
3. Narrative Framing, Conspiracy Theories, Propaganda and Hate between India and Pakistan after the Pahalgam attack: An Analysis of Twitter Data

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Abstract

This study examines the role of social media as a battleground for information warfare in the aftermath of the Pahalgam terrorist attack within the broader context of Indo-Pakistan rivalry. Parallel to military action, both states—and their citizens—weaponized platforms such as X (formally Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube to disseminate propaganda, misinformation, and disinformation. By analyzing social media data primarily retrieved from X, the research uncovers the narrative frames employed online, their underlying intentions, and their relationship to offline dynamics. Findings depict how India largely portrays herself through two major narratives—the collective victimhood and the anti-terrorist actor. The online discourse portrays Pakistan as the terrorist other overlapping with the conspiratorial narratives. One of the most significant findings is that the central role of conspiracy theories in shaping public opinion: they generate competing truth claims, depict some Indian citizens as traitors, create suspicion, and blur the line between what is true and what is credible from what is paranoia. Conspiracy theories, hate speech, and harmful offline activity are interrelated and often recur simultaneously on Tweets, suggesting how the combination can directly contribute to harmful offline behavior. Overall, the study highlights how social media discourses not only reflects the existing Indo-Pakistan rivalry among both elites and citizens but also intensifying through offline spillovers that shape political attitudes, inflame hostilities, and fuel broader cycles of conflict.

Keywords: Information Warfare, Conspiracy Theories, Narrative Framing, Hate Speech, Online-Offline Spillover, South Asia

1. Introduction

This study explores social media narratives and discourses surrounding the recent escalation of military action between India and Pakistan over Kashmir in the aftermath of the Pahalgam terrorist attack. Building on the history of conflict between the two countries over Kashmir, this paper focuses on the digital dimension of the Pahalgam attack. Parallel to the military action on the ground, both countries used social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube as tools of information warfare. Both states weaponized fake news, misinformation, and disinformation—spreading doctored videos, fabricated letters, and manipulated images to influence public opinion and international narratives. In that context, this study analyses the war narratives created by both states (and their citizens), by examining social media data, primarily retrieved from X (formally Twitter). The main objective is to uncover the narrative frames employed on social media, the intentions exhibited, the relationship between online and offline, and in what ways public opinion has been shaped. Below I first discuss a brief history of Indo-Pakistan rivalry. Secondly, I provide a theoretical overview of how social media framing, propaganda, mis/dis-information and hate speech matters in times of crisis and war. Thirdly, I explain how propaganda and information warfare was unfolding on social media in the aftermath of the terrorist attack. Finally, I will explain my data collection and analysis methods, followed by an in-depth discussion of the findings.

2. An overview of Indo-Pakistan rivalry since 1947

Indo-Pakistan conflict originates with the partition of British India in 1947, which established a Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan. Initially Kashmir was provided the opportunity to choose

which country to accede to. Kashmir first sought independence but later agreed to join to India, triggering the Indo-Pakistan war of 1947-48. Tensions between the two countries escalated to a full-blown war in 1965. The war between the two countries in 1971 over east Pakistan resulted in the establishment of present-day Bangladesh. In 1972, a Line of Control (LOC), a 450-mile-long, provisional military control line which serves as a frontier slicing the disputed Indian and Pakistani governed parts of Kashmir into two¹, was established between the two countries. The tensions between the two countries took a new dimension with the introduction of nuclear weapons to the region.

In 1999 the Kargil war erupts when the Pakistani soldiers crossed the LOC seizing Indian military posts in the Kargil Mountain.² Ever since, the history of Indo-Pakistan rivalry is marked with a chain of terrorist attacks and military engagements. Amidst the global war on terror, the Indian parliament was attacked in December 2001 killing 14 people. India accused Pakistan-backed armed group for the attack, and led to a face-to-face military standoff along the LoC.³ In 2008 the Mumbai attack takes place when armed gunmen opened fire on civilians in several sites killing more than 160 people.⁴ In 2016, when the attack on Indian army base in Uri in Indian administered Kashmir took place, fears arose that the two countries would go to direct military confrontation. In 2019, a suicide bomber killed 40 Indian paramilitary in Pulwama, Indian-administered Kashmir, triggering direct military action between the two countries especially leading to an aerial engagement.⁵ According to Uppsala conflict data programme the total number of deaths in Kashmir since 1989 has been approximately 20,132.⁶

Most recently, militants attacked Indian tourists in Kashmir, killing 26 tourists in a scenic hill station called Pahalgam.⁷ India accused Pakistan of nurturing terrorism and arrested a few Pakistani

¹ Wall Street Journal. (2016, September 30). *What is Line of Control?* The Wall Street Journal. Retrieved from <https://www.wsj.com/articles/BL-263B-8246>

² Al Jazeera. (2025, May 9). *India-Pakistan tensions: A brief history of conflict*. Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/9/india-pakistan-tensions-a-brief-history-of-conflict>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Center for Preventive Action. (2025, May 12). Conflict between India and Pakistan. Global Conflict Tracker. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-between-india-and-pakistan>

⁶ Uppsala Conflict Data Program. (n.d.). India: *Kashmir*. Uppsala University. Retrieved from <https://ucdp.uu.se/conflict/364>

⁷ Sushant Singh. (2025, April 29). India and Pakistan Are Perilously Close to the Brink. Foreign Affairs.

nationals. While Pakistan denied its involvement in terrorism, this incident led both countries to downgrade their bilateral relations to the lowest point in history. Both countries terminated the visa-free-travel between each other. India suspended the Indus Waters Treaty, but Pakistan rejected any such suspension, warning that any attempt to alter Pakistan's Indus River Flows would be considered as an "act of war." Pakistani airspace was closed to all Indian commercial flights and suspended bilateral trade. On May 07th India launched "Operation Sindoor", conducting missile strikes across multiple locations across Pakistan. While India stated that these attacks targeted terrorist infrastructure,⁸ Pakistan Military spokesmen stated that these attacks have killed women and children.⁹

Not only the elite level bilateral relations, but also public opinion on each other is also deteriorating after the Pahalgam attack. According to the Pew research findings, people in India have grown increasingly negative in their views of Pakistan. Northern Indians see Pakistan and Modi's handling of Kashmir differently than those in the rest of the country. Indians who live closer to Pakistan – those in Delhi, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh – are more likely to view Pakistan very unfavorably (69%) than people who live elsewhere (61%). It's possible that Indians in these areas feel more threatened by Pakistan or the conflict in Kashmir: 81% of northerners see terrorism as a very big problem, compared with 74% elsewhere in India. Indians in the north are harsher on Modi when it comes to Kashmir: Roughly half (51%) approve of his handling of the Kashmir situation, compared with nearly two-thirds (65%) in the rest of India.¹⁰

3. Understanding the role of information, propaganda and strategic communication in war: A theoretical framework

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/india/india-pakistan-kashmir-are-perilously-close-brink>.

