australia. Russia, by contrast, remains focused on Eurasian security dynamics and its ongoing confrontation with the West. This divergence reduces the scope for meaningful convergence in exercise objectives, as effective military cooperation typically rests on shared threat perceptions and aligned strategic goals.

While certain common security concerns exist for both navies in the Indian Ocean region, they may not always be in a position to deploy personnel and ships for regular exercises. This capacity constraint is also highlighted in the fact that INDRA NAVY is held once every two years, instead of an annual engagement. The prolonged war has strained Russia’s conventional forces and affected equipment availability. For India, this translates into diminishing returns from joint exercises, as the value of training is closely tied to the capability and professionalism of the participating forces.

Fourth, the aspect of language and people-to-people exchange remains a core component of any defence cooperation engagements. While the Indian Navy operates Russian-origin ships, submarines, and weapons, both sides are not fully compatible when it comes to the language of communication. Russia has not been willing to share its operational doctrines and has prioritised naval exercises with China. These aspects may further limit the frequency and scope of future exercises. In doing so, the exercise’s military value will stagnate while its diplomatic value will remain.

Lastly, Moscow becomes increasingly dependent on Beijing economically, diplomatically, and to an extent militarily; the risks associated with sensitive military engagement grow for India. Given that China represents India’s primary security challenge, the possibility of operational exposure, even indirect, imposes clear limits on the depth and nature of future exercises. This structural contradiction fundamentally constrains the evolution of bilateral military cooperation.

#### Opportunities

Exercises that once signalled deepening military cooperation are increasingly being reshaped into politically calibrated instruments of limited utility, reflecting broader shifts in geopolitical alignments,

military capabilities, and strategic priorities. A key opportunity lies in the continuation of low-visibility, tightly controlled engagements. Recent trends, particularly the conduct of low-profile naval exercises, suggest a move away from large-scale, high-visibility exercises toward more discreet formats. Such engagements allow both sides to preserve a baseline level of operational familiarity without incurring high diplomatic costs.

For India, this approach offers a way to sustain legacy defence ties with Russia while avoiding overt signalling that could complicate its relations with Western partners. Russia's limited international military cooperation indirectly contributes to this need for real-life combat experience as well.<sup>76</sup> Due to Russia's desire to expand its joint exercises with Asian navies, the modernisation of its Pacific fleet, and its attempts to negotiate visits and access to bases, there will be increased contact between Russian military forces and those of regional actors.<sup>77</sup>

Another area of opportunity lies in niche operational domains where Russian expertise retains relevance. India's continued reliance on Russian-origin military platforms, particularly in the submarine fleet, necessitates periodic interaction for training, interoperability, and technical familiarisation. Similarly, Russia's experience in operating in Arctic and high-latitude environments offers a unique, if limited, avenue for engagement that is not easily substitutable by India's Western partners. In such cases, exercises may evolve from broad-based operational drills into platform-specific or domain-specific engagements, focused less on joint warfighting and more on sustaining functional competence.

Multilateral formats also provide a potential avenue for sustaining engagement under reduced political scrutiny. Participation in exercises linked to groupings such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, or in Russia-led multilateral drills, can allow India to interact with Russian forces without the optics of exclusive bilateral alignment. This form of indirect engagement offers a degree of political deniability, enabling continuity without overt signalling. However, such formats are typically less effective in generating meaningful operational interoperability, given their broader and less focused nature.

### Conclusion

India-Russia naval exercises, when examined across three decades, do not reflect a linear trajectory of

deepening military cooperation. Instead, they reveal a pattern of episodic expansion, disruption, and recalibration shaped less by operational imperatives and more by shifting political and geopolitical contexts. From the low-cost signalling of PASSEX engagements in the 1990s, to the peak operational complexity of the INDRA series in the 2000s, and finally to the controlled, low-visibility interactions of the post-2020 period, these exercises have progressively evolved in function rather than simply in scale.

The evidence suggests that such exercises are best understood not as instruments of sustained interoperability or joint warfighting preparation, but as flexible tools of strategic signalling. Their form, frequency, and visibility have been repeatedly adjusted to align with broader diplomatic priorities, whether it was managing post-Cold War uncertainty, navigating defence trade tensions, or balancing contemporary geopolitical pressures arising from Russia's confrontation with the West and India's expanding engagement with Indo-Pacific partners. In this sense, continuity in exercises has not implied convergence in strategic objectives.

This has important implications for how defence cooperation is interpreted in a multipolar world. Military exercises, often treated as indicators of alignment or deep partnership, may instead function as calibrated mechanisms of political communication, allowing states to signal intent, preserve legacy ties, and manage external perceptions without committing to deeper operational integration. The India-Russia case illustrates this distinction clearly: despite sustained engagement, structural divergences in threat perception, geographic focus, and external alignments have constrained the transformation of exercises into platforms of high-end military synergy.

Looking ahead, India-Russia naval exercises are likely to persist, but in a narrower and more carefully managed form. Rather than returning to the high-intensity operational formats of the past, they are expected to remain limited in scope, selectively visible, and politically conditioned. Their primary utility will lie not in enhancing combat capability, but in sustaining a baseline level of engagement while enabling both countries to navigate competing strategic partnerships. In this evolving context, naval exercises should be understood less as markers of military integration and more as instruments of strategic balance that reflect continuity without convergence in an increasingly fragmented global order.

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# Strengthening India-EU Ties: Strategic Convergence in a Changing Global Order

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## ABSTRACT

*The world is at a critical juncture struggling with changes in economic systems, environmental challenges and technological innovation, and India and the European Union (EU) are at a turning point. Both advocate an international order based on rules, but their own interests often conflict. This study explores the resurgence of historic ties between the two parties that are increasingly becoming relevant in the era of pressing shared issues from fostering renewable energy to implementing digital governance, while balancing trade aspirations with security needs. There are potential complementarities between India's digital sector and Europe's regulatory capability and large market as well as India's demographic advantages. But there are still many challenges to overcome. There are often substantive delays in negotiations because of lengthy trade negotiations, differences in policies, and administrative issues. The analysis argues that cooperative efforts will be less about lofty rhetoric and more about tangible actions: regulatory alignment, joint initiatives, and backing from the political will towards the process.*

**Keywords:** India-EU Relations, Strategic Partnership, Multilateralism, Geopolitical Shifts, Economic Cooperation, Climate Action, Digital Governance.

## Introduction

### The Imperative for India-EU Collaboration in a Multipolar World

The post-Cold War landscape of the 21st century has seen a new distribution of power, from a relatively straightforward bipolar and Western-dominated era to a new multipolar world where influence is spread out between a multitude of actors, and old alliances have been replaced by more fluid, and sometimes ad hoc, coalitions (Leonard, 2021). The India-EU partnership has a sense of urgency and strategic importance today that perhaps could not even have been conceived 10 years ago in an era in which China's rise is assertive, authoritarian regimes are back and the traditional powers such as the US and Western Europe are facing uncertainties (Ikenberry, 2001). Both India and the EU are two of the world's largest economies and democracies, and are not only committed to pluralism and open societies, but have also a vested interest in the norms and rules that allow for peaceful coexistence, sustainable development

and economic stability (Stuenkel, (2016)). Together, their partnership is more and more essential to solve issues of the 21st century, such as digital governance and climate change, pandemic resilience and inclusive growth. How these two are working together could well determine the future architecture of global governance - in an era of uncertainty and competition. India is emerging as a key economic and geopolitical power, with its strategic autonomy and desire for pragmatic partnerships but without compromising on its own decision-making authority now defining its role in Indo Pacific and beyond (Service, (2020)). As it adjusts to the new world order, however, the European Union still possesses remarkable soft power, as a large economic bloc and as a leader in the defence of multilateral norms, despite the recent turmoil of its internal debates, including over Brexit and the disruptive currents of populism. India and the EU share a common interest in addressing transnational challenges that impact all, ranging from climate change, to the digital

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revolution, access to a reliable, clean energy system and the security of supply chains which are still feeling the effects of COVID-19 (Abraham, (2024)). Especially during the pandemic, the precariousness of many global networks and supply routes has become all too evident, and resilience and diversity of partnerships are no longer policy choices but strategic needs. In this context, the increasing substance and magnitude of India-EU cooperation is noteworthy, not only as an immediate response to the current challenges, but also as an alliance with the potential to define the way that democracies can tackle the world's most pressing issues.

