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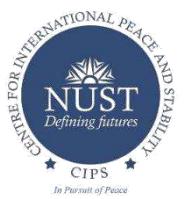
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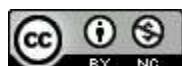
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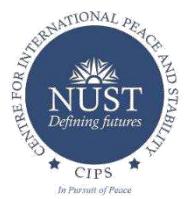
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Countering Radicalism: Pakistan's Pursuit of Peace and Stability

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Abstract

The global rise of radicalization has called for a deeper understanding of its complexities, particularly in Pakistan, where various extremist ideologies and groups operate. This study undertakes an inclusive examination of the factors driving radicalization in Pakistan, drawing on insights from policymakers, journalists, academics, security officials involved in countering violent extremism, and both government and non-government organizations. Through the lens of structural functionalism and critical terrorism studies, this study explores the functional needs of the state in countering radicalism in Pakistan, including the socialization of education, social control, and the role of law enforcement agencies. By employing a qualitative research approach through semi-structured and in-depth interviews, this study highlights that radicalization in Pakistan results from a complex interaction of historical, geographical, security, geopolitical, and foreign factors. Moreover, key socio-economic, political, and religious factors are identified as primary drivers, often interacting and exacerbating one another. The findings underscore the need for an all-inclusive strategy to address radicalization in Pakistan, with a focus on customized deradicalization approaches that reflect the country's unique context. The study further suggests that policymakers and practitioners must also consider the interconnectedness of these factors to effectively mitigate radicalization.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, Pakistan has been facing significant challenges due to the rise of radicalism and extremism, particularly among its youth. Addressing these issues has become paramount for national stability and security. The government's 'complex' approaches incorporate various strategies and initiatives aimed at countering

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radicalization and promoting peace within the country. Pakistan, a federal parliamentary democracy since 1973, grants its citizens fundamental rights through the Constitution of Pakistan (1973). However, the nation has endured terrorism for more than twenty years, resulting in the loss of over 83000 lives, financial damages exceeding 35 trillion Pakistani rupees (approximately $130 billion USD), and an increase in societal violence, extremism, and intolerance (National Counter Terrorism Authority Pakistan, n.d.).

To combat extremist ideologies, Pakistan has launched several counter-narrative campaigns. These initiatives involve partnerships with religious scholars, community leaders, and media outlets to promote messages of peace and denounce violence. By providing alternative perspectives and debunking extremist propaganda, these campaigns aim to undermine the appeal of radicalism. Similarly, radicalism is also a global issue that requires extensive international cooperation and collaboration. Pakistan has actively engaged with neighboring countries and global organizations to share intelligence, best practices, and strategies for countering extremism. Including joint efforts in border security, information exchange, and capacity building have strengthened Pakistan's ability to combat radicalism (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

Moreover, Pakistan has struggled with radicalism, which is deeply rooted in its turbulent history marked by decades of political instability, religious extremism, and geopolitical influences. Following independence in 1947, the country faced challenges in establishing a stable government. According to Cohen (2004), the founder, Mr Jinnah, envisioned a secular state; however, his successors struggled to uphold this vision. Meanwhile, the Objective Resolution of 1949, which declares Pakistan an Islamic State, marked a significant shift towards a religious-political ideology (Jalal, 2014). Later, General Zia-ul-Haq, who declared martial law in the country in 1977, brought Islamist groups to the forefront. Zia's Islamization policies, including the implementation of Sharia law, created an environment conducive to radicalization among youth (Haqqani, 2005). This led to the production of Mujahedeen (Islamic warriors who aim to protect Islam) in the country during the Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989), which intensified extremism and established Pakistan as a hub for the anti-Soviet Mujahedeen. The Soviet-Afghan war had a profound impact on Pakistan, transforming the country into a frontline state in the global fight against communism. The state of Pakistan, led by General Zia, collaborated closely with the United States and other Western powers to support the Afghan Mujahideen, a loose coalition of Islamist and nationalist groups, resisting Soviet occupation (Hoodbhoy, 2005).

Despite growing concerns over radicalization in Pakistan, there is a paucity of research that broadly examines the relationship of multiple factors associated with radicalization. Such factors drive radicalization through the perspectives of diverse stakeholders, including policymakers, academia, security officials, and non-governmental organizations, within the framework of structural functionalism and critical terrorism models. This limits our understanding of the functional requirements for an effective counter-radicalization strategy in Pakistan. Therefore, this study aims to explore the diversity of factors that pave the way for radicalization and the counterstrategies devised by the Pakistani state. It also seeks to investigate the effectiveness of these counterstrategies.