⁸ Center for the Study of Organized Hate. (2025, May 16). Inside the misinformation and disinformation war between India and Pakistan. CSOH. <https://www.csohate.org/2025/05/16/india-pakistan-digital-war/>

⁹ Associated Press. (2025, May 7). Pakistan says 26 killed in Indian missile strikes. AP News.

<https://apnews.com/live/india-pakistan-attack-pahalgam-kashmir#>

¹⁰ Chwe, Hanyu. (2017, December 7). How people in India see Pakistan, 70 years after Partition. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2017/12/07/how-people-in-india-see-pakistan-70-years-after-partition/>

Studies have found that new media, especially social media polarizes societies. Exposure to like-minded media increases affective (how identity salience within groups can exacerbate out-group animosity) and ideological polarization (divergence of political opinions, beliefs, attitudes, and stances of political adversaries).¹¹ Experimental research find that manipulated media content predicts how social media can cause both affective and ideological polarization.¹² Also, repeated exposure to news increases one's likelihood of believing in falsehood¹³ and news consumers are often unmotivated to critically assess the news that they are consuming.¹⁴

Researchers¹⁵ have found that online propaganda and news media had interdependent influences on Islamists' rejections of non-Muslims and Western politics, as well as on their willingness to use violence and commit suicide.

Scholars find that propaganda, framing, discourse as key toolkits that governments and other conflict parties use in war.¹⁶ Propaganda can be understood as the deliberate manipulation of representations¹⁷ "The research on propaganda demonstrates that government disinformation in war has a rich and bloody history, and that governments have historically sought to lie and mislead their adversaries."¹⁸ Information manipulation and propaganda always take place during war and terror. The Nazis weaponized information during World War II.¹⁹ During the Gulf War, a young girl testified in front

¹¹ Emily Kubin & Christian von Sikorski (2021) "The role of (social) media in political polarization: a systematic review," *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 45:3, 188-206, DOI: 10.1080/23808985.2021.1976070

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Pennycook G, Tyrone Cannon, D. G. Rand (2018a) Prior exposure increases perceived accuracy of fake news, *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 147 (12) 1865-1880.

¹⁴ Pennycook G, and Rand DG. (2018b) Lazy, not biased: Susceptibility to partisan fake news is better explained by lack of reasoning than by motivated reasoning. *Cognition*. doi: 10.1016/j.cognition.2018.06.01

¹⁵ Baugut, P., & Neumann, K. (2019). Online news media and propaganda influence on radicalized individuals: Findings from interviews with Islamist prisoners and former Islamists. *New Media & Society*, 22(8), 1437-1461. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819879423>

¹⁶ Crilley, R., & Chatterje-Doody, P. N. (2021). Government disinformation in war and conflict. In The Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism (1st ed., Chapter 27). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003004431-27>

¹⁷ Briant, E. (2014). Propaganda and counter-terrorism: Strategies for global change. Manchester University Press.

¹⁸ Crilley, R. and Chatterje-Doody, P. N. "Government disinformation in war and conflict."

¹⁹ Purdy, E. R. (2023). Nazi propaganda. EBSCO Research Starters. <https://www.ebsco.com/research->

of the US Congress that Iraqi soldiers had taken babies out of incubators in Kuwaiti hospitals and left them to die. It was a powerful, emotional story—and it helped build support for the war in the United States, which later exposed that the young girl is no ordinary Kuwaiti teenager but the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador to the United States and the story is a fabrication.²⁰ Similarly, justifications by the US government that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction and links to Al-Qaeda created massive local and international support for US to invade Iraq in 2003, which was later proven false. Thus, states seek legitimacy for their activities, especially during wars, the activities are justified as anti-terrorist activities using information manipulation and propaganda.

Understanding framing as a tool is especially important in the present study. Framing consists of four elements: definition of a problem, the cause of that problem, third, evaluation of those involved, and fourth offering a solution.²¹ To illustrate this with an example, consider how, throughout the War on Terror, the Bush administration consistently framed the events of 9/11 as a problem of global terrorism caused by radical Islamists who were 'evil' and could only be stopped through a global 'War on Terror'. This frame cascaded down from the Bush Administration, played out in news coverage, and shaped how people understood what was happening and what should be done in response to it - such as the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.²² What is the impact of framing on ordinary populace? Many experimental research documents on how framing affects political attitudes. These studies suggests that minor adjustments to the description of the political issue (which we identify as framing) generate larger changes in the public attitude towards that issue.²³ "For example, a classic study of this phenomenon exposed participants to a TV news report about a Ku Klux Klan rally on a US campus, varying whether the report emphasized free speech or potential violence at the event. Those who

starters/history/nazi-propaganda

²⁰ Democracy Now. (2018, December 5). How False Testimony and a Massive U.S. Propaganda Machine Bolstered George H.W. Bush's War on Iraq [Video]. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WkRylMGLPMU>

²¹ Entman, R. M. (2003). Cascading Activation: Contesting the White House's Frame After 9/11. *Political Communication*, 20(4), 415–432. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584600390244176>

²² Ibid.; Tumber H and Palmer J (2004). *Media at War: The Iraq Crisis*. London: Sage.

²³ Berk, N. (2025). The Impact of Media Framing in Complex Information Environments. *Political Communication*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2025.2456519>

received the free speech treatment were substantially more inclined to support the conduct of the rallies.”²⁴ Thus, it is important to understand the multiple frames on social media in the aftermath of the Pahalgam attack, as those impact how people make sense of what is truth, who is enemy and who is not, and also construct either religious or not or other group demarcations as *us* and *them*.