India's policy of strategic autonomy will propel it to become a key economic and geopolitical player in the Indo Pacific region, while not committing to any rigid alliances. This strategy helps New Delhi to participate in maritime security, digital innovations, regional connectivity etc., without compromising on its independent decision-making power. Meanwhile, the European Union, despite Brexit, populism and other difficulties, continues to be a global standard-setter and influential economic bloc, determined to uphold multilateralism and the rules-based governance. Brussels is looking to play a stronger role in the changing world order with recent strategic changes, such as a more assertive attitude towards China. (Service, (2020))

A convergence of priorities is what is increasingly binding India and EU together. Both see the need to respond to climate change and ensure energy security, digital trust and diversified sources of supply to decrease reliance on authoritarian states. COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical consequences of the Ukraine war have exposed vulnerabilities in global networks and called for increased need for resilience and "de-risking" in trade, technology and critical resources. The skills and demographic strength of India combined with the regulatory framework and economic force of the EU, provide a complementary toolkit. Such a partnership not only makes strategic sense, but also allows both parties to maintain a rules-based international order in an Indo-Pacific that is characterized by evolving alliances and heightened competition. (Saran, (2021))

India and the EU seemed poised to move closer on several fronts during much of their interaction but in many instances, results were not as expected. The opportunities in trade, investment, and strategic cooperation were not fully exploited due to bureaucratic obstacles, regulatory variations, and varying priorities in the areas of the Strategic

Partnership in 2004. (Jain, 2019) However, its tone has changed recently as free trade agreement (FTA) negotiations were resumed in 2021 and with the launch of the India-EU Connectivity Partnership, both sides have expressed a fresh commitment to address previous obstacles. The steps come at a time when global dynamics are shifting, and both New Delhi and Brussels seem to be more inclined than ever to overcome the long-standing differences and leverage the complementary strengths to strengthen their relationship in the future. (Ministry of External Affairs G. o., 2021)

India's 'Act East' policy and the European Union's Indo-Pacific strategy are beginning to show an increasing strategic convergence, with shared interests and concerns. One of the key reasons is that the two are afraid of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and what it means for the region's stability, sovereignty, and rules-based order in the long run. (Pant, H. V., & Passi, R, 2020). To this, India and the EU are trying to promote other connectivity options that prioritize transparency, sustainability and adherence to international standards. The strong underlying normative values, shared democratic values and their dedication to human rights not only power their capacity to resist the authoritarian influence but also bolster their collective efforts in inclusive and equitable development in Indo-Pacific. All these combine to create a strong case for both to be trusted partners in crafting a future regional and global order that is open, safe and based on rules.

In this, consider how the current period of change in the global order offers a unique chance to reimagine the fundamentals of India-EU relations and make it a stabilizing power in a world of disruption and flux. Each has on its own a lot to offer: India's large population of young talent, fast developing tech industry and rising voice in Indo Pacific, matches naturally with the EU's economic power, long experience in regulatory framework and longstanding expertise in setting international standards. With coordination and purpose, these assets can be combined to address common issues, such as adapting to climate change and developing responsible digital infrastructure, as well as developing resilient global, interdependent supply chains, and, crucially, help drive a more equitable, balanced and future-proof international framework.

## 2. Historical Context: Evolution of India-EU Diplomatic and Economic Ties

The partnership between India and the European Union (EU) has evolved greatly since its beginning,

closely reflecting the geopolitical and economic developments in both continents over the last six decades. The first time India began to consider establishing formal diplomatic relations with the European Economic Community (EEC - the forerunner of the EU) was in the early 60's. The focus was pragmatic and limited: the EEC was at that time a secure market for Indian exports, and a sure source of development aid. During this early phase, Europe's contribution in India's external relations revolved around India's trade relations, preferential tariff regime under the generalised System of Preferences and financial and technical assistance for implementation of development projects (Jain, 2019).

The first phase has been mainly of a transactional nature, but it was based on a basic political goodwill and shared interest, both sides having a list of post-colonial and post-war priorities: the reconstruction of India, the economic recovery of Europe, and a gradual insertion of India into the global economy. Dialogue continued to be limited in scope until the 1970s and 1980s, partly due to a focus of both partners with their own neighbourhoods and internal changes.

The '90s striking a turning point with the onset of the economic liberalisation programme in India in 1991, and a greater integration of the EU under the Maastricht Treaty, new impetus was provided for engagement. The liberalisation made the Indian economy more accessible to the European investors and companies; Brussels saw the potential of India, as a fast growing market and strategic partner in Asia. For the past 10 years, the EU grew to become one of the biggest trading partners of India and an important source of foreign direct investment (FDI), with cooperation extended to various fields such as technology transfer, infrastructure building and sectoral reform.

This progress was consolidated by the signing of the 1994 Cooperation Agreement, which established a formal forum for discussions on cooperation not only in the field of trade and economic relations but also more and more on development cooperation, energy, research cooperation and educational exchange (European, 2004). In the reform years, the EU has been a supportive partner to India in a number of projects, such as the improvement of the energy grid and the promotion of renewable energy, vocational training and the strengthening of public health systems. Diplomatic contacts between both sides increased during this period and paved the way for further political contacts and even for initial discussions on security issues.

The India - EU strategic partnership was formed in 2004 which was a conscious attempt to expand the scope beyond trade and assistance. Its accompanying Joint Action Plan was ambitious and in the areas of trade, security, climate change, science and technology, and support for multilateral governance (Ministry of External Affairs G. o., (2004). It also envisioned people to people exchanges and cultural connections as well as joint work on global challenges. But, in order to turn such a vision into an actual reality, it was challenging. In 2007 negotiations began for a Broad-Based Trade and Investment Agreement (BTIA), but these soon hit some rough waters. Structural and policy differences came to light, such as regulatory incompatibilities, IPR and data protection issues, and divergent views on market access for agriculture and services, which resulted in repeated delays and show that structural and policy differences can slow down the partnership's ambitions.

Regardless of this, there was an influx of energy in the 2010s. The relationship was infused with new strategic meaning in the wake of global power dynamics, the emergence of China and the pivoting of both India and the EU towards the Indo-Pacific. The 'Act East' policy of India and the increasing significance of the Indo Pacific region in the eyes of the European Union (EU) brought converging interests to the table in the areas of maritime security, connectivity and sustainable development (Pant, H. V., & Passi, R, 2020). The ratification of the Paris Climate Change Agreement in March 2016 and the initiation of an India-EU Climate Change Cooperation Framework Agreement in November 2015 highlighted the shared commitment to climate action, and the launch of the India-EU Water Partnership in November 2016 expanded the cooperation to the smart resource management and technology transfer (European External Action Service, 2016).

The recent stage has been accelerated further as a result of the increased geopolitical competition, supply chain disruptions brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic and realignments triggered by conflicts like the war in Ukraine. As FTA negotiations are restarting in 2021 - after eight years of negotiation - it is obvious both sides are willing to get back to the table on challenging economic issues to create a more balanced, resilient trading relationship (Commission, European, 2021). The India-EU Connectivity Partnership signed in the same year was an indication that both parties were interested in developing sustainable, transparent infrastructure options to China's Belt and Road.

EU's Indo Pacific Strategy fits well with India's Indo Pacific vision of the open, inclusive region, and can foster Indo European partnerships to work on counterterrorism, cyber security, maritime domain awareness, and more.

Problems remain in the India-EU relationship, such as the challenge of aligning divergent regulatory regimes to the clear need for a greater people-to-people relationship via increased educational, touristic and cultural diplomacy opportunities. There has been a lack of a long-term strategic vision which is fully integrated, making it sometimes more reactive than proactive. What is nonetheless evident is the historical process: In the last six decades, the initial step of economic engagement has grown into a multifaceted and multidimensional partnership that has extended beyond the economic to include political dialogue and strategic cooperation, as well as common normative commitments. The relevance and reach of the India-EU cooperation has grown to unprecedented levels as both the countries face a 21st century global order of multipolarity and evolving alliances and pressing global challenges. This alliance, based on shared values, yet flexible to the realities of the situation, is more likely to influence future governance and plays a crucial role in helping to stabilize the economy and create economic security in an uncertain world.

