2. The Kashmir Conflict in the 21st Century from the Perspective of Confronting Theories of Geopolitics and the Narratives of the War on Terror and the Clash of Civilizations

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Abstract

This article analyzes the Kashmir conflict within the broader dynamics of South Asian geopolitics and contemporary international relations. It applies two contrasting traditions of geopolitical theory—the Anglo-American and the Continental—together with their respective narratives, the Global War on Terror and the Clash of Civilizations, to examine the multilayered structures of conflict. From the Anglo-American perspective, South Asia functions as a strategic bridgehead projecting into the Indian Ocean, with Kashmir situated at the fault line between sea power and land power. By contrast, the Continental framework views South Asia as a civilizational flashpoint where Hindu, Islamic, and Chinese spheres intersect. The 2025 armed confrontation between India and Pakistan highlighted these dynamics: India framed its retaliatory strikes as counterterrorism measures aligned with the logic of the Global War on Terror, while Pakistan leveraged civilizational rhetoric and international sympathy, particularly from Islamic states, consistent with the Clash of Civilizations narrative. Despite India's demographic and economic preeminence, its efforts to consolidate control over Kashmir continue to face asymmetric resistance and limited global support. The study concludes that South Asia's geopolitical "awkwardness" in the multipolar world makes the Kashmir conflict not only a regional dispute but also a site of enduring global significance.

Keywords: Kashmir conflict, South Asian geopolitics, Anglo-American vs. Continental geopolitics, Global War on Terror, Clash of Civilizations

1. Introduction

What theoretical framework of international relations can best explain conflicts in South Asia, such as the Kashmir conflict? The growing importance of South Asia in global politics calls for an examination of the region's conflicts through the broader lens of international relations theory. This paper seeks to provide a perspective for analyzing the multilayered structures of conflict in the region. Even traditional approaches to describing the nature of the Kashmir conflict—such as the concept of "protracted social conflict"—are intended to illuminate its complexity.[1]

This article does not necessarily present a comprehensive picture of the multilayered structures of conflicts in South Asia. "Kashmir Studies" has recently drawn a wide range of historical, sociological and cultural explorations in addition to analysis of political affairs in and around Jammu and Kashmir.[2] This article does not necessarily defy such an enormous amount of work across many other fields. However, it seeks to explore the complexity of understanding the nature of such conflicts as the Kashmir conflict from multiple perspectives, given the multiplicity of interests among a wide range of both internal and external stakeholders.

It attempts to do so by applying the "two traditions of geopolitical theory"—the Anglo-American tradition and the Continental tradition—together with their respective linkages to two grand narratives

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[1] See, for instance, Debidatta Aurobinda Mahapatra, *Conflict Management in Kashmir: State-People Relations and Peace* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 28-29.

[2] See, among others, Ankur Datta, On Uncertain Ground: Displaced Kashmiri Pandits in Jammu and Kashmir (Oxford University Press, 2017); Chitralekha Zutshi, *Kashmir's Contested Pasts: Narratives, Sacred Geographies, and the Historical Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 2014); and Chitralekha Zutshi (ed.), *Kashmir: History, Politics, Representation* (Cambridge University Press, 2018); Haley Duschinski, Mona Bhan, Ather Zia, and Cynthia Mahmood (eds.), *Resisting Occupation in Kashmir* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018); and Mona Bhan, Haley Duschinski, and Deepti Misri (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Critical Kashmir Studies* (Routledge, 2023).

of the 21st century: the Global War on Terror and the Clash of Civilizations.[3] The former presents a worldview rooted in the dichotomy between sea power and land power, with particular emphasis on the concept of the "rimland," including strategic "bridgeheads."[4] The article suggests that the narrative of the Global War on Terror was advanced primarily by the sea-power proponents of the Anglo-American tradition of geopolitics. By contrast, the Continental tradition emphasizes a perspective grounded in the multipolarity of civilizational zones, each dominated by regional hegemons, and corresponding to the narrative of the Clash of Civilizations in the 21st century.

From the Anglo-American viewpoint, the Indian peninsula appears as a strategically vital bridgehead projecting into the Indian Ocean. In contrast, the Continental perspective views South Asia as a flashpoint where civilizational zones collide, with India representing a distinct Hindu civilizational sphere surrounded by Islamic and Chinese counterparts.

This article focuses on the Kashmir conflict as a critical case study to examine South Asia through the application of these contrasting geopolitical paradigms.