4. Propaganda and information warfare between India and Pakistan

Hussain and others note how information warfare was taking place between the two countries during 2019 Pulwama attack and not only the governments of India and Pakistan but also their militaries have engaged in social media-based propaganda activities.²⁵ Various media outlets have reported how different influencers and campaigners have been launching social media campaigns, organize members in WhatsApp chatrooms to promote anti-Indian or anti-Pakistan content and make those go viral.²⁶ According to research findings of Hussain and others,²⁷ citizens from both India and Pakistan have been actively contributing to information warfare launched by the two states, which is contrary to the general imagination that information warfare is driven solely by state machinery. The same research also finds the existence and manipulation of troll accounts—human driven social media accounts run by paid social media armies who run multiple accounts to produce new content and counter the opposition online—in launching propaganda warfare.²⁸ The research also recognizes how hashtags created in India and Pakistan are deliberately producing content favourable to the respective country.²⁹

²⁴ Nelson, T. E., Clawson, R. A., & Oxley, Z. M. (1997). Media framing of a civil liberties conflict and its effect on tolerance. *The American Political Science Review*, 91(3), 567–583. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2952075>

²⁵ Hussain, S., Shahzad, F., & Saud, A. (2021). Analyzing the State of Digital Information Warfare Between India and Pakistan on Twittersphere. *SAGE Open*, 11(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211031905>

²⁶ Jorgic, D., & Pal, A. (2019, April 2). Facebook, Twitter sucked into India-Pakistan information war. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-pakistan-socialmedia/facebook-twitter-sucked-into-india-pakistan-information-war-idUSKCN1RE18N/>; Al Jazeera English. (2020, June 25). War, lies and hashtags: Pakistan's Twitter battles [Video]. Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/video/witness/2020/6/25/war-lies-and-hashtags-pakistans-twitter-battles>

²⁷ Hussain, et al. (2021). Analyzing the State of Digital Information Warfare.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

Similarly, parallel to the military attacks in Pahalgam in 2025, many observed the proliferation of electronic warfare, where fake news, misinformation, disinformation, hate and propaganda warfare were rising on both traditional and new media domains.³⁰ Hashtags such as IndiaPakistanWar, OperationSindoor, and IndianArmy had generated 215,000, 885,000, and 399,000 posts respectively on X.³¹ The Center for the Study of Organized Hate notes “False reports of military victories, doctored videos purporting to show successful airstrikes, fabricated images of destroyed infrastructure, and unfounded rumors about the deaths or arrests of high-profile military and political figures proliferated across social media platforms, including X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube.”³² “Between April 22 and May 2, India Hate Lab (IHL) has documented 64 in-person hate speech events across 9 states and Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir. Among states, Maharashtra recorded 17 hate speech events, Uttar Pradesh (13), Uttarakhand (6), Haryana (6), Rajasthan (5), Madhya Pradesh (5), Himachal Pradesh (5), Bihar (4) and Chhattisgarh (2). Most of these rallies were organized by Hindu nationalist groups”³³.

Below are some of the hate speech contents spread around social media in the aftermath of the Pahalgam attack; “Don’t talk to the mad jihadis in your city; they can’t be spoken to, they have to be shot in the head.”³⁴ A far-right monk said, “You have to finish these adharmis.” He urged Hindus to prepare for war, called for an economic boycott, and told attendees, “You all need to have weapons.”³⁵ “At a candlelight rally held in Madhepura, Bihar on April 25, a speaker similarly called for the economic boycott of Muslim vendors, urging Hindus to inquire about the religion of shopkeepers before buying anything.”³⁶ This wave of hate speech has been accompanied by a troubling spike in hate crimes and

³⁰ Center for the Study of Organized Hate. (2025, May 16). Inside the misinformation and disinformation war between India and Pakistan. <https://www.csohate.org/2025/05/16/india-pakistan-digital-war/>

³¹ Chaturvedi, A. (2025, May 8). Social media platforms buzz with fake posts on Operation Sindoos. The Economic Times. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/social-media-platforms-buzz-with-fake-posts-on-operation-sindoos/articleshow/120969228.cms>

³² Ibid.

³³ India Hate Lab. (2025, May 2). 64 anti-Muslim hate speech events recorded in 10 days post Pahalgam attack. India Hate Lab. <https://indiahatelab.com/2025/05/02/hate-speech-post-pahalgam-attack/>

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

acts of violence, targeting Kashmiris in particular and Muslims more broadly. In Haryana, Muslim Street vendors were assaulted and their carts set on fire. In Uttarakhand, Kashmiri shawl sellers were attacked, and a BJP leader openly threatened Muslim food vendors. In Uttar Pradesh, a Muslim man was brutally attacked with an axe while the assailant reportedly shouted, "Twenty-six were killed; twenty-six of yours will die too."³⁷ Researchers at IHL have noted that a majority of these in-person hate speech events were either live-streamed or had videos uploaded to Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, or X, further amplifying the harm and reaching millions of viewers. The rapid spread of this content demonstrates the dangerous connection between online hate ecosystems and offline violence.³⁸

The Fact Check Division of the Press Information Bureau (PIB) of India has identified seven instances of narratives fabricated by Pakistan in their own favour.³⁹ For instance, a video claiming to be a drone attack in Jalandhar, noting that it was an unrelated video of a farm fire. Another video falsely claimed that a Pakistani army attack destroyed an Indian post, which the fact-check unit debunked, confirming that the video was staged and part of Pakistan's propaganda campaign. An old video was also shared claiming Pakistan launched a missile attack on India, but the unit identified it as footage from an explosive attack in Beirut, Lebanon, in 2020. A purported confidential letter from the Chief of the Army Staff (CoAS), General VK Narayan, regarding military preparedness, was debunked, and PIB confirmed that General Narayan is not the CoAS, and the letter was entirely fabricated. A baseless claim on social media where it stated that the Indian military used Ambala Airbase to attack Amritsar and its citizens. Another post alleged entry bans into airports across India, which the Fact Check unit debunked, confirming no such decision was taken by the Union Government.⁴⁰

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Livemint. (2025, May 9). Fake news alert! PIB debunks seven instances of misinformation amid India-Pakistan conflict. <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/indiapakistan-conflict-pib-debunks-seven-instances-of-misinformation-tension-what-it-revealed-operation-sindoor-loc-11746766505051.html>; Press Information Bureau. (n.d.). Fact Check Updates. Government of India. Retrieved September 14, 2025, <https://www.pib.gov.in/factcheckupdates.aspx?reg=3&lang=1>.