### 3. Strategic Convergence: Shared Priorities in Trade, Security, and Climate

The nature of India-EU partnership has considerably evolved over the last few years, and moved beyond mere formal diplomacy to a strong partnership built on shared and substantive goals. What is striking is how both sides have been intentionally moving toward one another in their three priorities: trade, security and climate action. As India and the EU are making concerted efforts towards a Free Trade Agreement and push for greater policy coordination on the establishment of resilient and sustainable value chains, trade relations are in particular in a new phase. The actions are not only a result of the recent disruption in the world, but also an indication of a mutual economic aspiration, and long-term commitment. Security cooperation has also come of age: Both sides understand that their democratic values and pluralism can only work in an international order that is stable and based on the rules. Most notably, the alignment on climate, with India and the EU using their combined strength to drive the clean energy transition, create innovation and catalyse together their ambitious climate

transition, which resonates both in their Roadmap to 2025 and in the updated Clean Energy and Climate Partnership. India and the EU are now partners, not just passive onlookers, with India's voice on global challenges being multiplied through regular high-level summits, joint councils and practical, sectoral initiatives, bringing the widely touted 'voice of the voiceless' to the forefront. Trade is the most ancient (and perhaps the strongest) pillar that underpins India-EU ties. (Jain, R. , 2020, June 30)

The EU is India's biggest trade partner for goods: EU-India trade in 2024 is estimated to be around €120 billion, representing approximately 11.5–12% of India's total trade. Furthermore, the EU is an important investor in India with more than €140 billion in cumulative EU FDI flows into the country by 2023, ranking it as one of India's largest investors. The relation is further strengthened with the relaunch of negotiations of the ambitious Broad-Based Trade and Investment Agreement (BTIA) between the two sides, which had not moved for several years, in 2021. This round of negotiations includes addressing more complicated issues, such as regulatory harmonization, digital trade, IP rights, and above all the supply chain resilience, which has been thrown into sharp relief by the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic and the current geopolitical uncertainty. Indeed, both sides see the diversification and fortification of supply chains as a strategic imperative in the light of recent experiences on the vulnerabilities of using a single country hub. While the contours of the trade agenda have shifted over the years, India and the EU's trade policy is now an outcome of the pragmatic, forward-looking response to emerging realities on the ground, where trade relations are not merely commercial, but also a key component of strategic autonomy and security in an unpredictable world, as both parties strive to reach a comprehensive agreement by 2025. (EU Trade Relations with India, 2025)

Security cooperation has emerged as a key pillar of the India-EU partnership, driven by mutual apprehension of threats related to terrorism, cyber security, maritime security and the peace and stability in the Indo Pacific region, both consider the rules-based order and freedom of navigation as central. High-level meetings have led to commitments to enhance joint maritime domain awareness, information sharing in real-time on counterterrorism and coordinated responses to cyber and hybrid threats, and to consider structured security and defence partnerships, such as those that the EU has with other key partners. The cooperation has

been growing steadily with regular joint naval drills, formal maritime security dialogues, cooperation on fighting piracy, and the EU explicitly naming India as a “core partner” in the Indo-Pacific Strategy (Leaders’ Statement: Visit of Ms. Ursula von der Leyen, Feb, 2025). Both sides have acknowledged the necessity of safeguarding critical infrastructure and jointly promoting international norms and are making efforts to finalize agreements on security of information and boost their defence-industrial cooperation through technology transfers and joint research. Significantly, India and the EU are on the same page with these priorities while preserving their respective strategic sovereignty and are looking into establishing a resilient, rules-based security architecture that will be able to meet both old and new challenges without departing from their own foreign policy views.

The EU-India Trade and Technology Council (TTC), established in 2022, have given a great boost to the technological cooperation between the two countries. On Key outcomes of the second Ministerial meeting of the EU-India Trade and Technology Council, the TTC released a joint statement in February 2025, pointing to significant progress throughout the three key working groups – digital connectivity, green technologies and supply chain resilience. The scope of cooperation has now expanded to the most advanced and strategically important fields such as artificial intelligence, 6G networks, semiconductor manufacturing and high performance computing. These spaces are not just hubs of innovation; they represent pivotal geopolitical assets, as technological supremacy now and in the future are intricately linked with strategic influence (Flaherty, N. (2025,)). Building a human-centric digital transformation is a shared aspiration in the TTC’s agenda, with the aim of boosting the development of trustworthy and cutting-edge digital technologies that will have a positive impact on economies and societies. Improving the interoperability of digital public infrastructures, joint research on chip design and semiconductor technologies, improving the resilience of semiconductor value chains and fostering strong cooperation on AI ethics and large language models are concrete steps that can be taken. A memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the EU 6G Smart Networks and Services Industry Association (SNIA) and India’s Bharat 6G Alliance is another step toward secure telecommunications and supply chain resilience (Joint Statement, 28 February 2025). The TTC also highlights collaborative innovation initiatives like the GANANA project,

a joint initiative by both partners to explore high-performance computing applications, which is funded by both parties (GANANA Project, 2025). Overall, this developing partnership can set the stage for India and the EU to become strategic partners, not only in the realm of technology transfer but in defining the global landscape of digital sovereignty, economic security, and sustainable technological advancements in an age characterized by geopolitical competition and technological innovation.

Connectivity – with the bold India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC) – is the third key pillar of the strategic partnership between India and the European Union. The transformative initiative is aimed at creating a multi-modal transport and energy network, called “a modern golden road” by President von der Leyen, consisting of railways, electricity grids, a Clean Hydrogen pipeline and a high-speed data corridor. IMEC stretches from India to the Arabian Gulf to Europe, its goal is to not only cut down on transit times and logistics costs to boost trade efficiency, but also to shift the geo-economic landscape from one continent to the other (Yildirimcakar, E., 2025). The corridor is more than just a transport route; it incorporates sustainability as its very heart, fostering the cooperation of renewable energies and the integration of green technologies, all in line with the international climate goals. IMEC is regarded as an important strategic ally to the Belt and Road Initiative from China, which will provide an alternative infrastructure route to meet the goals of diversification of supply chains, increased economic integration and a stronger energy security, in particular by connecting India’s clean energy aspirations with Europe’s energy transition. The corridor’s future holds significant promise to transform intercontinental commerce and contribute to a rules-based, resilient, and inclusive global order, despite the challenges posed by geopolitical tensions in the Middle East, and the fact that diplomatic and multilateral efforts are ongoing (Rizzi, A., 2024).

Although the climate action is not a subject that is frequently discussed at the forefront of India – EU relations, it is a strong and consistent catalyst for India – EU Partnership. Both actors have adopted ambitious net-zero commitments (2070 for India and 2050 for the EU), and are driving the integration of climate finance, the promotion of renewable energy deployment and the negotiation of the multifaceted aspects of carbon border adjustment mechanisms (CBMs) (Climate Action Network South Asia & Climate Action Network Europe., 2023). Its collaboration is based on clear complementarities

between the EU's technological expertise and the strong green finance infrastructure in India, as well as India's huge renewable energy potential and growing market. (European Commission. (n.d.).)

Today, the India-EU interaction is not episodic or reactive, but is more and more structured and forward looking, based on a common realisation that the challenges of our day, such as economic shocks, digital vulnerabilities or environmental changes due to climate change, require systematic and long-term responses. The agreement between India and the EU through its emphasis on trade, security, and climate in a holistic strategic framework signals a proactive approach towards a more rules-based, resilient, and inclusive global order in the coming decades, while also affirming India and the EU's status as pivotal regional actors. The partnership is an example of how democracies can combine their capacities to solve global challenges, in a world that is rapidly changing.

#### 4. Joint Statement: India-EU Trade and Technology Council, New Delhi 2025

The second meeting of the India - European Union (EU) Trade and Technology Council (TTC) in February 2025 in New Delhi was a significant step in the journey of India - EU strategic partnership. The TTC was launched in April 2022 by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, and has become a key forum for discussing the interlinked issues of trade, technology, and security in today's fast-changing world. With its open economies, two of the largest democracies in the world and a shared conviction in the ideals of sovereignty, territorial integrity and rules guided international order, India and the EU redoubled their efforts to collaborate in propelling the world towards stability, economic security and sustainable growth (Ministry of External Affairs G. o., (2004)).

The agenda of the meeting revolved around three thematic working groups. The first session on Strategic Technologies/ Digital Governance/ Digital Connectivity witnessed both sides reaffirm the commitment to building interoperability of Digital Public Infrastructure, joint research on semiconductors, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and 6G networks and creating secure and inclusive digital ecosystems. Key achievements included the MOU between Bharat 6G Alliance (India) and 6G Smart Networks and Services Industry Association (EU) and the establishment of a work schedule for 6G research and development and telecommunications

supply chain. The second group, on Clean and Green Technologies, presented collaborative efforts in clean energy, battery recycling, marine plastic pollution reduction and waste to hydrogen projects, with a total project funding of €60 million, where India has matched the funding from Horizon Europe; highlighting shared aspirations towards achieving Net Zero emissions (2070 for India, 2050 for EU) (Ministry of External Affairs G. o.,(2004)).

The third working group focused on Trade, Investment, and Resilient Value Chains, and noted developments on addressing market access issues and continued talks on a Free Trade Agreement and Investment Protection Agreement. Both sides recognised the need to strengthen resilience in key industries such as agriculture, pharmaceuticals and clean technologies as well as the pressing need for reforms in the World Trade Organization to take into account the realities of modern trade and provide effective dispute settlement. Overall, the TTC meeting in February 2025 marked a significant step towards further deepening the strategic partnership between India and the EU, highlighting a coordinated approach in trade, technology, and security to build a more sustainable, resilient, and equitable world. (Ministry of External Affairs G. o., 2021)

#### 5. Navigating Divergences: Regulatory Challenges and Geopolitical Nuances

A rules-based international order is a shared commitment of both India and the European Union (EU) and is reflected in formal partnerships such as the EU-India Strategic Partnership: A Roadmap to 2025 and the EU-India Connectivity Partnership. But when it comes to real-life crises, this commonality of aspirations is executed in a different manner. Consider the Hamas-Israel conflict: at first both championed Israel's right to self-defence; eventually they got to the same point of calling for de-escalation and respect for international humanitarian law. But differences in worldview come to the fore in the Russia-Ukraine war. The EU has announced and implemented comprehensive sanctions against Russia and military support for Ukraine, but India has continued to ramp up its energy imports from Russia and has avoided making any explicit condemnations of the invasion, calling for "strategic autonomy". This difference indicates a shift towards an Indian view of sovereignty, non-interference, and restraint in the context of Western humanitarian intervention, as well as the view of the Global South (Vaishali Jain, 2024).