2. The Geopolitical Perspective on the Kashmir Conflict

The eruption of armed confrontation between India and Pakistan in 2025 was another episode in the long history of their conflict over Kashmir. While the tense relationship between the two countries over the Kashmir issue has remained constant, the 2025 incident also reflected the changing nature of the world in the 21st century. The terrorist attack against civilians—specifically tourists—in Kashmir diverged from the traditional pattern in which armed attacks were directed mainly against government

[3] See Introduction. See also Hideaki Shinoda, *Confronting Theories of Geopolitics* (Sringer, 2025 forthcoming); and Hideaki Shinoda, *The Geopolitics of War* (Kodansha, 2023) (in Japanese).
[4] Halford J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History" and "Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction", in Halford J. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction* (National Defense University Press, 1942); Nicholas J. Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power*; with a new introduction by Francis P. Sempa (Archon Books, 1970, c1942); and Nicholas J. Spykman, T*he Geography of the Peace*, edited by Helen R. Nicholl; with an introduction by Frederick Sherwood Dunn; (Archon Books, 1969, c1944).

facilities and personnel, if not purely military targets. India emphasized that the incident constituted a heinous terrorist attack on civilians. Pakistan, however, secured favorable positions from key neighboring countries—China, Iran, and Turkey—in response to India's strikes on Pakistani territory. On May 7, India launched attacks reportedly targeting terrorist facilities, to which Pakistan retaliated. After several days of armed clashes, the two sides reached a ceasefire agreement on May 10.

China, Iran, and other states, including the United States, undertook mediation efforts, while neither international organizations such as the United Nations nor regional bodies like SAARC played any role. This stands in contrast with patterns observed in other conflict-prone regions, such as Africa. The episode suggests that the Kashmir conflict must be understood in the contemporary context of international relations.

The fact that India—a nuclear-armed country with a population of 1.43 billion and the world's third-largest economy by GDP (PPP)—repeatedly collides militarily with another nuclear power of 240 million people carries major implications for the structure of global politics. India is poised to become the world's third-largest economy by nominal GDP and can rightly be regarded as a 21st-century great power. Yet Pakistan is able to attract support from states wary of India's growing influence, particularly Islamic countries. Against the backdrop of escalating crises in the Middle East—most notably the Gaza conflict—Pakistan has been strengthening its ties with the Islamic world. Thus, while the Kashmir conflict remains a traditional territorial dispute between two regional rivals, it also carries broader global implications.

To analyze these dynamics, this article illustrates two trends in 21st-century international relations that contextualize the conflict in South Asia. The first is the Global War on Terror, advanced by the sea-power proponents of the Anglo-American tradition of geopolitics. The responses of the United States and its allies to the 9/11 terrorist attacks fundamentally altered the landscape of international relations. Large-scale military retaliations against terrorist attacks—particularly those targeting civilians—came to be justified, albeit often controversially. The 2025 terrorist attack in Kashmir created a similar context: India insisted that its military operations against installations in Pakistani territory were legitimate responses to terrorism.

The second trend can be explained through the worldview of the Clash of Civilizations, which corresponds to the Continental tradition of geopolitics. Against the globalist narrative of the "End of History" as the triumph of liberal democracy, Samuel Huntington advanced the thesis of civilizational clashes in the 1990s—a perspective that has since gained wide currency.[5] In the 2025 confrontation, Pakistan insisted that it bore no responsibility for the attack conducted by a non-state actor, and that India's large-scale retaliation was unjustifiable. This stance won Pakistan broad international support, particularly among Islamic states. Implicitly, Pakistan suggested that India had exploited the terrorist attack to provoke a wider civilizational conflict between Hindu nationalism and Islam.

China, embroiled in its own territorial disputes with India in Kashmir, nearly backed Pakistan's position as a way to balance India's rising power. Notably, even the United States sought to maintain neutrality, with US President Donald Trump reportedly mediating the conflict in a manner Pakistan accepted but India did not. Despite its superior military and economic capacity, India struggled to garner international backing.

The track record of military interventions by the United States and its allies in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere in the history of the Global War on Terror has produced few positive outcomes. Moreover, the ongoing tragedy in Gaza, stemming from Israel's devastating military response to the October 7, 2023 terrorist attack, has further undermined the credibility of justifying large-scale military operations as counter-terrorism measures. India remains one of the few countries to sustain stable relations with Israel despite widespread criticism of its actions in Gaza and the West Bank.