⁴⁰ Livemint. (2025, May 9). Fake news alert!

Some observers argue that while India is proactive on fact checking and countering fake news, misinformation and disinformation created by Pakistan, it has done little to "challenge the divisive campaigns being waged by mainstream Indian broadcasters. At the same time, the authorities briefly blocked some independent media outlets and commentators and filed cases against satirists."⁴¹ Some are highly critical of the conduct of Indian news channels, "...Indian TV news had... already launched their own 'operation' against Pakistan without waiting for the Indian government to act. Indeed, within days of the terror attack in Pahalgam where 26 people were killed, TV anchors were not just demanding war but even demonstrating how it ought to be conducted."⁴²

Pakistan also publicly accuses India of deploying extensive propaganda and fake news during the military activities between the two states. According to a report of a Pakistani newspaper, "Pakistan has released a comprehensive dossier, contained irrefutable evidence of India's aggression and lies and outlining historic success of Marka-e-Haq and Bunyanum Marsoos, as well as Delhi's false-flag operation in Pahalgam in Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK)."⁴³ The dossier exposes the fake news spread through the Indian media and RAW's social media networks to create a war hysteria in the country. As reported in the newspaper article, Pahalgam is a false-flag operation created by India based on fabricated information to instrumentally target various locations in Pakistan "including Muridke, Bahawalpur and Muzaffarabad and also sent 100 plus drones in Pakistan territory, killing dozens of civilians, including women and children."⁴⁴ It further attests that (irrespective of India's rejection) Pakistan has downed Indian warplanes including three Rafale jets, a MiG-29 and an SU-30 and 84 drones.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Ganguly, M. (2025, May 21). Indian officials repress dissent following India-Pakistan hostilities. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/05/21/indian-officials-repress-dissent-following-india-pakistan-hostilities>

⁴² Sharma, K. (2025, May 9). India's fog of war: Print media treads cautiously, TV media loses the plot. NewsLaundry. <https://www.news laundry.com/2025/05/09/indias-fog-of-war-print-media-treads-cautiously-tv-media-loses-the-plot>

⁴³ Correspondent. (2025, May 19). Pak releases dossier to expose Indian lies. *The Express Tribune*. https://tribune.com.pk/story/2546563/pak-releases-dossier-to-expose-indian-lies?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

In a press release issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pakistan categorically rejects India's claims as baseless media propaganda. It rejects Indian claims of arresting an alleged 'militant' and "killing another on Indian side of the LoC. Such allegations are established Indian tactics to mischievously implicate Pakistan and divert world attention from its own heinous activities in IIOJK. We have shared incontrovertible evidence with the world about India's grave human rights violations in the IIOJK, including through a Dossier unveiled this month."⁴⁶ Pakistan also rejects Indian prime Minister's remarks as misleading and baseless "to accuse Pakistan of involvement in the Pahalgam attack, without presenting a single piece of credible evidence."⁴⁷

5. Data collection, qualitative coding and frameworks of analysis

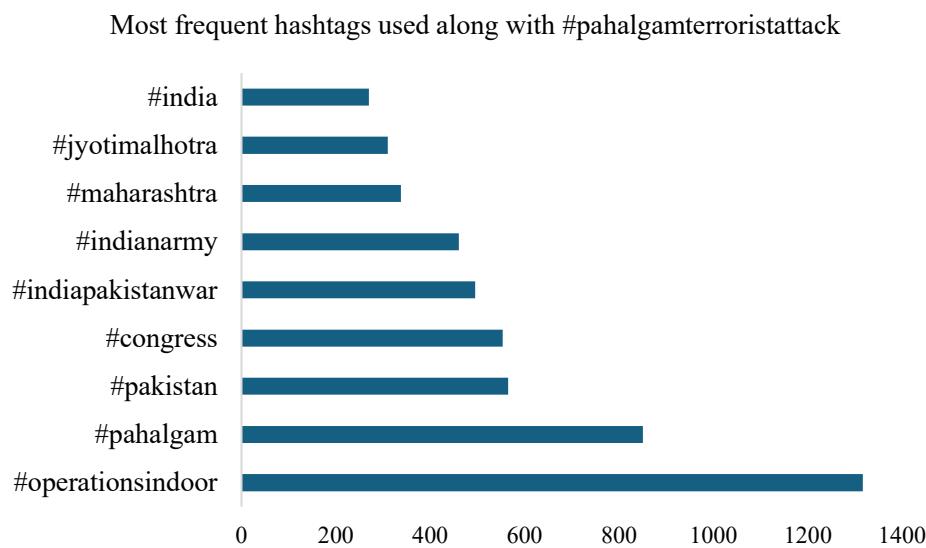
Twitter data were automatically collected for the hashtag #PahalgamTerroristAttack from 22 April 2025 to 22 May 2025 using a third-party twitter data collection tool called Tweet Binder, which resulted in collecting 10,009 posts. Tweet Binder is a hashtag analysis tool and upon subscription it allows automatic collection of historical data from twitter based on hashtags. The author was careful to read the ethical aspect of using third-party tools and Tweet Binder's compliance with X's community standards and data protection was one of the major reasons to select it for data collection. Among many hashtags available to collect data, the hashtag #PahalgamTerroristAttack was employed based on its high frequency, usage and popularity during and in the immediate aftermath of the terror attack. This decision is based on the author's own observation of Twitter environment during the period and also based on various literature and search tools that provide summary of popular hashtags.⁴⁸ Along

⁴⁶ Press Information Bureau. (2021 September 28.). Press release 470. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan. Retrieved September 11, 2025, from https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/press-release-470?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁴⁷ Press Information Bureau. (2025 June 6). Pakistan strongly rejects the Indian Prime Minister's misleading remarks. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan. Retrieved September 11, 2025, from <http://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/pakistan-strongly-rejects-the-indian-prime-ministers-misleading-remarks>