India's foreign policy has a purer motivation for a more comprehensive institutional reform of global governance – a reluctance to take the power equation on the global stage as a given. India has long been calling for a greater representation on the UN Security Council, greater representation in the international financial institutions, international recognition of its nuclear status and a more equitable distribution of climate responsibility. These goals are based on the belief that the current century's multipolar realities are not reflected in today's global institutions. China occasionally operates outside or even in open opposition to the status quo, but India has generally sought to change things from within, whether through the BRICS, the G20 or the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, pushing—sometimes subtly, sometimes more forcefully—for change.

It is a step-by-step, reforming approach which makes India different, and thus offers opportunities for collaboration and potential conflict, especially with Europe. By far the biggest difference between India and the EU is in their worldviews on sovereignty and intervention. The fact that India is an aspiring leader of the Non-Aligned movement and always wary of foreign intervention due to its colonial past translates into a cautious attitude, if not outright aversion, to such intervention in the case of Libya, Bosnia, Darfur or Mali. The European Union, however, has wholeheartedly embraced the doctrine of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) that says the international community should intervene if a state is unable or unwilling to protect its citizens from serious harm. (Pethiyagoda, K., 2013). This philosophic divide engenders practical tensions: western democracy promotion efforts are seen as potential violations of national sovereignty and at the same time, as moral obligations by Europe. Interestingly, India which has been generalist on the principle of sovereignty, has reacted in measured ways to the Ukraine crisis, thereby implying that often strategic considerations prevail over normative ones in Indian foreign policy. However, if the partnership is to be successful, then both Europe and India need to respect each other's interests. Europe should accept India's "legitimate aspirations" for a new order in the world and India should accept Europe's "legitimate concerns" for security, especially against the Russian expansionism. While there may be differing views on how and how fast these can be realised, economic cooperation can offer the most solid ground on which to negotiate these differences, as both sides emphasize market access, supply chain

resilience and technological innovation. (Grare, F, 2022, May 4))

## 6. Policy Recommendations: Strengthening Institutional Frameworks and People-to-People Ties

Deliberate efforts are needed to boost institutional mechanisms as well as human contacts to leverage the full potential of the India-EU Strategic Partnership. All of these endeavors will seek to fill some of the gaps and create a stronger platform to face the challenges of twenty-first century cooperation. The most immediate institutional change to be done is to improve the functioning of the Trade and Technology Council (TTC), including creation of a permanent secretariat. Such a body would ensure continuity between meetings of the ministers, the possibility of regular consultations with stakeholders and the monitoring of the implementation of agreed actions, as well as technical expertise for working groups. As a future step, it would be wise for the TTC to broaden its scope by creating a dedicated working group that takes a straight-forward approach to regulatory harmonisation, that is, harmonisation of standards across all areas of digital governance, environmental protection and employment law. Taking a staged approach, prioritizing shared priorities like digital commerce, sustainable technologies and resilient supply chains could also help progress on the Broad-Based Trade and Investment Agreement (BTIA). At the same time, a joint task force on issues where agreement is still elusive, such as data localization regulations or the complexities of IP, could offer a pragmatic forum to bridge some of the regulatory gaps and catalyse stalled negotiations to concrete results (Confederation of Indian Industry, 2025).

As with any economic or political measure, strengthening the human ties are integral to the health of the India - EU partnership. A joint Education and Research Council between India and EU could facilitate joint research and academic collaboration and development of innovation clusters in areas such as artificial intelligence, renewable energy and biotechnology. Expanding the scope of participation for universities and students in programmes like Erasmus+ could facilitate the convergence of academics and help cultivate a cadre of professionals with a mind-set of both India and Europe. Much can be also gained through a boost to the cultural diplomacy, by holding an annual India-EU Cultural Festival in the cities in both regions in turn, which will showcase the diversity of cultures and traditions, while creating shared understanding.

Concrete measures would include visa liberalisation and introduction of multi-entry visas for students, researchers and business travellers, which would significantly contribute to increased mobility and establishing personal connections and trust that lie at the heart of effective international cooperation.

Digital connectivity is now a strong catalyst to further reinforce the institutional linkages and personal connection between India and EU. Adopting interoperable Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) infrastructure and platforms, designed with privacy at the centre and to support the widest of digital participation, could provide the foundation for more inclusive and efficient economies for both regions. An India – EU Digital Innovation Fund for startups and small companies will foster a new round of startups and job creation in the two continents. Focusing on capacity development and targeted training in specific emerging skills areas such as the digital and green market can be equally important in enabling the workforce and marginalised groups to be ready to seize opportunities as they arise. The positive impact this partnership can have on the society as a whole would be further accentuated by an India – EU Social Innovation Fund to invest in grassroots initiatives on health, education and women empowerment. All these plans together set out a clear roadmap, not only for formal institutions, but for a partnership that is built on personal relationships. (Confederation of Indian Industry, 2025).

## 7. Conclusion

India and the European Union (EU) partnership has turned into one of the key partnerships of the today's world politics. This is based on a shared democratic ethos, a complementary economic profile and a mutual awareness of the fact that the world's largest challenges can be addressed only in combination. India and the EU are both resilient and adaptable as global power dynamics change, climate change is afoot and technology is changing societies at an unprecedented pace. This change was reflected in the second Trade and Technology Council (TTC) meeting in February 2025, which marked a step away from symbolic gestures. While regulatory differences and the desire to foster closer bonds in society remain obstacles to progress, trade, digital standards and security cooperation are now at the forefront.

The special nature of this partnership lies in the mutual complementary fit between India's

youthful dynamism and innovation, and the EU's well-established markets and its leadership in the development of rules and norms. The cooperation in the fields of renewable energy, joint work in the field of digital governance and even initiatives such as India – Middle East – Europe Corridor (IMEC), for instance, show the extent to which can be achieved when priorities intersect. It's not only about pushing their own agendas, but also about co-constructing common solutions for pressing current problems, ranging from climate finance to clean energy transitions and the governance of new technologies, that we are facing on a global scale. The future offers one option: India and the EU can be the game changers in establishing the rules of global governance. However, this will take a lot of political will, building of trust and creative ways of collaboration. Their partnership can help to map out a more balanced, fair and sustainable international order that extends beyond their own boundaries if they can overcome challenges and strengthens ties.

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# Fractured Inheritances: State-Making, Colonial Exception, and the Politics of Insurgency on the Indo-Burma Frontier, 1947–2000

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## ABSTRACT

*When the British left South Asia, the hill peoples strung along the Indo-Burma frontier did not gain new rulers so much as new flags above the old machinery of exclusion. This article follows that inheritance across three states that rarely appear in the same study. India, Burma, and Bangladesh each kept the colonial law of exception that set highlanders apart, and the insurgencies that answered them, from the Naga and Mizo risings to the revolt in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, tried to imagine communities larger than any colonial district. They failed in a revealing way. Because a single highland world had been cut across three borders, every movement had to bargain separately with a different state on terms drawn from the same colonial archive, and the partition reappeared inside each movement as the lines along which it broke. Read whole, with the war of 1971 as its hinge, the frontier tells one connected story.*

**Keywords:** Indo-Burma frontier; AFSPA; Naga Insurgency; Mizo National Front; Postcolonial State-Making; Sixth Schedule; Ethnonationalism; Panglong Agreement; Colonial Exception; Zomia

## Introduction

On 14 August 1947, the day before the British transfer of power to the Dominion of India, the Naga National Council declared the Naga homeland independent and informed London that the Naga people would not consent to inclusion in the new state. Delhi did not reply. Five months later Burma became independent under a constitution that guaranteed the Kachin, Chin, and Shan peoples a measure of federal autonomy and, in the Shan and Karenni cases, a formal right of secession; within fifteen years a coup had abolished the ethnic state legislatures and gaoled their leaders. The two episodes are usually narrated within separate national frames. Read together, they disclose a common structure: in each, the end of colonial rule transferred administrative authority over highland peoples without altering the terms on which that authority was exercised. The frameworks the British had built to govern the hills were not dismantled at independence. They were retained, and in places extended.

The retention was not incidental but constitutive, and its consequences can be followed with some precision. Three of them shape what follows. The first is that the postcolonial states of India, Burma, and Bangladesh governed their frontier territories through instruments of exception, emergency statute, military administration, and constitutional provisions that withheld from highland communities the ordinary protections of citizenship, and that the genealogy of these instruments runs directly back to colonial legislation. The second is that the insurgencies which arose in response were not, as official discourse insisted, eruptions of primitive tribalism but political projects with arguable premises, which set out to constitute communities larger than any colonial district. The third, and the least often noticed, is that the fragmentation of those projects after the 1980s into narrow and mutually violent ethnonationalisms was not a contingent failure but the working-out of colonial classification at the sub-ethnic level: the census categories and

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administrative sub-divisions of the nineteenth century supplied the fault lines along which the movements broke.