In short, despite India's superior power and its de facto appeal to the logic of the Global War on Terror, Pakistan effectively leveraged anti-India sentiment and broader resistance to globalist agendas, including large-scale counterterrorist campaigns. This interplay between the two competing narratives—aligned with the Anglo-American and Continental traditions of geopolitics—offers a valuable lens for examining the Kashmir conflict in both its regional specificity and its global significance

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[5] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2002). See also Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, c1992).

in contemporary international relations.

3. The Indian Subcontinent as a Bridgehead in the Great Game

The Kashmir conflict originated as a territorial dispute following the independence of India and Pakistan from the British Empire in 1947. When the decision was made to separate Hindus and Muslims into distinct nations, the issue of territorial demarcation remained unresolved, producing a dispute that has persisted for nearly eighty years. Yet the conflict should not be viewed solely through this territorial lens—it warrants consideration from a broader geopolitical perspective.

The common explanation, often repeated, is that during British colonial rule the Princely State of Jammu and Kashmir (1846–1947) was established after the fall of the Mughal Empire. At the time of partition, the Hindu Maharaja of the state expressed allegiance to India, but since the majority of the population was Muslim, conflict ensued.

This interpretation, however, is overly simplistic. Historical evidence indicates that the Muslim population did not necessarily favor incorporation into Pakistan; many peasants, in fact, preferred stability as "mostly status quoist".[6] Meanwhile, the Maharaja initially sought to preserve independence, joining neither India nor Pakistan.[7] That plan collapsed when tribal Pashtun fighters from Pakistan invaded northern Jammu and Kashmir, threatening the safety of residents. In response, the Maharaja sought Indian military support and formally acceded to the Indian Union.

The invasion by Pashtun tribesmen was likely intended either to compel the state to join Pakistan or, at minimum, to establish Muslim control over the territory. Although the Pakistani government did not officially command the attack, it is widely believed that Pakistan unofficially mobilized the fighters to secure incorporation of the princely state or to assert Muslim dominance.

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[6] Idrees Kanth, "Peasant Imaginaries and 'Kashimiri Nationalism'" in Mona Bhan, Haley Duschinski, and Deepti Misri (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Critical Kashmir Studies* (Routledge, 2023), p. 32.
[7] There was a rise of nationalist movement to address Kashmir as a nation in early 20th century. See Chitralekha Zutshi, *Kashmir* (Oxford University Press, 2019), Chapter 5.

At that time, violent unrest was sweeping across the Indian subcontinent. Hundreds of thousands perished in partition-related riots, and millions were displaced as refugees. In such a volatile environment, the Maharaja's aspiration for a neutral, independent state bridging Hindus and Muslims became virtually impossible.

The Pashtun tribesmen who invaded Jammu and Kashmir came from Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province—now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa—which borders Afghanistan. Since 2018, this province has incorporated the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), once a stronghold of the Taliban.[8] During the years of U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) frequently became the site of counterterrorism operations targeting the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

The Pashtuns, the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, inhabit areas straddling the Afghanistan–Pakistan border. This border, known as the Durand Line, was drawn by the British Empire under an 1893 agreement with the Afghan king. Because neither Afghanistan nor Pakistan officially recognizes it, the artificial division of Pashtun territory remains a persistent source of tension.

The Durand Line was originally established to prevent hostile forces from invading British India via Afghanistan. It is closely tied to the 19th-century Great Game, in which Britain and Russia fiercely competed for influence in Central Asia. From this perspective, Kashmir is not merely a local territorial issue but part of a broader geopolitical contest.

Through British colonial administration, the Anglo-American geopolitical framework—marked by the confrontation between sea power and land power—was implanted in the Indian subcontinent as a strategic "bridgehead" into Eurasia. Kashmir, positioned at the base of this bridgehead, cannot be disentangled from this larger context.

4. Understanding the Kashmir Conflict in the Context of the War on Terror

[8] See, for instance, Mohita Bhatia, *Rethinking Conflict at the Margins: Dalits and Border and Hindus in Jammu and Kashmir* (Cambridge University Press, 2020). pp. 80.