⁴⁸ Chaturvedi, A. (2025, May 8). Social media platforms buzz with fake posts on Operation Sindoor.

with the analyzed hashtag #pahalgamterroristattack, below are the other most frequently used hashtags in the dataset:



Descriptive statistics of the dataset are discussed in the analysis section below to provide an overall idea of the Twitter environment during and aftermath of the terror attack. In order to reach an in-depth analysis, the above dataset was further filtered out and posts with 1000 or more impressions were selected for analysis which resulted in 113 posts.⁴⁹ This dataset consists of textual posts in several languages other than English such as Hindi, Tamil, and Telugu. All posts were analyzed closely using manual content analysis facilitated by MAXQDA. Content analysis was conducted at different depths. First a preliminary content analysis was conducted for the researcher to be familiar with the dataset. It mainly employed the Grounded Theory Method to capture naturally occurring themes/frames/categories. Secondly, a more systematic content analysis was conducted under three major sets of codes: frames, intentions and activity. Framing codes refer to the narrative frames employed by each country to refer to Pahalgam attack and retaliation. Codes of intentions refer to intentions/motivations displayed in Tweets. Activity codes include hate (whether hateful messages are

⁴⁹ For better results I also filtered out tweets based on most reposted category, and a general overlook suggests that posts with higher impression levels overlap with posts with most reposts.

used), and to what extent Tweets demand action or activities. Below Table 1, 2 and 3 summarize the three sets of coding categories.

Table 1. Coding categories of 'Frames' employed on Twitter

Frames	Description
Hindus under threat (India)	Tweets that specifically refer to Hinduism being targeted by the terrorist attack
Victim (India)	India is portrayed as a victim
Own hypocrisy/critical/anti-nationalist (India)	Various self-critical statements on Indian hypocrisy, anti-nationalism or other wrongdoing by India
Anti-terrorist (India)	India is playing a strong anti-terrorist role
Terrorist (Pakistan)	Pakistan is portrayed as promoting terrorism or performing acts of terrorism
Islamic terrorism (Pakistan)	Tweets that specifically refer to Islamic religion and its followers as terrorists
Conspiracy theories	Statements that frame certain events, people or activities that have taken prior to/during/after the terrorist attack as acts of conspiracies

In addition to frames, the content analysis also focused on identifying the intentions of expressions, for example whether some of the Tweets have the intention of legitimizing their activities or seeking international community's support. To reflect that, two codes were employed.

Table 2. Coding categories of 'Intention'

Intention	Description
—	

Support/legitimacy-international 8	Whether the activities referred to in a given Tweets reflects any intention of legitimizing that activity among the international community or seeking international support
Support/legitimacy-local 4	Whether the activities referred to in any given Tweet reflects any intention of legitimizing that activity among the local communities or seeking local support

The tweets were also coded to see whether those carries hate. This is considered important as circulation of hateful messages on social media is a common phenomenon during and after a conflictual situation.

Table 3. Codes of 'Action'

Action/activity	Description
Hate	Tweets that consist of hateful words, degrading terms, that evoke emotion of hatred
Activity-negative	Tweets call for physical activity that may threat, harm or negatively affect the other party; demanding action with negative/hateful tone
Activity-benign	Tweets that call for activity/action with benign effects/non-harmful tone

6. Findings and discussion

The word cloud in Figure 1 provides an overview of the most and least frequently occurring codes in the dataset and serves as a useful tool for initial familiarization with the dataset. *Pakistan* and *Pahalgam* emerge as the most widely used words, while other prominent terms include *operationsindoor*, *attack*, *terrorist*, *terror*, *Hindu*, *India*, and *jyotimalhotra*. The frequency of these words offers preliminary insights into the dominant themes circulating in the aftermath of the terrorist attack. While the word cloud is limited to displaying frequency rather than meanings or relationships, it provides important clues for identifying recurrent frames and narratives. Based on this initial understanding, below I have conducted a deeper content analysis which resulted in several major narrative frames used on Twitter in relation to the two countries involvement in the terrorist attack and responses to it in the aftermath.

Figure 1. A word cloud of most frequent words in the dataset

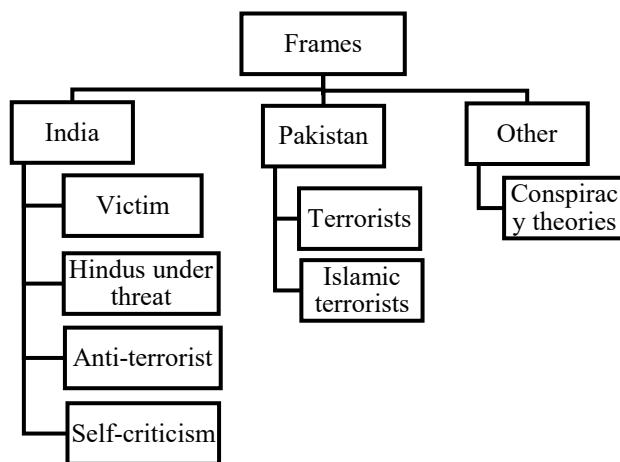


Note: Author drawn based on data analysis using MAXQDA, minimum frequency at 3.

6.1 Major narrative frames: Victimhood, anti-terrorism, Hinduism under threat, Islamic terror and conspiracy theories

Frames, as discussed in the literature review section above, refer to how certain incidents or situations are understood and interpreted in the social world. Framing enables us to categorize/label particular events, activities, situations, incidents in specific ways, for instance by labeling as X or Y. In this dataset, seven major categories of frames can be identified as summarized in Figure 2. India is particularly framed as a victim, an anti-terrorist actor, and as a religious (Hindu) community under attack. At the same time some users adopt a more reflective stance, using the incident as an opportunity to be self-critical of Indian activities and to take a more moderate position.