These three steps are usually pursued, when they are pursued at all, within three separate national literatures, and the separation conceals what matters most about them. The territories in question were not three discrete peripheries that happened to suffer parallel fates. They were segments of one highland world, divided by borders that postcolonial states drew through living communities and then declared eternal. The clearest case is the Zo world, the Mizo, Chin, Kuki, and related peoples whose villages the colonial severance of Burma from India in 1937 and the partitions of 1947 and 1948 distributed across what became three countries, so that a single people came to carry three names: Mizo in India, Chin in Burma, and, among the population the Bengali state would later call Jumma, in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The insurgencies that rose in these places were not merely analogous; they were connected, sharing kin, sanctuary, weapons, and a political vocabulary that crossed the borders as readily as the people did. And their defeat was produced by the borders themselves. Because each fragment of the highland world had to make its peace separately, with a different state, on terms that state had drawn from the same colonial archive, the partition of the highlands was reproduced inside the movements as the very fault lines along which they broke. The war of 1971 is the hinge on which this connection turns, and it returns below, at the point where the national frames lose their hold.

A claim of this kind rests on a method, and the method has both a long pedigree and persistent critics. Michiel Baud and Willem van Schendel argued three decades ago that borderlands must be studied comparatively and from the borderland outward, asking not how states have managed their margins but how the people of the margins have dealt with the states that claim them (Baud and van Schendel 1997). Van Schendel went on to show that the postwar map of world areas had quartered precisely this kind of region, leaving in the seams between the recognised areas a durable geography of ignorance where a connected social world had been (van Schendel 2002). It was in that essay that he named the region Zomia, a coinage James Scott would later elaborate into an account of the uplands as a zone of deliberate state evasion (Scott 2009). The frame is indispensable, and it is contested: on empirical grounds by historians who find its evidence thin, and on political grounds by critics who hold that it romanticises highland life

and that the thesis of colonial construction it tends to carry denies agency to the highlanders themselves. This paper treats those objections as live, returns to them in its fourth section, and offers its own account of intra-highland violence as evidence that bears on the dispute rather than as decoration upon a settled view.

## I. The Colonial State in Postcolonial Clothing

### Integration and Its Asymmetries

The settlement that brought Northeast India into the Indian union rested on an asymmetry its framers did not name. The hill districts had been governed for half a century under regimes of administrative exclusion, the Inner Line of the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873 and the excluded and partially excluded areas of the Government of India Act of 1935, whose explicit purpose was to insulate the hills from the plains and which, in doing so, prevented the formation of the representative institutions through which a community might later negotiate its incorporation. The consequence was procedural as well as political: there were no hill representatives of consequence in the Constituent Assembly, and the Sixth Schedule, the constitutional instrument devised to accommodate tribal aspiration, was drafted for the hill communities rather than with them.

Sanjib Baruah's analysis of the region as a space of "durable disorder" describes the result as a governance equilibrium that produces neither integration nor open war but a managed and self-perpetuating instability (Baruah 2005). The description holds, but it can be pressed further than Baruah takes it. Where he locates the sources of durable disorder substantially in the practices of the contemporary democratic state, the equilibrium is better understood as colonial in its architecture: the Sixth Schedule's Autonomous District Councils were endowed with legislative competence over custom and land but denied the fiscal and police powers that would have made self-government substantive, so that they operated, in practice, as the conduits through which central authority reached communities it preferred not to govern directly. The Inner Line, retained without amendment from 1873, continued to constitute hill peoples as a protected and therefore segregated category. To call this integration is to misdescribe it. What the settlement produced was a territory simultaneously inside the republic and juridically distinct from it, attached to the centre by bonds more conditional than those binding any other citizens.

Udayon Misra's reading of the Naga national question established that the demand for self-determination possessed a historical and juridical coherence the Indian state declined to contest on its merits, opting instead for administrative accommodations such as the creation of Nagaland state in 1963 (Misra 1978). The point can be sharpened into a logic of substitution. Statehood was offered in place of the sovereignty that had been demanded; when statehood proved inadequate, emergency law was offered in place of negotiation. At each turn the state met a political claim with an administrative or coercive instrument, and the communities absorbed the difference as cost.

### AFSPA and the Permanent Emergency

The clearest specimen of the inheritance is the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act of 1958. Its lineage is documentary, not merely thematic. The wartime Armed Forces Special Powers Ordinance of 1942, by which the colonial government armed its officers against the Quit India movement, furnished the template; the Act of 1958 reproduced its essential design (Chasie and Hazarika 2009). That design has three load-bearing elements. Section 3 empowers the executive to designate any area a "disturbed area" on its own opinion that the use of armed force in aid of the civil power has become necessary. Section 4 then confers on officers, down to the rank of non-commissioned officer, the power to fire upon and kill, to arrest without warrant, and to destroy shelters and arms dumps. Section 6 bars any prosecution or suit against a person acting under the Act except with the prior sanction of the central government, extending that bar even to acts "purported to be done" under its authority. The structure is that of the colonial ordinance preserved intact: a discretionary declaration, a grant of lethal power, and an immunity that places the actor beyond the reach of ordinary law.

What converts this continuity from genealogy into argument is the reasoning by which the Supreme Court upheld the Act. In *Naga People's Movement of Human Rights v. Union of India*, decided in November 1997, a Constitution Bench unanimously sustained AFSPA, locating it not in the emergency provisions of Article 352, which it expressly distinguished, but in Article 355, the Union's standing duty to protect a state against internal disturbance (*Naga People's Movement of Human Rights v. Union of India* 1998). The distinction is decisive and is rarely read for what it accomplishes. By refusing to treat AFSPA as an emergency measure, the Court detached it from the temporal logic that defines emergency, the

logic of a suspension that must, in principle, end. Lodged in Article 355 rather than Article 352, the suspension of ordinary right becomes a permanent feature of ordinary administration, renewable in six-month increments without the constitutional ceremony that a declared emergency would require. This is the precise mechanism that Giorgio Agamben theorised under the name of the state of exception, the procedure by which the exceptional is normalised and installed as the durable infrastructure of rule over populations a state holds ungovernable by other means (Agamben 1998). The Court's own juridical move, not the conduct of the security forces alone, is what makes the exception permanent.

There is a constitutional irony here that the petitioners pressed and the Court set aside. AFSPA was enacted by a Parliament whose authority over the Naga Hills the Naga National Council had denied on the ground that no legislature elected without Naga participation could bind the Naga people. The Court treated this as a question of legislative competence under the Union List and answered it accordingly, never reaching the claim of consent that the Council had actually advanced. Murkot Ramunny, writing while the conflict was active, observed that the militarisation of the Naga Hills under the emergency regulations of the 1950s closed off the negotiation that might have produced a settlement before positions hardened (Ramunny 1979). This reading is consistent with the quantitative record: across the northeastern states between 1970 and 2007, relative deprivation together with sustained economic and political discrimination, rather than any disposition peculiar to the region's peoples, best predicts the onset of armed conflict (Vadlamannati 2011). A governance regime founded on designation, lethal discretion, and immunity is an efficient instrument for producing exactly the discrimination that such analyses identify as the proximate cause of revolt.

Kipgen's account of the federal question shows that successive governments construed every subsequent demand for genuine autonomy as latent secession, and so converted constitutional claims into security threats (Kipgen 2018). The mechanism is visible in the sequence: the constitutional promise of 1947, the declaration of Buddhism as the state religion in 1961 that the Christian Kachin and Chin read as a repudiation of Panglong's pluralism, and Ne Win's coup of 1962, which abolished the ethnic legislatures outright and inaugurated a programme of Burmanisation.

The parallel with Northeast India is structural, and it should not be overstated into identity. In both cases postcolonial state-making received communities that colonial governance had held in administrative suspension and, with modest constitutional revision, kept them there. But the Burmese trajectory was faster and more total than the Indian, and the difference is not captured by the shared inheritance alone. It is explained, as the third section argues, by the competitive geopolitics of the frontier and by the Cold War patronage that militarised western Burma more thoroughly than Delhi ever militarised the Northeast. The symmetry of form, in other words, is the beginning of the analysis and not its conclusion.

Seen together, the instruments of exception across the frontier compose a single colonial technology in three local variants. The Inner Line of 1873 sealed the Assam hills; the excluded and partially excluded areas of the 1935 Act and the separately administered Frontier Areas of Burma did the same work under other names; and the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation of 1900 sealed the hills of eastern Bengal. Each designated a hill population as a category apart, restricted the entry of outsiders, and replaced the ordinary law with administration by executive discretion. What the three postcolonial states inherited was therefore not three separate problems but one apparatus of rule, and the divergence in what they made of it, militarised emergency in India, Burmanising centralism in Burma, and settler demographic transformation in Bangladesh, is a divergence of application within a common form. The sections that follow trace how a single highland world, governed by one technology in three keys, attempted and failed to constitute itself politically against all three states at once.