Research Methodology

Understanding radicalization in Pakistan requires a comprehensive approach grounded in rigorous research methodology. Existing studies on radicalization and extremism

contribute to a substantial body of literature; however, much of this work remains mainly descriptive or narrative in nature, rather than analytical. Therefore, this study uses a qualitative research design, which is well-suited for exploring complex phenomena such as radicalization. This approach enabled the collection of rich, contextual data through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with diverse stakeholders, including security experts, journalists, academics, and religious scholars. A purposive sampling technique was employed to deliberately select participants based on their relevance to the research objectives, rather than through random selection. Furthermore, a content analysis method was used to analyze the primary data collected through various interviews with government and non-governmental officials. This approach facilitated the identification of recurring themes and the exploration of the links between multiple factors that lead to radicalization in Pakistan, as well as possible steps to counter extremism. Such an approach provided a nuanced understanding of radicalization in Pakistan by integrating multiple perspectives and highlighting the complexity of this phenomenon.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in the comprehensive examination of multiple factors that fuel radicalization in Pakistan. Given the continued rise of extremism globally, this topic offers a comprehensive body of knowledge on radicalization and counterstrategies. Additionally, the discussion explores the complex interplay of historical, geographical, geopolitical, and security factors, offering important guidance for policymakers aiming to develop a contemporary and effective counter-radicalization approach.

Ethical Considerations

This study involves interviews with security experts and representatives from non-governmental organizations, such as the Media and NGOs. To ensure the integrity, transparency, and ethical aspects of this research, I took measures that aimed to protect the identity of respondents. All participants received detailed information about the aims and objectives of this study. They were also informed about the methodological design and potential risks and benefits involved. Consequently, the participants gave explicit consent, and their responses were recorded with their permission.

Theoretical Framework

To analyze the complexities of radicalization and explore its driving factors, researchers have drawn on several theoretical frameworks. In this study, I have used the Critical Terrorism model by Richard Jackson (2005), which asserts that state-centric approaches primarily aim to understand terrorism rather than emphasizing the need for nuanced and critical perspectives. Jackson's argument is based on the importance of contextualizing terrorism within historical and political settings. His thesis on the state's role in countering extremism and terrorism underscores how state actions and policies contribute to shaping the understanding of root causes. Jackson's work emphasizes an interdisciplinary approach that integrates insights from various fields, such as politics, history, and social contexts. Therefore, Jackson's model offers a valuable framework that emphasizes the need to move beyond a solely state-centric approach, which often focuses on security measures and military operations.

Such approaches include addressing socio-economic grievances, promoting inclusive education, and fostering critical thinking (Jackson, 2005). To expand our discussion, I have also adopted the Human Security model by Haq (1995), which guides

the study to examine the state's equilibrium. The model is based on the idea that all societal functions are interconnected and interdependent, which is necessary for a functioning society (Haq, 1995). Haq, the former finance minister of Pakistan, provides insight into human development by emphasizing the importance of protecting people from traditional threats like violence, extremism, hunger, and poverty.

Pakistan's Encounter with Rising Militancy

During the Cold War era concerning the Soviet-Afghan conflict, Pakistan and the United States cooperated in their efforts to oppose the Soviet Union in Afghanistan by providing support to the Mujahideen (Hughes, 2008; Hilali, 2017). After the disintegration of the USSR, the post-Soviet era witnessed the rise of jihadist groups, including the Taliban, which consisted predominantly of the Pashtun tribe and was an Islamic fundamentalist group. During this period, Pakistan's engagement with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan (1996-2001) contributed to the growing influence of radical ideologies (Rashid, 2010). The vulnerabilities were further increased by the large number of Afghan refugees from the Soviet-Afghan War, with about 3.4 million refugees estimated to have settled in Pakistan (Cone & Khan, 2023). Scholars have argued that the historical elements of Pakistan's regional security strategy have contributed to the persistence of militant groups, allowing them to flourish (Cohen, 2004). Additionally, successive political governments have exploited Islamist sentiments to legitimize their rule and divert attention from domestic challenges (Nasr, 2001). Therefore, the conflicts in the region created an environment that led many individuals, especially young people, to join and align with various fighting factions in Afghanistan. Their involvement exposed them to militant ideologies and combat training, which had lasting effects on Pakistan's social fabric. Additionally, with the shifting geopolitical landscape and Pakistan's alliance with the United States in the Global War on Terror, another wave of militancy emerged within the country. Groups like Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Lashkar-e-Tayyaba (LeT), and many others gained prominence, carrying out devastating attacks (Abbas, 2017).