The Resistance Front (TRF), which claimed responsibility for the April 22 Pahalgam terrorist attack, is widely regarded as a faction of Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), an Islamist militant group based in Pakistan whose name means “Army of the Pious”. LeT was formed during the Cold War, initially to support the mujahideen—Islamist fighters resisting Soviet and Afghan government forces, in Afghanistan. At the time, the United States supplied the mujahideen with weapons and other assistance, enabling them to resist Soviet advances. These circumstances illustrate how the structure of the Great Game evolved into the Cold War and shaped the dynamics of Afghanistan.

Following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, elements of the mujahideen reportedly flowed into Kashmir. From this point onward, the character of armed struggle in Kashmir began to change, marked by an increase in radicalized, terror-based tactics. Organizations such as the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), which had previously spearheaded anti-India movements for independence, lost influence to more militant groups like Jaish-e-Mohammed and LeT.

By the late 1990s, the Taliban—largely composed of Pashtun fighters and backed by Pakistan—had gained de facto control over nearly all of Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda also began operating from Afghan territory, transforming the region spanning northern Pakistan and Afghanistan into a hub of terrorist activity. After the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, this area became the undisputed frontline of the Global War on Terror.

During this period, India quietly extended substantial support to the U.S.-backed Afghan government, avoiding overt actions that might provoke Pakistan. Nevertheless, India’s involvement was widely recognized as strategically significant. The collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in 2021 therefore came as a major shock to New Delhi.

Unlike the United States, however, India cannot simply withdraw from the region. Whereas Washington may choose to disengage from the frontline of the Global War on Terror, India must continue to confront Islamist militant groups operating nearby. In this sense, India’s conflict with Pakistan—a state aligned with Islamist forces—can increasingly be framed within the broader logic of the Global War on Terror.

5. The Context of the Global War on Terror

Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) is widely regarded as having been involved in past terrorist incidents inside India. That said, however, large-scale attacks on civilians in Kashmir have been relatively rare. Historically, where both sides' militaries were deployed, targets tended to be military personnel or at least government entities, facilities, and organizations. For example, the 2019 attack—described by India as a terrorist act—was a suicide bombing in which a vehicle laden with explosives rammed an Indian security convoy, killing about forty personnel.

More traditional anti-India groups such as the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) pursued independence for Kashmir. However, beginning around 1989—after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, when mujahideen fighters reportedly flowed into Pakistan—terrorist tactics escalated. Groups such as Jaish-e-Mohammed, which claimed responsibility for the 2019 attack, expanded alongside LeT from the late 1980s. Their cadres are said to have consisted mainly of Pakistanis and Arabs rather than local Kashmiris.

Even so, mass terror attacks against civilians remained relatively uncommon, partly because the majority of residents in India-administered Jammu and Kashmir were Muslims. If one asks why this pattern has shifted in recent years, one answer lies in demographic change.

In 2019, the Indian government revoked Article 370 of the Constitution, stripping Jammu and Kashmir of its "special status" and reorganizing it into the Union Territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh. Since residents of other Indian states were now granted the right to acquire land, settle, and seek employment there, observers argue that demographic change has accelerated through the promotion of Hindu settlement.

There has long been a significant disparity in national power between India and Pakistan. India has a population of roughly 1.43 billion, compared with Pakistan's 240 million. The economic gap has widened as India has enjoyed remarkable growth while Pakistan has stagnated. In 2023, India's nominal GDP per capita stood at $2,480, compared with Pakistan's $1,365—nearly a two-to-one ratio. Until 2005, Pakistan's per capita GDP was actually higher, but since India overtook it twenty years ago, the gap has

steadily grown. In total nominal GDP, India's $3.57 trillion dwarfs Pakistan's $338 billion—nearly tenfold. Furthermore, India has benefited from the stability of the Modi administration, while Pakistan has faced mounting political turbulence. Against this backdrop, India has pursued a more assertive Kashmir policy under the banner of "fighting terrorism."