## II. Proto-Federal Visions

### Phizo and Nagalim

The political project of the Naga National Council exceeded the administration of a single hill district from the outset. Angami Zapu Phizo, who assumed the Council's presidency in 1950, conceived it as the foundation of a polity that would reunite Naga communities whom colonial cartography had distributed across separate jurisdictions. The underground Naga Federal Government, established in 1956, and the "Yehzabo" constitution that accompanied it asserted sovereignty over Naga-speaking peoples on both sides of the line the British had drawn, and the concept of Nagalim, a greater Nagaland reaching into Manipur, Assam, and the

Sagaing region of Burma, named the territory to be recovered. The very possibility of claiming such a territory depended on a prior operation that David Vumlallian Zou and M. Satish Kumar describe as the objectification of the "geo-body" of the Northeast, the cartographic labour by which colonial survey fixed fluid frontiers into bounded space and invested them with territorial identity (Zou and Kumar 2011; cf. Thongchai 1994 on the geo-body of the nation). The insurgents inherited the map even as they repudiated the sovereignty it encoded, and the trans-border reach of Nagalim was a wager that the map could be redrawn from below.

This dependence on the colonial map points to a difficulty at the centre of the project, which Debojyoti Das has framed as constitutive of frontier nationalism. To claim sovereignty for the Naga people, the Council had first to specify who the Naga were, and that specification reproduced the colonial category "Naga," a label British administrators had imposed on dozens of distinct communities of the Patkai for convenience of governance. The nationalism that opposed the postcolonial state thus rested on a foundation the colonial state had laid, and Das concludes that the movement reproduced the colonial imagination of communities as "static, undifferentiated and homogeneous" (Das 2022). The conclusion is sound as genealogy and overdrawn as politics. That the category was colonial in origin does not establish that the movement was nothing more than its colonial origin, and the fourth section returns to this point; for now it is enough to register that Phizo did not merely inhabit the category "Naga" but converted it into a claim of sovereignty that no colonial administrator had contemplated. The trans-border dimension was operational as well as discursive. By the early 1970s Indian military pressure had pushed elements of the Naga Federal Army into the Kachin Hills, where the Kachin Independence Organization furnished training and arms, and the networks thus formed would later connect Assamese insurgents to the same Kachin facilities (Kotwal 2000). The international boundary, formally delimited only in 1967, remained in practice a permeable line that the movements crossed as necessity required.

### The Limits of Greater Mizoram

The Mizo rising of 1 March 1966 is frequently read as an ethnic secession, but its proximate cause was a documented failure of governance. Benjamin Holt's study of the conflict's origins locates the decisive moment in the Mautam famine of 1959, when the

cyclical flowering of bamboo triggered a rodent population explosion that destroyed the harvest, and the Indian administration's delayed and inadequate relief converted a subsistence crisis into a crisis of legitimacy (Holt 2022). Holt's contribution is to show that the Mizo National Front emerged from a famine relief organisation, and that its passage to arms was a response to demonstrable state indifference rather than the expression of a pre-existing separatism. What this leaves out is the horizon the Front set itself. Laldenga's conception of Greater Mizoram drew on the idiom of Mizo ó hnahtlak, the branches of the Mizo tree, to claim solidarity with Chin communities in Burma and Zo communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Willem van Schendel has shown that this was no romantic invention: the separation of Burma from India in 1937, and the subsequent partitions of 1947 and 1948, had divided a single Zo ethnolinguistic world across three administrations (van Schendel 2016). Zarzosanga's analysis identifies the resulting tension between a narrow programme of statehood for the Mizo Hills District and a pan-Zo federalism that sought to reverse those divisions (Zarzosanga 2021).

The settlement of 1986 resolved that tension by abandoning the wider horizon. The accord delivered statehood on the basis of the colonial administrative definition of "Mizo," and in doing so excluded both the Kuki communities that had fought alongside the Front and the Chin across the frontier who had belonged to its founding vision. Namrata Panwar's study of the Front explains its internal cohesion through the period of armed struggle (Panwar 2017b); what it leaves unexamined is that the same boundary which held the movement together also fixed the outer limit of what it could ultimately claim. Greater Mizoram contracted to Mizoram, a state whose borders reproduced the colonial district almost exactly. The colonial category was at once the resource that made mobilisation possible and the ceiling that the postcolonial state imposed on its ambition.

The fate of Greater Mizoram cannot be told within India alone, and the point at which it escapes the national frame is the war of 1971. The Front had operated from sanctuaries in East Pakistan, whose government found in the Mizo rebellion a serviceable instrument against India; when the Pakistani state collapsed in December 1971 and Bangladesh was born, that sanctuary vanished, and Laldenga's forces scattered into Burma and beyond (van Schendel 2016). The same war that closed the movement's eastern refuge opened, on the far side of the new

border, the wound from which the next highland insurgency would grow. For the hill peoples of the Chittagong Tracts, who shared with the Mizo the wider Zo world that all three states had partitioned, 1971 brought not liberation but a change of sovereign, and the state that inherited them proved less willing than its predecessor to tolerate their difference. The connection is not figurative. It is the same frontier, the same partitioned people, and a single chain of events running from a sanctuary lost in the Mizo Hills to a rebellion begun in the Chittagong hills.

### Chittagong: Exclusion Recycled

The Chittagong Hill Tracts furnish the starkest instance of the inheritance, because the reversal there was so rapid and so complete. The Tracts had been governed since 1900 under a special regulation that designated the region excluded, restricted Bengali settlement, and administered the hill communities under a separate legal order. Pakistan retained these arrangements in 1947, and Bangladesh retained them from Pakistan in 1971, but neither dismantled the structure so much as inverted its purpose. Syed Aziz-al Ahsan and Bhumitra Chakma demonstrate that the restrictions on settlement were progressively lifted while the protections for hill communities were allowed to lapse, so that the framework built to insulate the hills became the instrument of their demographic transformation, the state treating the Tracts as an underpopulated reserve for the relief of plains land hunger (Ahsan and Chakma 1989). The asymmetry, protections withdrawn and exclusions retained, is the same one identified in Northeast India, executed in reverse.

The insurgency that followed was set in motion by an act of national definition. The Bangladeshi constitution of 1972 proclaimed a unitary state, made Bengali the sole national language, and designated every citizen a Bengali, an imposition the hill peoples experienced as the legislative erasure of their existence. When a delegation led by Manabendra Narayan Larma asked the new republic to recognise the autonomy of the Tracts, the request was refused and the hill leaders were told to accept the Bengali identity (Ahsan and Chakma 1989). What the movement then demanded is the most economical statement of the whole frontier's predicament: its founding manifesto asked that a provision modelled on the Regulation of 1900, the very instrument of colonial exclusion, be written into the constitution as the guarantee of hill autonomy. The colonial cage had become, for the people it once confined, the only available language of protection. From this refusal

the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti was constituted under Larma's leadership, and its armed wing, the Shanti Bahini, took the field by 1977. Around it the movement built the category of Jumma identity, a pan-hill solidarity meant to supersede the distinctions of Chakma, Marma, and Tripura, a unity the colonial order had never supplied and that the movement had to construct from below. It did not consolidate. Jenneke Arens and Kirti Nishan Chakma, writing soon after the accord of 1997, observe that the settlement reproduced rather than dissolved the structural exclusions of the colonial hill administration, privileging the Chakma leadership and leaving other communities aggrieved (Arens and Chakma 2010). A solidarity built from below proved no more durable against the logic of particularism than the inherited categories it had set out to transcend, and the partition of the highlands reappeared, once again, inside the very movement that had formed to overcome it.

### III. The Archaeology of Factionalism

#### The Naga Split

There is a peculiar and painful irony in the trajectory of highland nationalism on the Indo-Burma frontier. The movements that began with the most expansive visions of trans-border community ended by producing the most intensely localized and internally violent ethno-nationalisms. The Naga Federal Government had imagined a sovereign state incorporating all Naga communities across the India-Burma border; by the 1990s, Naga armed factions were killing each other over the control of specific villages, the taxation of specific markets, and the political loyalties of specific sub-tribal communities. The Mizo National Front had aspired to reunite the Zo people divided across three nations; its 1986 settlement created a state whose borders reproduced the colonial administrative unit almost exactly. The Shanti Bahini had called for pan-hill Jumma solidarity; the 1997 accord was signed by Chakma leadership and left other hill communities feeling abandoned. Recent research increasingly suggests that such divisions cannot be viewed merely as ideological differences; rather, they have emerged from the interplay of historical anthropological classifications, post-colonial state-building processes, and the connection between ethnic identity and territory. Ashley South (2018) has shown that, as a result of ceasefire agreements in Myanmar's ethnically diverse border regions, broad-based nationalist movements often transform from being territory-centric into political entities. (South,

2018) On the other hand, according to Mary P. Callahan (2003), successive governments in Burma have reinforced rather than dismantled colonial and administrative divisions in the process of state-building. (Callahan, 2003) Similarly, Jelle Wouters (2023) notes that many contemporary conflicts in Northeast India revolve around territorial and administrative structures inherited from colonial rule, thereby complicating the interpretation of insurgent groups merely as consequences of post-independence political failures. (Wouters, 2023) In each case, the movement's political horizon contracted as it approached the postcolonial state, until what it had been able to claim was reduced to precisely the dimensions the state was willing to acknowledge. This contraction was not a failure of will. It was the structural consequence of negotiating with states that would only recognize political claims expressed in the administrative grammar they had inherited from colonialism: named, bounded, enumerated tribes residing within demarcated territories.