In response to rising militancy and extremism, Pakistan introduced the National Action Plan (NAP) in 2015. The Pakistan Army conducted several military operations across western Pakistan, particularly in the former Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA), to counter terrorism. However, most of the NAP's actions remained inconsistently implemented as the country still faces threats of rising violent attacks from radical groups like TTP and Islamic State (IS). Along with the security issues, Pakistan has also faced challenges of widespread poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment. Pakistan's education system, on the other hand, particularly the madrassahs, has been criticized for promoting radical ideologies (Kalhoro & Cromwell, 2022). These factors have served as key drivers of radicalization, leading many individuals to join extremist groups that offer financial incentives and a sense of purpose.

The Complexities of Madrassahs

Madrassahs, also known as Islamic seminaries, have a long-standing presence in the subcontinent and experienced significant changes during the colonial period. Initially, madrassahs served as key centers for Islamic learning and social welfare. These institutions maintained a peaceful reputation, producing prominent Islamic scholars and providing free education, lodging, and food to unprivileged students. Before the inception of Pakistan in 1947, there were approximately 247 madrassahs (Khan &

Waqar, 2020). However, the onset of the Soviet-Afghan War marked a turning point, bringing a significant rise in the number of madrassahs and a shift in their objectives. In 1975, approximately 100,000 were enrolled in different madrasahs throughout Pakistan (Nasr, 2002). During General Zia-ul-Haq's regime (1978–1988), state patronage and geopolitical developments further accelerated this growth, with the number of madrassahs reaching 2,831. By 1998, this expansion had intensified, and in Punjab province alone, enrollments had surged to about 540,000 (Personal Communication, Feb. 7, 2025). Studies have further documented that between 1979 and 1989, around one thousand new madrassahs were established, financed and supported by the United States and Saudi Arabia, to train militants and mujahideen (Yoo, 2019). This era marked the growth of the militant narrative and led students toward radicalization. Additionally, after the Soviet withdrawal, the United States' rapid exit made Pakistan more susceptible to extremism and heightened internal security issues (Ibid, Personal Communication, Feb. 7, 2025).

The dynamics surrounding madrassahs changed following the 9/11 attacks and Pakistan's subsequent involvement in the Global War on Terror (GWOT). These developments resulted in increased scrutiny of madrassahs. Furthermore, considerable discourse surrounding religious seminaries emerged, as Western criticism prompted significant debate within Pakistan over the reform of its more than 37,500 madrassahs nationwide. It is observed that while these institutions continue to play an important religious, educational, and socio-political role, their overall image remains a subject of contention. Some scholars emphasize the need for madrassahs to focus on educational development and social welfare. In contrast, others associate them with the potential for breeding extremist tendencies. Despite reform efforts, progress has remained limited, primarily attributable to a lack of political will and opposition from rigid religious and political factions (Fair, 2008, 2012; Bashir & Ul-Haq, 2019). Moreover, recent counterterrorism strategies have refocused on madrassah reforms, emphasizing mapping, streamlining, and regulation. Nonetheless, the relationship between madrassahs and radicalization remains a complex and multifaceted challenge.

Madrassah Curriculum

Throughout Pakistan's history, the madrassah curriculum has significantly influenced the minds of future generations. However, the existing curriculum, known as Dars-e-Nizami, has been in use for over 500 years and needs to be enhanced to align with current educational standards. Developed by Mullah Nizamuddin Sihalwi in the 18th century, the Dars-e-Nizami syllabus has been widely adopted by traditional madrassahs, with Shia institutions being a notable exception. Unfortunately, the curriculum's outdated content and teaching methods hinder students' ability to develop critical thinking and analytical skills.

The students of madrassa rely heavily on classical commentaries and are involved in memorizing Arabic texts, primarily through rote learning, which hinders their understanding of the material's context and meaning. Scholars have criticized this traditional approach to learning for stagnating knowledge and limiting students' understanding of world affairs. Similarly, Winthrop and Graff (2010) observed that most madrassahs focus solely on rote memorization, failing to provide students with necessary vocational training or preparation for the real world. Furthermore, the curriculum has been criticized for encouraging intolerance and hostility toward differing secular and religious viewpoints (Kalhoro & Khan, 2022). The madrassah

curriculum, on one hand, emphasized extremist viewpoints, while on the other, it neglected the basic subjects of social and applied sciences.