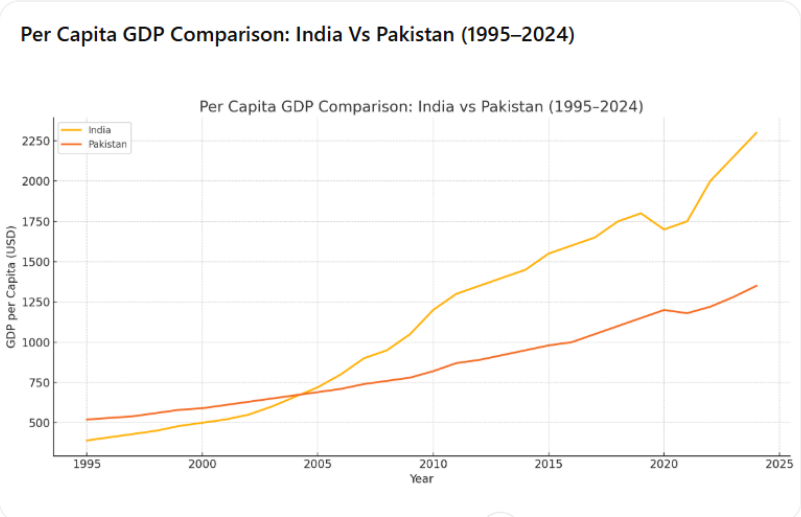

Figure 1: India and Pakistan—Nominal GDP per Capita (1960–2023)[9]

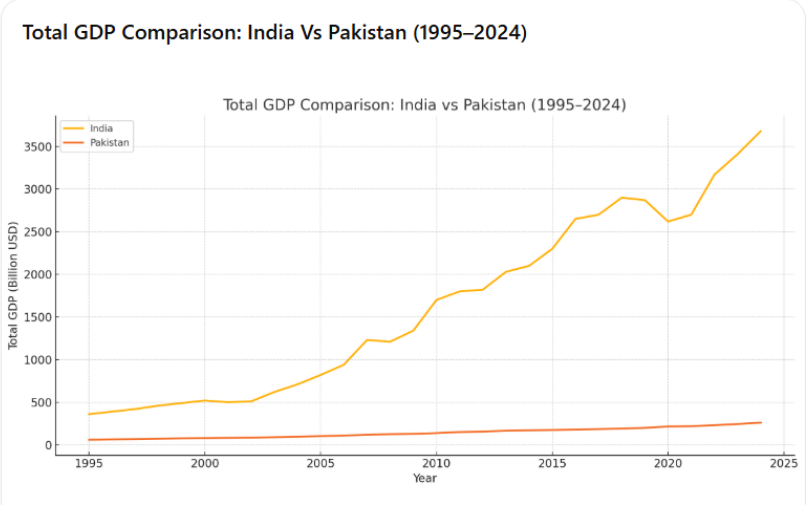

Figure 2: India and Pakistan—Nominal GDP (1960–2023)[10]

With this overwhelming advantage in national power, India has intensified its efforts to eliminate

[9] Created by the Author, based on data provided by the IMF, https://www.imf.org/en/home.
[10] Created by the Author, based on data provided by the IMF, https://www.imf.org/en/home.

terrorist organizations and consolidate its governance in Jammu and Kashmir. In line with this domestic strategy, India has also pursued an active diplomatic campaign, fostering close ties with Israel and maintaining cooperative relations with the United States. As the dominant power in South Asia, India is not only addressing the Kashmir issue domestically but also positioning itself on the frontline of the global War on Terror against Islamist extremism.

Given the stark demographic and economic disparity, Pakistan's overall national power is clearly inferior. Economic stagnation has been accompanied by growing political instability. The military's influence has expanded, yet rifts among elites are evident—for example, illustrated by the arrest of a former ISI director general, retired Lieutenant-General Faiz Hameed, allied with former Prime Minister Imran Khan, who himself remains imprisoned on corruption charges. From the standpoint of deflecting public discontent outward, confronting India over Kashmir offers a quick means of stirring national sentiment.

Pakistan is not passively accepting its imbalance with India. During India's military operations, Islamabad sought international sympathy by portraying India as blurring the line between terrorist groups and the Pakistani state. In practice, it seems to be the case that the power asymmetry has incentivized anti-Indian forces to escalate asymmetric tactics, including terrorist attacks targeting civilian tourists. Such actions are designed to provoke India, create crises, and draw attention from Muslim-majority countries—including neighboring Iran—as well as major powers such as China. As the weaker party in bilateral terms, Pakistan is naturally more motivated to rally international support.