The fragmentation of the Naga movement provides the most extensively documented illustration. The Shillong Accord of 1975, signed by a faction of the NNC without the consent of Phizo's government-in-exile, split the movement along lines that would prove permanent. The National Socialist Council of Nagaland, formed in 1980 by Thuingaleng Muivah, Isak Chishi Swu, and S. S. Khapleng to continue armed struggle, itself divided in 1988 along lines that mapped uncomfortably precisely onto the colonial sub-tribal categories inscribed in administrative records since the nineteenth century. The NSCN-IM drew primarily on Tangkhul and other Naga communities with historical ties to Manipur; the NSCN-K drew more heavily on Konyak and Eastern Naga communities with historical ties to Burma. Namrata Panwar's study of faultlines within the Naga insurgency demonstrates that what presented itself as an ideological split over the terms of engagement with the Indian state was in practice a manifestation of sub-tribal rivalries that colonial administration had formalized and the postcolonial state had been unable to resolve (Panwar, 2017).

To understand the depth of this fracture, it is necessary to appreciate what the NSCN's founding manifesto had originally claimed. The 1980 declaration asserted an "unquestionable sovereign right" over a unified Naga homeland stretching across four Indian states and into western Myanmar. It was a document written in the language of decolonization and international self-determination, invoking the UN Charter and the principle of peoples' right to sovereignty. The

1988 split did not produce two movements with competing visions of that sovereignty. It produced two armed factions competing for the same limited pool of recruits, revenue, and territorial control, each willing to kill the other's cadres in disputes whose immediate causes had more to do with the specific political economies of particular valleys and the community loyalties of particular commanders than with any question of principle. Ahu Sakhrie, writing in the *Morung Express* in 2007, identified this degeneration with unflinching clarity: the initial proclamation of pan-Naga unity had been "negated by subsequent afterquarrels" that "converted rebels into internecine enemies" (Sakhrie, 2007). What colonial administrative classification had partially managed by naming, categorizing, and separating, the insurgent movements completed among themselves.

### ULFA and the Assamese Political Subject

The United Liberation Front of Assam, founded in 1979 and moving into active insurgency through the 1980s, represents a different but structurally analogous case. ULFA's founding charter framed its demands in terms of land, identity, and economic resources for the indigenous people of Assam, constructing "Assamese" as a *de facto* ethnic category threatened by Bengali migration from Bangladesh and by the extractive economic relationship between Assam and the Indian center. Sanjib Baruah's 1994 analysis shows that this project was shaped from its inception by the colonial construction of Assam as a distinct administrative unit whose tea, oil, and timber resources the colonial economy had systematically exported while leaving the valley's own population without proportionate development (Baruah, 1994). However, recent research suggests that the rise of Assamese nationalism cannot be explained solely within the framework of colonial administrative boundaries. According to Uddipana Goswami (2014), post-colonial economic marginalization, the federal structure of Assam, and the Indian state's failure to address regional aspirations played equally significant roles in shaping the ideology of ULFA. Similarly, Subir Bhaumik (2009) has emphasized the extraction of natural resources, demographic changes, and prolonged militarization in the context of sustaining insurgent activities and mass mobilization.

The fracturing of ULFA followed the pattern that had become characteristic of frontier movements. A surrendered ULFA emerged in 1992 after a group of leaders made separate terms with Delhi, splitting

the movement along lines of negotiating position that quickly hardened into mutual hostility. The movement divided again in 2011 into the pro-talks faction of Arabinda Rajkhowa and the hardline ULFA-Independent of Paresh Baruah. Arup Kumar Deka's account of ULFA and the peace process shows that the colonial administrative heritage of Assam as a plural territory containing multiple communities with distinct and sometimes competing relationships to the state consistently undermined the movement's efforts to construct a unified "Assamese" political subject capable of sustaining a coherent negotiating position (Deka, 2006). Researchers have offered various perspectives regarding the fragmentation of ULFA. Sajal Nag (2018) posits that the internal divisions within the movement were not merely the result of a colonial administrative legacy; rather, they were driven by the combined impact of a protracted armed struggle and shifting regional political dynamics. Similarly, Udayon Misra (2014) argues that the concept of Assamese identity has consistently been a subject of internal debate, given the vast disparities in the historical experiences vis-à-vis the state of the linguistic, ethnic, and religious groups comprising it. Viewed from this perspective, the internal fragmentation of ULFA signifies more than just the persistence of colonial-era stratifications; it also reveals the inherent complexities of forging an inclusive political community in a region characterized by the coexistence of multiple, overlapping identities. The identity was real enough as lived experience; it was insufficiently coherent as a political platform to survive the pressures of sustained insurgency and the selective offers of accommodation that the Indian state deployed with considerable skill.

### Trans-Border Networks

One of the most significant and consistently underestimated dimensions of the insurgencies of this period is their trans-border operational character. The frontier that the postcolonial states insisted was a fixed and permanent international boundary was, in the lived practice of the movements that resisted those states, a highly permeable zone of circulation. The ULFA's earliest contacts for training and weapons were facilitated by Naga intermediaries who had developed operational relationships with the Kachin Independence Organization during the preceding decade. The KIO had trained Naga militants on the India-Burma border in the 1970s; those Naga networks connected ULFA to Kachin facilities in the 1980s; by the 1990s a complex web of trans-border

relationships linked insurgent organizations across the India-Burma-Bangladesh frontier in a geography of armed resistance that no single national security apparatus could fully interdict (Kotwal, 2000; Nath, n.d.).

These networks are significant not merely as security facts but as evidence of a persistent highland solidarity that the colonial and postcolonial partitioning of the frontier had suppressed but not destroyed. They were also shaped by the Cold War international order in ways that complicate any purely domestic reading of the insurgencies. The Naga insurgents received weapons and training from East Pakistan and subsequently from China in the 1960s. The Mizo National Front received Pakistani support during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, when alignment between Pakistani strategic interests and Mizo separatist ambitions created a temporary convergence that Laldenga exploited without being controlled by it. The Kachin Independence Organization received Chinese support through the 1970s and 1980s, as Beijing's policy of supporting armed ethnic and communist organizations in Burma served its regional strategic interests. These entanglements shaped the weapons available, the alliances possible, and the negotiating positions of all parties. They also gave postcolonial states powerful rhetorical resources for delegitimizing insurgent demands as instruments of foreign interference rather than expressions of genuine political aspiration. The insurgencies of the Indo-Burma frontier were simultaneously local, regional, and global in their conditions and their consequences, and any account that treats them as purely domestic phenomena will miss a dimension essential to understanding why they took the forms they did.

James C. Scott's analysis of Zomia provides the theoretical framework for understanding why highland solidarity persisted across the borders that states drew and redrew. The highland communities of mainland Southeast Asia, Scott argues, had organized their social and political life for centuries around the capacity to maintain relationships across state boundaries, to keep themselves mobile, legible to their own communities and illegible to lowland administrators, and to absorb outsiders while retaining the flexibility to dissolve apparent solidarities when circumstances changed (Scott, 2009). The postcolonial insurgencies of the twentieth century were not, on this reading, the beginning of political consciousness among communities that colonialism had awakened from timeless pre-political existence. They were the transformation

of a very old politics of evasion into a politics of direct confrontation, forced by the condition of total territorial enclosure that made the older strategy of flight across uncontrolled highlands no longer available.