Building on the above, there are two major issues plaguing the madrassah curriculum:

- Rigid sectarian interpretations foster hate and divisions within society.
- The misinterpretation of key concepts like Jihad, which promotes militancy over its true meaning.

To address these concerns, an inclusive curriculum reform is necessary. This reform should incorporate modern subjects, research, and comprehensive perspectives to provide students with a well-rounded education. Moreover, correcting misinterpretations of fundamental concepts like jihad is crucial to promoting peace and understanding. Thus, implementing these changes will require a strong political will and intent. Although the process may be time-consuming, the benefits of curriculum reform will ultimately extend to both students and the state, fostering a more informed, tolerant, and engaged citizenry. The revamping of the madrasah curriculum is an urgent necessity, one that holds the key to unlocking the potential of future generations and promoting societal harmony.

National International Security Policy (2014-2018)

The National International Security Policy (NISP) 2014-2018 was Pakistan's first-ever national security document, passed in 2014 by the federal cabinet. The 64-point policy document was designed to focus on the country's internal security policy. This policy underscores the necessity for a national narrative to effectively address non-traditional threats, leveraging the support of religious scholars, educational institutions, media outlets, and, most critically, intelligence agencies (NACTA, n.d.).

The NISP states that "Madrasah system cannot be excluded from the internal security parameters of the country" (NACTA, n.d.). This was mainly due to the unchecked proliferation of madrasahs running across the country. These religious seminaries were involved in shaping extremist ideologies and training individuals for violent acts, thereby impacting both national and regional security. The outdated curriculum of madrassahs not only caused alienation among the youth seeking religious education but also made them vulnerable to anti-state influences. Furthermore, women were not exempt from exposure to extremist ideologies within religious seminaries. A notable example is the 2007 Jamia Hafsa incident, where female madrassah students actively participated against the state, reflecting their degree of radicalization and extremism. The National Internal Security Policy (NISP) underscores this concern:

> Social harmony and national integration of Pakistan are the prime targets of extremists, terrorists and separatists. The concept of 'radicalization' literature in madrassas, wherein the complete rejection of other beliefs and sectarian indoctrination plays a critical role in dividing society and adding emotive fuel to existing divisions in society. Also, a large number of terrorists are either students of madrassas, where they were brainwashed to take up arms against the state. Therefore, madrassa and mosque remain an important point of focus for any government policy to stem the spread of violent extremism in Pakistan (NACTA, 2014, p. 28).

To address the threats from madrassahs, the NISP called for the regulation of madrassahs and mosques, assigning the NACTA this responsibility. The NACTA was also charged with legal reforms and mapping for the mosques and madrassahs to ensure the country's internal security.

Terrorism Financing for Madrassahs: An Assiduous Threat

Terrorism financing continues to be a major challenge for Pakistan, as it weakens the country's overall security infrastructure and harms political stability. Despite multiple efforts to curb terror financing, Pakistan continues to face an inflow of funds to certain madrassahs, which may perpetuate violence and instability. Militant organizations often disguise themselves as charitable entities and compete for donations from unwary individuals. A notable example is The Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD), which also operated under the name Falah-e-Insaniyat Foundation (FIF); such militant-affiliated groups have been banned by the Government of Pakistan (NACTA, 2021; United Nations Security Council, 2005). Similarly, in its report, the NISP highlights that "There was a problem with some madrassahs, which have spread extremism. Some troublesome aspects of these madrassahs, which impinge on national and internal security, include financing from unidentified sources; publication and distribution of hate material" (NACTA, 2014, p. 28). The report recommends that the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) investigate these issues, specifically examining banking transactions linked to these madrassahs to determine their funding sources and the functionality of the mosque.

Another challenge is Pakistan's porous border with Afghanistan and Iran, which facilitates the flow of illicit funds such as Hawalas or Hundi for anonymous transactions. Militant groups exploit these networks, leveraging donations from sympathizers and extortion from local businesses. The US State Department's report states that several terrorist organizations, including UN-listed groups, operated in Pakistan, raising funds through various means, including direct support, public fundraising, abuse of non-profit organizations, and criminal activities (U.S. Department of State, n.d.). Therefore, funds have been transferred through both formal and informal (hawala/hundi) channels.