Currently, backlash against what is perceived as Hindu "settlement" has further increased the incentive for forces aligned with Pakistan to target civilians through terrorism. Pakistan is likely to continue waging asymmetric or limited warfare in order to attract support from Islamic countries and China. By contrast, India—long a champion of "non-alignment"—often acts unilaterally; in recent years, however, its perceived alignment with Israel has made it unpopular in parts of the Islamic world. There have been discourses of analogy between India's "occupation" of Kashmir and Israel's occupation of the

Palestine territories, and the former may be even called "Indian settler/colonial sovereignty".[11] Even so, it is also true that few states wish to adopt openly hostile stances toward a rapidly rising India aspiring to become the world's third great power in the 21st century. Moreover, India anyway maintains links with China and Iran through organizations such as BRICS and the SCO.

Given current trends, this dynamic is likely to persist, with the gap between India and Pakistan continuing to widen. The Kashmir conflict will proceed on that premise: India will maintain—and likely strengthen—its current policy, while forces on the Pakistani side may increasingly resort to asymmetric violence.

6. Trump's Historical Framing of Kashmir as a Clash of Civilizations

U.S. President Donald Trump, who proudly claimed to have mediated between India and Pakistan, described the Kashmir conflict in his social media posts as "a thousand-year conflict." Immediately after the April 22 terrorist attack in Pahalgam, Kashmir—in which twenty-six tourists and others were killed—Trump had used the same characterization, asserting that the conflict had been ongoing for a thousand years.[12] What happened a thousand years ago? A millennium ago, Muslim forces began entering the northern regions of today's India through routes overlooking the Indus Valley from Kashmir. Their path of invasion ran through the plains of the Indus River, over which Kashmir exercised strategic oversight. The Turkic Ghaznavid dynasty captured Delhi via this route in 1192. In 1206, the "Slave Dynasty" was established, marking the first Muslim regime in India. This dynasty laid the foundation for a powerful empire that controlled the fertile and densely populated regions along the Indus and Ganges Rivers, stretching from Kashmir into modern-day Pakistan and northern India.

From the early thirteenth century, when the Slave Dynasty was founded, until the mid-

[11] See Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal (eds.) *Kashmir and the Future of South Asia* (Routledge, 2021); and Goldie Osuri, "The Forms and Practices of Indian Settler/Colonial Sovereignty in Kashmir" in Bhan, Duschinski, and Misri (eds.), *Rutledge Handbook of Critical Kashmir Studies*.

[12] https://x.com/TrumpDailyPosts/status/1921420718656324093

nineteenth century, when the Mughal Empire collapsed, successive Muslim dynasties ruled much of the Indian subcontinent. While the political elite remained predominantly Islamic, Hinduism persisted as the majority faith among the population. Thus, when British colonial rule ended in the twentieth century, the question of whether independent India would become a state of the Hindu majority or of the Muslim elites who had long dominated governance became a central issue. It is against this backdrop that President Trump framed Kashmir as the legacy of a "thousand-year conflict" between Hindus and Muslims.

It is sometimes argued that the distortions of British colonial rule gave rise to the modern Kashmir conflict. Certainly, the partition of India and Pakistan along religious lines in 1947 made it impossible to draw neat boundaries in mountainous areas with mixed populations, leaving territorial disputes unresolved. Yet it would be an exaggeration to claim that the British "created" a religiously based social structure. One could theoretically imagine a secular successor state transcending religion, but such an outcome did not align with popular aspirations.

Modern states are founded on the principle that cohesive "nations" exercise the right of self-determination to form nation-states. Before this principle prevailed, such thinking was absent; thus, under Muslim rule, Hindus remained the majority population without claiming separate sovereignty. By the twentieth century, however, the ideal of the nation-state had taken root. Religion and social culture became inseparable from national identity: Hindus became "Indians," Muslims became "Pakistanis," and territorial partition was pursued accordingly—even though applying this European-derived concept in the Himalayas and surrounding regions proved extraordinarily difficult.

7. Kashmir as a Gateway to the Heartland

The territory of the Slave Dynasty overlapped with modern Pakistan and extended to the edge of Kashmir. Geography—rising from the uplands of Kashmir into the Himalayas—shaped the boundaries of empire. About a thousand years ago, Islamic powers repeatedly advanced through this corridor, subduing the Hindu-majority plains and establishing great dynasties. Trump's characterization of

Kashmir as a “thousand-year conflict” thus reflects a civilizational interpretation of history: a struggle between Hindus and Muslims stretching back centuries. This perspective aligns closely with Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations,” a paradigm rooted in Continental geopolitical thought, which views Kashmir as a site of conflict between Islamic and Hindu civilizations.