#### IV. Reading the Frontier Whole

The argument of the preceding sections points toward a methodological imperative that the paper has been building toward from its opening pages. The scholarly literature on the Indo-Burma frontier remains, with important exceptions, enclosed within national categories that reproduce the very divisions it claims to analyze. Indian historians write about the Northeast as a problem of Indian national integration. Burmese historians write about the Frontier Areas as a problem of Burmese nation-building. Bangladeshi scholars examine the Chittagong Hill Tracts in the context of Bengali national politics. Each of these framings produces genuinely valuable scholarship. But taken separately or together, they cannot account for the reality of frontier politics as actually lived, because the communities who lived that politics have never recognized the national borders as the primary units of their world. The scholarly silo is a methodological inheritance from the colonial administrative silo, and it carries the same limitations. This critique is part of a broader shift in scholarship away from methodological nationalism and towards an inter-state and borderlands perspective. Scholars such as Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan (2012) argue that international borders should be understood not merely as territorial boundaries but as socially constructed spaces where sovereignty is constantly negotiated through everyday activities. These arguments provide a crucial methodological foundation for the present study and suggest that the India-Burma border should be situated within the context of broader comparative research on borderlands, rather than being treated as an exceptional case. (Donnan, 2012)

Willem van Schendel's body of work has done most to challenge this inherited framework. His study of the Bengal borderland demonstrates that communities along the India-Bangladesh frontier have maintained cross-border economic, kinship, and political relationships that state authorities have consistently attempted and consistently failed to suppress (van Schendel, 2005). His collaborative study of the Chittagong Hill Tracts as a living borderland shows that the hill communities of the CHT cannot be understood within any single national framework because their cultural and

historical connections run simultaneously into India, Burma, and Bangladesh (van Schendel, Mey, and Dewan, 2000). Most strikingly, his analysis of the Mizo role in the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 reveals a dimension of that conflict entirely invisible from within either Indian or Bangladeshi national historiography: Mizo insurgents crossed into East Pakistan during the liberation war, some fighting alongside the Mukti Bahini, others pursuing the MNF's own agenda of extending its influence into Zo communities on the Bangladeshi side of the frontier (van Schendel, 2016). A history of the 1971 war that does not include this dimension is not simply incomplete. It is organized around the wrong unit of analysis. Van Schendel's work has inspired a broad stream of research that challenges the notion of the 'nation-state' as the standard unit of historical analysis. For instance, Reece Jones (2016) argues that borders do not exist as static geopolitical realities but are constantly being constructed through political practices. In other words, when writing the history of borderlands, greater importance should be placed on the lived experiences of the people inhabiting these regions rather than on the conventional, state-centric concepts found in traditional historiography.

Jelle Wouters's recent work on colonial lines and postcolonial conflicts in Northeast India argues that the artificial administrative boundaries drawn by British administrators between communities that had previously interacted fluidly continue to structure political conflict in ways that bear no relationship to actual cultural or historical divisions (Wouters, 2023). Lipokmar Dzuvichu's analysis of territoriality and state-making practices on the Northeast frontier shows that the British project of mapping and classifying the hills was a fundamental transformation of the spatial and political order of highland life, and that postcolonial governments inherited its effects without adequately acknowledging their origin (Dzuvichu, 2024). What both scholars point toward is the need for a historiography that takes the hill communities themselves as its starting point rather than the states that claim sovereignty over them, and that reads the colonial and postcolonial transformation of those communities in terms adequate to what they experienced rather than in terms adequate to what the states wished to manage.

What a genuinely transnational historiography of the Indo-Burma frontier would require is not simply the aggregation of existing national scholarship but a reconceptualization of its fundamental categories. The relevant communities are not the national

minorities that states have recognized but the ethnolinguistic networks that colonial cartography divided. The relevant archives are not those of India, Burma, and Bangladesh considered separately but their holdings read in relation to each other, alongside the oral histories, community records, and counter-archival materials that hill communities have produced. The relevant questions are not "how did the Indian state manage the Naga insurgency?" or "why did the Burmese state fail to implement the Panglong Agreement?" but rather more fundamental ones: what was the character of political life in this highland world before states insisted on dividing it, what happened to that political life when the divisions arrived and intensified, and what kinds of political imagination did highland communities develop in response to the conditions of total enclosure that postcolonial state-making created? These questions cannot be answered from within any national historiography. Taken as a whole, these evolutions in historical scholarship point to the need for a new and broader perspective in the study and analysis of the India-Burma border region. The significance of this article is not limited merely to a comparative review of the experiences of three countries; rather, it demonstrates that the region's protracted political conflicts were essentially inter-state in nature.

### Zomia and Its Critics

To read the frontier whole is not to adopt any single theory of it, and the theory leaned on most heavily here has itself been seriously contested. The concept of Zomia, proposed by van Schendel and elaborated by Scott, has drawn a body of criticism that has to be confronted rather than circumvented. Victor Lieberman, in a detailed review essay, charged that Scott's account rests on selectively read and largely non-vernacular sources, that it overstates both the coherence of upland flight and the extractive reach of the lowland states from which highlanders supposedly fled, and that several of its specific historical claims do not survive scrutiny (Lieberman 2010). Sara Shneiderman, writing in the same forum, questioned whether the Himalayan communities routinely folded into Zomia in fact belong there, and drew attention to the political consequences of imposing the category from outside, since it can flatten distinctions the communities themselves treat as fundamental (Shneiderman 2010). Tom Brass pressed the sharpest objection: the romance of the state-repelling zone of refuge is not supported by the ethnographic record, in which highlanders were frequently pushed off valley land rather than

choosing the hills, were not in fact beyond the reach of lowland states, and lived within relations of unfree labour, debt bondage, and inter-ethnic violence that the celebration of mobile and egalitarian autonomy conveniently omits (Brass 2012; see also the survey in Michaud 2010).

These criticisms do not dissolve the case for a connected reading of the frontier, but they discipline it, and that discipline is exactly what the third section above supplies. The relational insight at the core of the Zomia literature, that highlands and lowlands must be understood in relation to one another, survives the critique. What does not survive is the romance: the assumption that highland society was innately egalitarian, that highland mobility was always voluntary, and that highland resistance was morally transparent. The factional violence documented above, the killings between rival Naga commands, the abandonment of the wider Zo and Jumma solidarities at the moment of settlement, is exactly the intra-highland conflict that the idealising versions of Zomia suppress, and it is offered here not as an embarrassment to be explained away but as central evidence. Read in this light, Brass's objection is not an obstacle to the argument but its confirmation, and the frontier emerges as a zone whose connectedness is real and whose internal politics were frequently hierarchical and violent.

### Construction and Agency

A parallel discipline must be applied to the thesis of colonial construction. That the categories Naga, Mizo, and Jumma were colonial in origin is established by the work of Das, Wouters, and Dzuvichu, and the argument so far has taken it as established. But the strong form of the thesis, in which these identities are simply imposed upon passive populations, cannot accommodate the agency that the highlanders plainly exercised, and it is contradicted by the evidence assembled here. Guyot-Réchar'd's demonstration that Himalayan populations could observe rival states and choose between them is, among other things, a demonstration of agency at the very site where the construction thesis locates passivity (Guyot-Réchar'd 2016). The historical record points to a reciprocal process rather than a unilateral one. The colonial state supplied the names, the boundaries, and the census categories; highland actors took those materials and made of them something their authors had neither intended nor foreseen. Phizo did not merely inherit "Naga"; he transformed it into a sovereign claim. Laldenga did not merely accept "Mizo"; he stretched it, through the idiom of

the branches of the Mizo tree, toward a solidarity that exceeded any administrative unit. The Shanti Bahini did not inherit "Jumma" at all; it built the category from below. To say that these movements were constrained by colonial categories is exact. To say they were nothing but those categories mistakes a genealogy for a verdict, and discards the political creativity that is the reason the movements repay study. The nationalisms of the frontier were neither inventions of empire nor survivals of a precolonial order. They were made in the encounter between the two, and a transnational historiography adequate to them must hold both halves of that proposition at once.

### Conclusion

By 2000 the major insurgencies had been brought to negotiation or to exhaustion, yet the structures that produced them remained intact: AFSPA renewed each year as a matter of routine, the Sixth Schedule councils confined to the powers the inheritance had allotted them, the demographic transformation of the hills proceeding, and across the international boundary a Burmese counterinsurgency that has, if anything, deepened since the coup of 2021 (International Crisis Group 2025). The exceptional governance of highland peoples did not end with the century; it was normalised. The lesson is not that the insurgencies were futile. Their grievances were specific and documented, and their leaders argued from premises that deserve to be read as contributions to the theory of political community rather than catalogued as symptoms of ethnic pathology. What defeated them was less the force of the state than the categories through which they were compelled to make their case, categories that the state alone could ratify and that it ratified only at the dimension colonial administration had already drawn.

The decisive qualification, established against the scholarship in the fourth section, is that this inheritance constrained the movements without wholly authoring them. Highland actors reworked the categories they were handed into claims their colonial authors could not have imagined, the invention Homi Bhabha located in the third space of hybridity (Bhabha 1994), even as the horizontal violence Frantz Fanon diagnosed among colonised peoples turned that invention inward into fratricide (Fanon 1961). To read the frontier whole is therefore neither to recover a romance of resistance nor to reduce its peoples to artefacts of empire. It is to recognise that the national silo, like the colonial

category before it, is an instrument of a particular kind of power, and that a history adequate to the highland arc from Nagaland to the Arakan must be written through the experience of the communities that lived, resisted, fractured, and imagined across the lines the states drew.

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