Pakistan's former ambassador to the United States, Hussain Haqqani, emphasized that Pakistan's efforts to limit militancy within its borders have been recognized, and considerable progress has been made in reducing internal terrorism. However, efforts are still needed to counteract the use of Pakistan's soil against other countries. According to him, organizations such as the Afghan Taliban, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and Jaish-e-Mohammed are reported to have maintained operational networks despite international sanctions. Furthermore, incidents like the 2008 Mumbai attacks, attributed to Lashkar-e-Taiba, are often cited as examples of transnational terrorism that have challenged Pakistan's international reputation (Zafar, 2019).

Now, with the rise of recent violent incidents, such as the attack on a mosque in Peshawar that killed at least one hundred and wounded over two hundred people, the debate on countering terrorism has resurfaced. The banned outfit has also expanded its operations in the southern parts of Baluchistan and continued attacks on the Pakistani security forces (Center for Preventive Action, 2024). The challenge of rising terrorism in Pakistan was highlighted by the Prime Minister, who noted that "since August 2021, there has been a 60% increase in militant attacks and a 500% increase in suicide bombings, resulting in the deaths of over 2,200 Pakistanis" (Congressional Research Service, 2023).

To effectively counter terrorism, Pakistan needs to focus on curbing the financing of terrorist groups. In this regard, the country has yet to take some of the conducive steps or even fully implement the already defined policies, such as the Anti-Terrorism Act (1997), the Anti-Money Laundering Act (2010), and the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act (1947). The lack of coordination among institutions and fragmented frameworks poses significant challenges to the effective enforcement of these policies. Additionally, strengthening collaboration with international agencies is crucial to boost institutional capacity and resource mobilization.

Pakistan's Deradicalization Programme

The concept of radicalization or de-radicalization lacks a unified definition. The existing literature does not provide adequate references where different countries, across the globe, have adopted a singular denotation of this particular term. However, individuals who have already been influenced by radical ideologies identify deradicalization programmes as essential for rehabilitation. One of the examples is Pakistan's Deradicalization Programme, which was launched in 2009, aiming to rehabilitate former militants and prevent radicalization through a multifaceted approach. As discussed earlier, the decades of terrorism in Pakistan have severely affected the overall social fabric of the country.

To counter this menace, the government of Pakistan launched this deradicalization programme in order rehabilitate the militants who were captured during the military operations in different parts of Pakistan. In this regard, the programme encompasses rehabilitation centers, counter-narrative campaigns, community engagement, and economic empowerment. Thus, a network of rehabilitation centers was created across the country. Most of the centers were established in the north-west parts of Pakistan, which are close to the Durand line (Pakistan-Afghanistan border).

The *Saboon* Rehabilitation Center in Swat and the Habibullah Rehabilitation Center in Peshawar are the two centers that provide psychological counseling, vocational training, and Islamic education to help individuals reintegrate into society (Khan, 2010). Furthermore, a community engagement programme was also launched that connects the locals with the military officials in order to promote awareness campaigns about discouraging extremist ideologies and promoting inter-faith harmony in the country. The *Paigham-e-Pakistan* initiative, on the other hand, aimed at fostering a counter-narrative to extremist ideologies through media outreach, social media engagement, and community events (NACTA, 2024). Additionally, community-based programmes are focused on madrassah reforms, youth empowerment, and interfaith dialogue to prevent radicalization (PIPS Report, 2020). Some of the report shows that through this programme, militant recruitment is reduced by 40%, whereas terrorist attacks are reduced by 30% (Ali, 2020).

On the other hand, the National Counter-Terrorism Authority (NACTA) plays a critical role in Pakistan's Deradicalization efforts, particularly in the operation of rehabilitation centers. NACTA's responsibilities include coordination with law enforcement agencies, provincial governments, and other relevant stakeholders to ensure effective implementation of deradicalization programmes. It also develops and reviews policies related to deradicalization, ensuring alignment with national counter-terrorism strategies (NACTA, 2020). Additionally, the deradicalization programme has shown potential but still faces some significant challenges. Enhanced transparency, funding, and societal support are crucial for long-term success. Allocating sufficient

resources is equally important to strengthen the programme. Public awareness campaigns through media may promote acceptance and reintegrate deradicalized individuals.

Pakistan's Counter-Narrative on Religious Extremism

Since its inception in 1947, Pakistan has long struggled with religious extremism, which has threatened the country's stability, security, and social fabric. In recent years, however, Pakistan has made significant efforts to counter this narrative through a multifaceted approach that combines military actions, legislative measures, and social reforms. In 2014, Pakistan's military conducted Operation *Zarb-e-Azb* to combat religious extremism by targeting various terrorist groups in North Waziristan, significantly weakening their infrastructure and operational capacity at large. Then there are efforts among law enforcement agencies. These efforts have resulted in a significant decline in terrorist attacks from 2204 in 2010 to 319 in 2020 (South Asia Terrorism Portal, 2025).