Figure 2. Major narrative frames on Twitter related to each country



Note: Author drawn based on data analysis

The narrative framing of *victimhood* is particularly striking. It emphasizes that the attack targeted *Hindus* rather than Indians or Indian tourists, highlighting religious affiliation over national identity. Many Tweets include expressions such as "*Hindus were targeted*" or "*innocent Hindus were killed*." The mindset of collective victimhood of Hindus in India has been recognized in other seminal research as well.⁵⁰ Historical memories of Muslim invasions during the medieval period, special favoritism

⁵⁰ Tripathi, R. C., Kumar, R., & Tripathi, V. N. (2019). When the Advantaged Feel Victimized: The Case of Hindus in India. *Psychology and Developing Societies*, 31(1), 31-55.

towards Muslims in the British colonial period constitute the collective victimhood⁵¹ which has been enhanced by the present identity politics. This framing of victimhood is also accompanied by efforts to celebrate and commemorate the dead, with calls to grant 'martyr status' to those who were killed. Such discourse reveals a strong undercurrent of commemoration and the celebration of religious victimhood.

There is a strong *anti-terrorist* narrative framing on India on Twitter in the aftermath of the Pahalgam attack. The Anti-terrorist frame is the most frequent after conspiracy theories. Nationalism and security-oriented language emphasizing the protection of borders and need to combat terrorism is common, with expressions such as "The nation can't rest till it finds that they are taken to task", "out on successful #Operationsindoar by our brave #IndianArmedForces" are frequently appearing. Tweets also include calls to identify those responsible, the release of the Hindi song hailing #Operationsindoar, condemnation of the attack, praise for the 'brave' Indian army, justifications of the retaliatory attack #Operationsindoar, and criticisms of Pakistan's response as insufficient. The widespread usage of #operationsindoar hashtag further underscores the anti-terrorist framing. Although less frequent, a self-critical frame is also present. Here some users portray India as hypocritical—facilitating terrorism elsewhere in Afghanistan against Pakistan or interfering in other neighboring states (such as Bangladesh) or utilizing the terrorist incidents to earn sympathy from the local population.

Frames associated with Pakistan focuses mainly on *terrorism* or *Islamic terrorism*, often highlighting the religious dimension. Many posts allege that Pakistan is a state sponsoring terrorism, with some even suggesting that Pakistani military leaders ordered the attack. Example statements include "*Muslims slaughtered Hindus*," "*Pak support terrorism*," "*1% educated Indians who knows who did it*." Pakistan is consistently depicted as the perpetrator of the Pahalgam terrorist attack, and as an enemy of India—particularly as anti-Hindu and as an organizer of terrorism. Given that most of the Tweets in

the dataset have originated from Indian user accounts, the historical Indo-Pakistan rivalry is visible in this framing.

Among all narrative frames, *conspiracy theories* are the most frequent. Examples include: “*Behind Pahalgam attack it was RAW*”, “*Jyoti Malhotra reportedly visited Pakistan twice, including a trip just two months before the deadly Pahalgam attack, drawing closely scrutiny from Indian security agencies*”, “*Investigating whether Jyoti Malhotra’s videos gave Pakistan key information*”, “*Watch! Just days after the #Pahalgamterroristattack a man bought a cake to Pakistani Embassy in Delhi*.” Technically, conspiracy theories like these are often based on three assumptions: “that nothing happens by accident, nothing is as it seems, and everything is connected.”⁵² They generate competing truth claims, depict some Indian citizens as traitors, create suspicion, and blur the line between what is true and what is credible from what is paranoia.

Although this study did not analyze whether conspiracy theories were spread more by official accounts or personal users, it is important to note that such narratives are employed not only by fringe groups or individuals, but also governments as political currency.⁵³ Conspiracy theories are powerful because they can make people believe in falsehood—for example, that COVID-19 vaccine causes heart attacks, or certain religious groups secretly uses infertility products in food, or that global warming is fiction.⁵⁴ As such, conspiracy theories is a core element in the post-truth era, where public knowledge is destabilized.

6.2 Aspired intentions and the nexus between online and offline

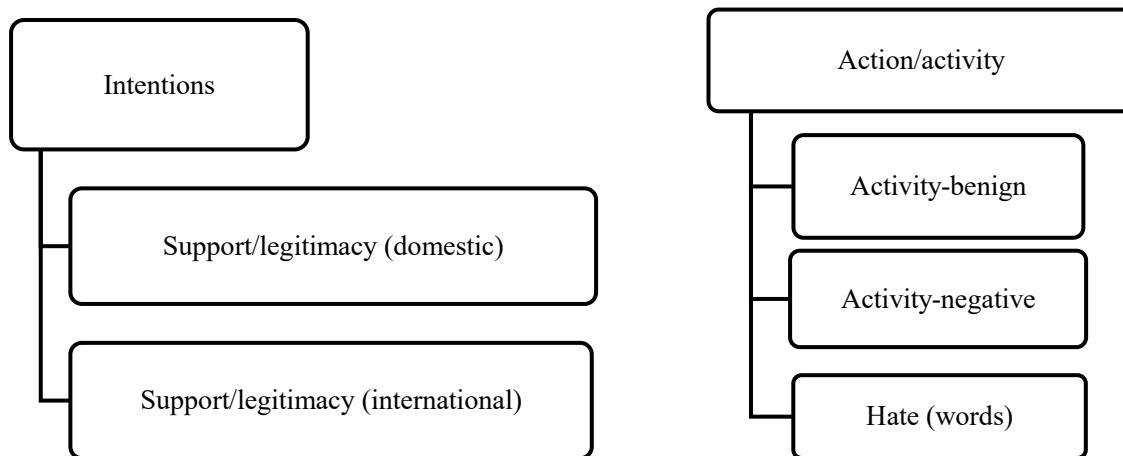
⁵² Jordan, M. M., & Whitmer, J. M. (2024). Why Believe Conspiracy Theories? *Contexts*, 23(2), 24-29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15365042241252124>

⁵³ Kundnani, H. (Chair). (2021, April 26). Post-truth politics: Demystifying conspiracy theories [Members' event]. Chatham House. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/events/all/members-event/post-truth-politics-demystifying-conspiracy-theories>

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Analysis of the dataset reveal two major intended outcomes: (1) gaining support or legitimacy from the international community and (2) securing legitimacy and support from the domestic population (see Figure 3-left). Examples include India's diplomatic sessions with foreign missions, public commentaries by governmental officials to educate local public and the parliament, and expressions of disappointments towards certain states—such as Turkey and China—for assumed support to Pakistan.