Yet this civilizational framing coexists—and is deeply intertwined—with the geopolitical logics of the Great Game, the Cold War, and the Global War on Terror. Kashmir’s complexity cannot be reduced merely to a territorial dispute in difficult terrain. Its high ground commands strategic gateways to the fertile plains where great civilizations have flourished since antiquity, making it a prize in successive geopolitical rivalries.

During his first term, President Trump engaged in negotiations with the Taliban—rooted in the Pashtun population of Afghanistan—seeking an agreement to withdraw U.S. forces. The strategic corridor connecting Delhi to Kabul via Islamabad extends north to Bagram, which housed a major airbase: first operated by the Soviet Union in the 1980s, then by the United States for two decades after 2001. Bagram illustrates how Kashmir, due to its geography, is inseparably linked to the successive frameworks of the Great Game, the Cold War, and the Global War on Terror.

Halford Mackinder, the British geographer and founder of modern geopolitical theory, observed in the early twentieth century that while the Himalayas protected India, there existed exceptional overland routes through which invading forces could penetrate the subcontinent. Kashmir was one such gateway:

> (There are) two routes from the Iranian plateau into India. One descends from the Kabul valley across the narrow heights of the Hindu Kush, over the Khyber Pass, and down to the Indus at Attock. The other passes through Herat and Kandahar, skirting the edge of Afghanistan’s mountains and descending through the Bolan Pass to the Indus. Just east of the Indus lies the Indian desert, spanning the short distance from ocean to the Himalayas. Thus, both routes—via Bolan and Khyber—merge into the narrow corridor between desert and mountains leading to India’s interior, at whose threshold stands Delhi, the head of

> navigation on the Jumna-Ganges. Delhi, like Xi'an and Beijing, was founded by conquerors from the Heartland. Although China and India have been repeatedly invaded via this narrow, difficult path, the empires established by such invasions often soon broke away from nomadic rule.[13]

The first of these exceptional land routes passes directly in front of Kashmir. The fertile, densely populated plains along the Indus and Ganges Rivers remain home today to some 250 million and 490 million people respectively—together over nine percent of the world's population. Defending this region has historically required preventing incursions by Heartland powers crossing through Afghanistan. Ideally, such threats would be neutralized in Afghanistan itself. This imperative explained Britain's fierce rivalry with Russia during the Great Game. In the nineteenth century, Britain repeatedly clashed with a southward-pressing Russia in Afghanistan. If Afghanistan were lost, British India—the linchpin of the empire—would inevitably be endangered. Defending British India thus meant stopping Russia north of Kabul.

Should British and Russian influence recede, it would fall to local Muslim and Hindu powers to struggle for control over these traditional invasion routes. From Mackinder's Anglo-American geopolitical perspective, the Indian subcontinent appears as a vast peninsula projecting from Eurasia—a critical bridgehead into the Indian Ocean. India's natural tendency, in this logic, is to align with or fall under the influence of sea powers.

During the Cold War, however, the leading sea power—the United States—sought to contain Soviet expansion into the Indian Ocean by supporting Iran and Pakistan. Consequently, India, antagonistic toward Pakistan, moved closer to the Soviet Union. After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran adopted a neutral stance, distancing itself from both superpowers. Meanwhile, Pakistan became an even more vital bulwark for Washington following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. With the end of

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[13] Halford Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (1919), pp. 73–74.

the Cold War, U.S.–Pakistan relations grew ambiguous, but with the advent of the Global War on Terror they resumed a peculiar partnership—only to blur again with the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.

8. Shift from a Bipolar World to a Multipolar World

The Global War on Terror was rooted in a dichotomous worldview. President George W. Bush famously declared, "You are either with us or against us." Since terrorism against civilians was to be regarded as a crime against humanity, the entire world was expected to condemn it and support those combating it. In 2001, this dichotomous logic was reinforced by the unilateralism of the United States at the height of its hegemonic power. By 2025, however, after long and costly military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, the age of unilateral American dominance had passed. The relative decline of U.S. power was apparent, as was that of its allies in Europe and Japan.

President Joe Biden often framed the contemporary world as a contest between "democracies vs. autocracies." While acknowledging the West's waning influence, he sought to revitalize U.S. leadership by consolidating a camp of democracies against the rise of authoritarian regimes. This effort produced limited results. The narrative did strengthen Western resolve in supporting Ukraine against Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, but sanctions and aid to Kyiv extended no further than America's military allies. The inauguration of President Donald Trump marked the end of this democracy–autocracy dichotomy.