Moreover, the 21st Constitutional Amendment and the Pakistan Army (Amendment) Act, 2015, empowered the military courts to try terrorism cases (Constitution (Twenty-First Amendment) Act, 2015). The Anti-Terrorism Act, 1997, has been amended to broaden the definition of terrorism and enhance penalties. (National Assembly of Pakistan, 2015). In the wake of the devastating Peshawar school attack in 2014, Pakistan unveiled the National Action Plan (NAP). As mentioned above, the NAP is a comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy aimed at combating extremism and terrorism. The NAP represents a significant shift in Pakistan's approach to addressing the menace of terrorism, which has plagued the country for decades. The NAP comprises twenty points, broadly categorized into five main areas:

- Law Enforcement and Counterterrorism: Strengthening law enforcement agencies, establishing the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA), and revamping the criminal justice system.
- Madrassahs Reforms: Registering and regulating madrassahs to prevent their exploitation by extremist groups.
- Media and Communication: Promoting counter-narratives to challenge extremist ideologies.
- International Cooperation: Enhancing regional and global cooperation to combat terrorism.

However, despite these efforts, challenges persist. Implementation of the NAP remains inconsistent, and some terrorist groups continue to operate freely (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Moreover, the judiciary's capacity to prosecute terrorism cases effectively remains limited. The presence of extremist groups in neighboring countries, such as Afghanistan, also poses a persistent threat.

Challenges and Future Directions

Pakistan's effort in countering radicalism is a composite and enduring challenge. Despite multiple efforts, several obstacles still hinder its progress. One of the significant challenges is the presence of eighty terrorist groups within its territories, such as Punjabi Taliban, ISIS-KP, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Lashkar-e-Omar, Sipah-e-Sahaba, Jaisha-ul-Adl, Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, etc. (South Asia Terrorism Portal, 2025). On the other hand, Pakistan's Islamic identity and the influence of religious leaders often make it difficult for the state to implement policies, which may be perceived as contradicting Islamic principles, for instance, the Blasphemy Laws, Women's Rights, Hudood

Ordinance, Education Reforms, Counter-Terrorism Laws, etc. Such policies witness impediments in their application, which clearly illustrates how Pakistan's Islamic identity and the political-religious groups' influence can produce challenges for the policy makers, seeking to implement reforms or laws. Such groups also exploit the country's porous borders, weak law enforcement, and inadequate intelligence gathering to maintain their presence. Additionally, Pakistan's complex and contradictory relationship with self-designed Islamic principles, exacerbated by the presence of radical groups, uses Islam to justify their violent actions.

Conclusion

Pakistan's effort to reduce radicalism is multi-layered and comprehensive in nature. The country has made significant strides in its effort to reduce radicalism. However, there are numerous reforms that are required for a sustainable future for the country. For example, the education sector in Pakistan requires a robust approach by making substantial changes in the existing curriculum. By focusing on education, counter-narrative, socio-economic development, deradicalization, law enforcement, and international cooperation, the country can create a more peaceful and sustainable society. While challenges remain, these initiatives reflect Pakistan's commitment to combating radicalism and fostering a brighter future for its youth.

With regards to the madrassah's role in reducing radicalism, the outdated curriculum, such as *Dars-e-Nezami,* cultivates animosity towards other schools of thought, both secular and religious. Furthermore, the madrassah education system not only glorifies violence in the name of religion, but it also neglects basic history, sciences, and other modern ways of learning. The government should address the madrassah curriculum issue by incorporating modern subjects and research, promoting inclusiveness, and correcting the misinterpretation of some of the key concepts, such as *jihad*. Furthermore, the government should also require a political will and intend to have a robust national narrative, which is crucial for sustainable success in countering extremism and terrorism. With regards to the radicalization in the country, the government of Pakistan needs to address the root cause by promoting discourse on socio-economic disparities and introducing poverty alleviation programmes such as job creation schemes and vocational training initiatives, to uplift the marginalized communities.

Pakistan's counter-narrative on religious extremism represents a significant shift in the country's approach to combating terrorism. In this regard, the country's deradicalization programme is a critical component of Pakistan's overall counter-terrorism strategy. However, while the deradicalization programme has made significant progress in rehabilitating former militants and fostering the counter-narrative campaign, it faces several challenges, such as a lack of funding, international support, corruption in the programme, and most importantly, a lack of expertise in deradicalization training. International cooperation and support are also essential in enhancing Pakistan's capabilities and addressing regional security concerns. While challenges remain, the country's progress in military action, legislative measures, and social reform demonstrates its commitment to countering extremism.