Figure 3. Intentions (left) and action (right)



Note: Author drawn based on data analysis

The rights side of Figure 3 is labelled *action/activity* and consists of three codes: *Activity-negative* and *activity-benign*, and *hate*. The first two codes examine whether the analyzed Tweets call for physical action that could have either harmful or benign effects. Tweets demanding harmful or aggressive actions are coded as activity-negative, while those encourage less-harmful, or neutral actions fall under activity-benign. The third code, hate, captures tweets containing hate speech.⁵⁵

A key concern here is whether online conversations translate into offline consequences, or whether digital activity spills over into real-world behaviour. Theoretically, this can be explained through

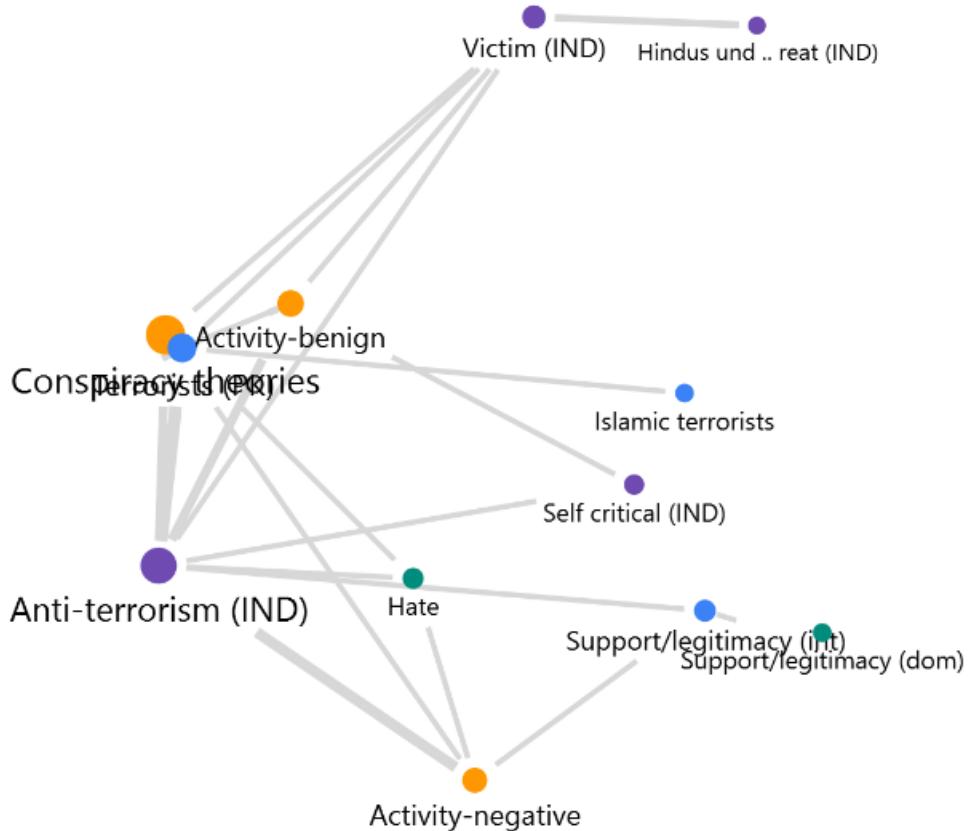
⁵⁵ UNESCO. (2024). What you need to know about hate speech. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Retrieved September 14, 2025, <https://www.unesco.org/en/counter-hate-speech/need-know>

the debate between digital dualism and the augmented reality perspectives. While digital dualism suggests that the online and offline worlds as separate spheres, the augmented reality perspective argues that they are augmented by each other, intertwined and mutually reinforcing. In the dataset, examples of negative offline activities demanded include: *"never forget, never forgive; her links should be investigated; she should be arrested; find out the terrorist."* By contrast examples of benign activities requested include verbs such as *"listen to; defend ourselves; think of it; can you stop supply; watch."*

4.3 An in-depth analysis of the causes and relationship between narrative frames, intentions and activity

The code map in Figure 4 provides a visual summary of how the narrative frames identified in the dataset relates to intentions and the type of activities demanded by the same Tweets. To understand the code map better, the basics must be explained. Each node represents a code, with its size (size of the note and size of the textual label) indicating frequency of code. Lines connecting two codes show their relationship, with line thickness reflecting the strength of the relationship. In other words, the more frequently the two codes appear together in the same Tweet, the thicker the connecting line. Also, the proximity between two codes on the map is an indication of higher degree of similarity or co-occurrence.

Figure 4. The connection between frames, intentions and activity



Note: Author drawn based on data analysis. Code map is generated using MAXQDA.

On the code map, *Conspiracy Theories* and *anti-terrorism* appears as the largest nodes, suggesting that these are the most frequently occurring codes across the 113 tweets analysed. Overlapping with the conspiracy theories are the codes, (1) *Terrorist (Pakistan)*, i.e., Pakistan being identified as a Terrorist state, and (2) *Activity-benign*. Conspiracy theories, Terrorist (Pakistan) and India's *anti-terrorist* activities are connected with the thickest lines on the code map, forming a cluster based on their close proximity. Notably conspiracy theories and terrorist-Pakistan are almost *overlapping*, suggesting that many Twitter users perceive terrorist activities as being conducted with Pakistan's support and frame them within a conspiratorial narrative.

Conspiracy theories are therefore central to the Twitter discourse on the Pahalgam terrorist attack. This highlights the powerful role such narratives play in shaping the meaning and knowledge on

who the victim is, who is responsible for terrorism, how important religious identification when deciding the victimhood and the perpetrator, and most importantly, how people should respond offline (whether in harmful or benign ways). Thus the centrality of conspiracy theories illustrates their destabilizing effect on knowledge production in the post-truth era.