India, as the world's largest democracy, might have been expected to champion the dichotomized narrative. Instead, India maintained the tradition of non-alignment and sought leadership of the "Global South," rather than playing a junior role alongside the U.S., even as it engaged in the Quad with Washington, Tokyo, and Canberra. The Biden administration frequently raised concerns over human rights in India, irritating the BJP government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The arrival of President Trump raised Indian expectations of closer ties. The April 2025 terrorist attack occurred during the ceremonial long stay of Vice President J.D. Vance in India, creating a mood of goodwill. Yet Washington's neutrality in mediating the India–Pakistan clash disappointed many Indians. Trump,

frustrated that his mediation was underappreciated in New Delhi, retaliated by imposing a 50% tariff on Indian imports, citing India's purchase of Russian oil.

In hindsight, Biden's Washington was frustrated by India's non-aligned stance, while India was equally frustrated by U.S. neutrality in the context of the Global War on Terror narrative. Meanwhile, India sought to strengthen ties with Russia and China, exemplified at the 2025 Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in Tianjin. Trump himself tweeted: "Looks like we've lost India and Russia to deepest, darkest, China."[14] Still, Prime Minister Modi skipped the subsequent Beijing ceremony commemorating the 80th anniversary of the War of Resistance Against Japan, a gathering attended by many Eurasian leaders. Observers noted that Modi sought to preserve India's benign relationship with Japan. India thus continues to cultivate ties with Japan and Australia while maintaining its Global South–oriented non-alignment.

The international system led by the West is transforming. Behind this lies the relative decline of U.S. power, which at the turn of the century had been dominant enough to be called "unipolar." Even a bipolar framework no longer reflects reality. If all states friendly with China are to be labeled "autocracies," then countries such as Indonesia—now a full BRICS member and participant in the Beijing ceremony—would fall into that category, despite their democratic structures. As the sanctions regime against Russia demonstrated, the so-called "camp of democracies" effectively amounted only to U.S. military allies. Labeling states according to whether they engage with China or the West is a presumption that resonates little in the broader world. Non-Western powers increasingly attract support through economic growth and anti-globalist agendas.

In practice, the SCO and BRICS—though sometimes expressing anti-American rhetoric—primarily profess to oppose hegemonism and to promote a multipolar order. Both remain loose consultative frameworks, not military alliances. Relations among China, Russia, and India are shaped by their status as regional great powers, rather than by hierarchical alliance structures. The growing weight

[14] "Trump says India and Russia appear 'lost' to 'deepest, darkest China'", *Reuters*, 7 September 2025 < https://www.reuters.com/world/china/trump-says-india-russia-appear-lost-deepest-darkest-china-2025-09-05/>, accessed 30 September 2025.

of these organizations thus reflects a broader momentum toward multipolarity.

9. Concluding Remarks: South Asia in the Age of Confronting Theories of Geopolitics

India, Pakistan, and other South Asian countries are deeply enmeshed in this global shift from bipolarity to multipolarity. Yet their positions are neither fixed nor straightforward. The structural complexity of the region stems from the fact that, although India now stands as an overwhelming great power with a tradition of non-alignment, it lacks a clearly defined regional sphere of influence comparable to China in East Asia or Russia in Eurasia. Instead, India remains locked in its traditional rivalry with Pakistan and faces tensions with Islamic communities across the region. With a population of 1.43 billion, India aspires to define itself as a civilizational area, but this identity does not easily extend beyond its borders.

India is neither a U.S. military ally nor a subordinate partner of other great powers such as China or Russia, despite its participation in frameworks like the Quad, the SCO, and BRICS. Pakistan, meanwhile, maintains close ties with China, Russia, and Iran, and since 2017 has been a member of the SCO. Yet India too is a member of the SCO and a founding member of BRICS. While China and Russia appeared to support Pakistan's eventual inclusion in BRICS, India has resisted and will likely continue to block it.

Thus, India defines itself as a distinct civilizational power that does not exercise hegemonic influence across South Asia in the manner of the U.S. in the West, China in East Asia, or Russia in Eurasia. This structural peculiarity gives South Asia its distinctive "awkwardness" in global politics. Given these realities, this awkwardness will likely persist into the foreseeable future—and the future of Kashmir will inevitably be shaped by it.