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India's Shifting Nuclear Doctrine and Its Impact on the Strategic Stability of South Asia

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Abstract

The paper analyzes the potential implications of transitioning India's nuclear doctrine from a No First Use (NFU) policy to a First Use (FU) policy. Based on neo-realist theory, the paper argues that India has been experiencing a shift in doctrine in its quest to acquire relative power vis-à-vis Pakistan and China. India's current policy, defined by strategic ambiguity, can be adjusted in response to evolving regional security dynamics. Nevertheless, the introduction of FU brings new complexities, and it may lead to the destabilization of the strategic balance and possibly an arms race in South Asia. India's aggressiveness underscores the logic of relative gains, in which maintaining its advantage over Pakistan is prioritized over the stability of the two nations. This may further lead to major economic problems for Pakistan, which is already struggling with heightened investment in national security, and raise the risk of entanglements between the two countries. The inherent ambiguity in India's nuclear doctrine also makes the command-and-control problems highly severe; hence, the risk of unauthorized or accidental use of nuclear weapons could also be on the rise. The research suggests that China's evolving strategic position may be a key factor driving this potential doctrinal shift, adding further complexity to regional security dynamics, particularly for Pakistan. The paper also highlights the importance of preemptive diplomacy, Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs), and greater transparency in India's nuclear policy for enhancing regional and global security.

Introduction

India's nuclear policy has consistently been based on the No First Use (NFU) principle. This policy was formalized in India's draft nuclear doctrine in 1999, before being consolidated in the 2003 official Indian nuclear doctrine (Bano, 2020). Lately, India's nuclear stance has slowly been shifting. Some recent Indian defense ministers have

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indicated that the NFU policy is not guaranteed and may change with evolving circumstances (Ehtisham, 2022). NFU of the Indian Nuclear Doctrine implies that the state will not ever be the first to use nuclear weapons in conflict, and the first use (FU) does not preclude the initial nuclear strike (Dalton, 2019). If implemented, this proposed change would shift from an FU policy, which could have serious implications for regional strategic stability and deviate from the Indian conventional policy paradigm.

Since its early days, India's nuclear strategy has centred on the NFU. A move to FU will lower Pakistan's nuclear threshold, the point at which a state might use nuclear weapons, creating uncertainty and increasing tensions. At the same time, India is modernizing its military and pursuing further superiority and relative gains, creating a security dilemma. From a technological perspective, the possible transformation of the country's nuclear policy raises concerns about the consequences for regional security, particularly for Pakistan and China. This move will have enormous consequences for the national security of both countries and strategic implications for regional stability.

Since independence, India and Pakistan have been engaged in multiple conflicts in which nuclear capabilities play an important role in maintaining strategic stability and act as a deterrent (Schumann, 2019). India's recent signals to reconsider its NFU policy have raised concerns about its commitment, thereby heightening tensions in Pakistan. How India's nuclear policies change can significantly alter the regional environment. In this paper, a thorough discussion is presented of how this shift would have a ripple effect across multiple areas. This altered nuclear doctrine can change the escalation scenario between India and Pakistan.

Introducing these factors will undoubtedly raise questions about the impact of balancing deterrence strategies, especially in an asymmetric context with Pakistan. The paper begins by tracing the development of nuclear policy in India, then examines how the policy evolved within the framework of neo-realism and concludes by evaluating the consequences of these changes for Pakistan and regional stability. To further structure and refine this study, the research addresses the following questions: (i) How does India's evolving nuclear doctrine affect regional stability in South Asia? (ii) How have India's nuclear policies developed over time? (iii) In what ways might this doctrinal shift contribute to crisis entanglement in the region?