In the aftermath of the terrorist attack, India positions herself as an anti-terrorist actor and a victim of terrorism. This victimhood narrative is strongly tied to religious identification with Hinduism. It is also noteworthy that while both harmful/negative and benign offline activities commonly originate from conspiracy theories and India's anti-terrorist discourse, harmful offline activity requests are particularly related to hate speech while benign activity requests lead India to be self-critical of own behaviour. Thus, hate speech online can be a triggering factor of harmful/negative activity offline. At the same time India actively seeks legitimacy and support (especially international) for her anti-terrorist stance. Interestingly, the nodes on *legitimacy/support* are linked only to the anti-terrorist node, underscoring India's sensitivity to both international and domestic responses to her retaliatory measures.

Conclusions

The digital dimension of the Pahalgam attack reflects broader dimensions of the information warfare, where social media serves as a battleground for competing narratives and a tool for altering political attitudes. A key finding of the study is that the central role played by conspiracy theories on social media. Conspiracy theories strongly shape how people assign blame and define victims and perpetrators. It also polarizes communities and induces offline activity. This is strongly linked to destabilizing knowledge and truth in societies. Abundance of conspiracy theories jeopardize trust among people or between countries, and at the same time creates a bizarre situation where the demarcation between truth and credibility vs paranoia becomes blurred. As the findings suggest, social media discourse portray Pakistan as the terrorist *other* which is widely overlapping with conspiracy theories. Hate speech, conspiracy theories and calls for negative activity offline are strongly linked, suggesting that online

discourse can directly contribute to harmful offline behavior. India, in particular employs two primary frames for self-definition: portraying herself as a victim of terrorism and as an anti-terrorist actor.

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

Hideaki Shinoda

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,

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.⁵⁶

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.⁵⁷ 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

⁵⁶ See, for instance, Debidatta Aurobinda Mahapatra, *Conflict Management in Kashmir: State-People Relations and Peace* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 28-29.

⁵⁷ See, among others, Ankur Datta, *On Uncertain Ground: Displaced Kashmiri Pandits in Jammu and Kashmir* (Oxford University Press, 2017); Chitralekha Zutshi, *Kashmir's Contested Past: 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.⁵⁸ 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.”⁵⁹ 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

⁵⁸ See Introduction. See also Hideaki Shinoda, *Confronting Theories of Geopolitics* (Springer, 2025 forthcoming); and Hideaki Shinoda, *The Geopolitics of War* (Kodansha, 2023) (in Japanese).

⁵⁹ 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, *The 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.⁶⁰ 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 counterterrorism 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

⁶⁰ 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”.⁶¹ Meanwhile, the Maharaja initially sought to preserve independence, joining neither India nor Pakistan.⁶² 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.

⁶¹ Idrees Kanth, “Peasant Imaginaries and ‘Kashmiri Nationalism’” in Mona Bhan, Haley Duschinski, and Deepti Misri (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Critical Kashmir Studies* (Routledge, 2023), p. 32.

⁶² 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.⁶³ 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

⁶³ 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."

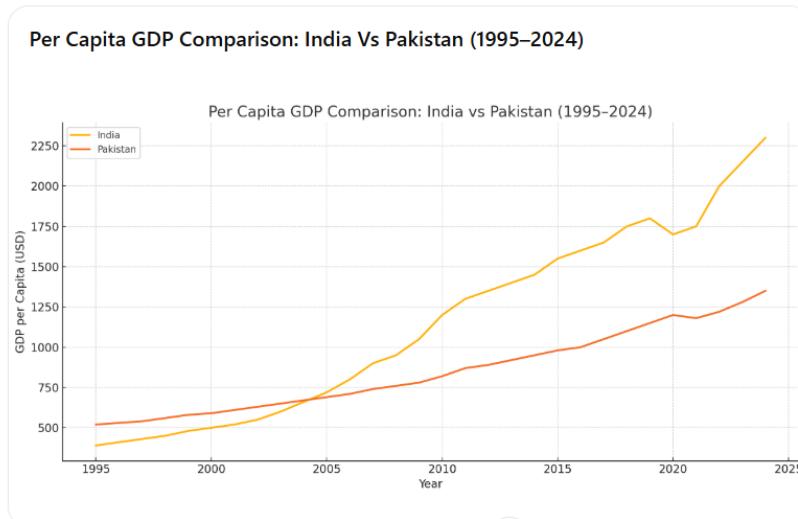


Figure 1: India and Pakistan—Nominal GDP per Capita (1960–2023)⁶⁴

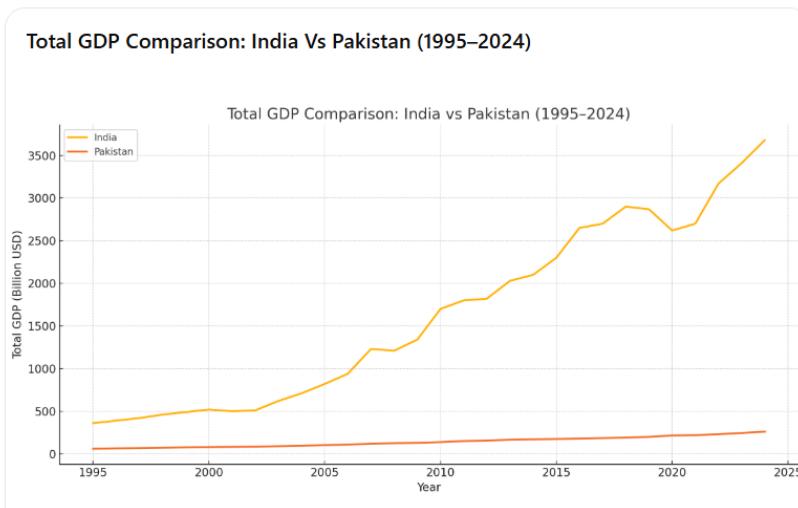


Figure 2: India and Pakistan—Nominal GDP (1960–2023)⁶⁵

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

⁶⁴ Created by the Author, based on data provided by the IMF, <https://www.imf.org/en/home>.

⁶⁵ 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”.⁶⁶ 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.⁶⁷ 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-

⁶⁶ 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.), *Routledge Handbook of Critical Kashmir Studies*.

⁶⁷ <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.⁶⁸

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

⁶⁸ 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."⁶⁹ 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

⁶⁹ "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.