Evolution of India's Nuclear Doctrine and Implications for Strategic Stability in South Asia

South Asia is home to two rival nuclear states, which exacerbate the nuclear dilemma in the region. The book 'Emerging Threats and Shifting Doctrines: The Current Challenges to Strategic Stability in South Asia' examines India's strategic move to deploy advanced technologies across sectors and, possibly, to shift from the NFU policy to an FU policy in nuclear strategy (ISSI, 2023). Additionally, India's steady progress in weaponry, particularly in its intelligence, reconnaissance, and surveillance (IRS) capabilities, is noteworthy. These capabilities are comparable to those of China. The book emphasizes the potential shift among leaders, who have traditionally avoided first use of nuclear weapons, towards contemplating the possibility of FU including pre-emptive strikes. These changes in the Doctrine are foreseen as a serious impediment to nuclear deterrence at the regional level, leading, most probably, to a 'race for arms' that will ensnare Pakistan's expenditure capabilities (ISSI, 2023)

Kazi (2014, p. 50) further highlights India's nuclear doctrine and posture. He also mentions the NFU policy of India, which states India "will not be the first to use nuclear weapons. Having stated that, there remains no basis for their use against countries which do not have nuclear weapons". This raises important concerns about whether the NFU policy of India applies to all states or just the states that do not possess nuclear weapons. This dilemma puts a huge question mark on India's NFU policy. In this paper, the author also notes several indications that India will reframe its nuclear policy. In its 2014 election manifesto, the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) indicated a revisit to the Doctrine to make it relevant to contemporary challenges (Kazi, 2014).

To further elaborate on the literature on the evolution of India's nuclear doctrine, Tellis (2019) examines the present state of nuclear weapons development in India and Pakistan, approximately 20 years after their 1998 nuclear tests. It seeks to assess the primary threats to regional security posed by nuclear weapons and how the international community can assist both countries in addressing them. While the document does not go into detail on China's nuclear program, it does underline the country's importance as a nuclear actor in the region (Tellis, 2019). Pakistan's nuclear capability is inextricably linked to Chinese funding. This may be one reason India is shifting its policy toward FU to contain China. This paper also underscores the technology and weaponry in which India is excelling, such as MIRVs, short-ranged submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and nuclear missiles like Prithvi-2, Agni (1-5), Dhanush SLBM, Brahmos, with advancements such as new development from Brahmos 1 to Brahmos 2 (Tellis, 2019).

Some studies delve into the fast-changing nature of nuclear doctrines, which depend on the evolution of threats and technological innovations. Sultan (2018) focuses on India's outdated 'period doctrine' in 2003, which is still facing challenges in adapting to the contemporary security environment, even though the government often emphasizes the multidirectional security challenges. This aggravates the difficulty further, causing India to plan its 'escalation dominance' over Pakistan and 'assured retaliation' against China. Furthermore, the disparity between India's claims and its actual nuclear posture may compel other countries to take offensive measures. As a result, the temptation to attack first will always exist, preventing the adoption of deterrence as the best means of ensuring long-term stability in this region. For India to articulate and make its nuclear strategy open, it has to provide information on the NFU of nuclear weapons as well as its approach to challenging reprisals. Furthermore, India should determine the minimum level of deterrence and the degree of reliability required to maintain its status as a legitimate nuclear state.

The literature in the context of India's Shifting Nuclear Doctrine and its Impact on Strategic Stability of South Asia emphasizes the necessity to investigate why India is changing its nuclear strategy. The current focus on potential causes for India's nuclear strategy shift frequently centers on its ties with China, as will be elaborated in the next sections. Furthermore, the danger that conventional and nuclear systems, including dual-capable missiles, will be difficult to distinguish during crises will be examined in this paper. This gap emphasizes the need for a more comprehensive knowledge of the precise elements impacting India's evolving nuclear strategy on regional stability and the extent to which it is influenced by its strategic interactions.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine India's evolving nuclear doctrine. Primary sources are official statements, defense white papers, peer-reviewed

journals, and organization reports like NTI and SIPRI that contain direct information on policy and capabilities. Secondary sources include scholarly books, think-tank publications, and reliable news sources, particularly those with a South Asian framework, to provide depth in context. This analysis follows the neo-realist model, where the study can interpret a change in its Indian doctrines as a result of security dilemmas and power politics, to evaluate its consequences for deterrence stability in South Asia. The study hypothesizes that the shifting nuclear doctrine of India has an adverse effect on South Asian strategic stability.

Discussion Analysis

The prospect of changes to Indian nuclear policy, specifically shifting the NFU's status to the FU, remains under discussion. This change, proposed by India's leaders, has geopolitical implications for stability in South Asia. Therefore, recent statements by Indian leadership suggest that the policy may be altered, with profound implications for the region's security dynamics. This could lead to new regional instabilities. The existing hostile environment between India and other nuclear powers, namely Pakistan and China, may become more strained. It can increase the likelihood of a lower nuclear threshold and the prospect of an arms race in the region. There may also be other adverse economic implications for Pakistan. Every shift in Indian nuclear policies and strategies raises the prospects of an escalating nuclear arms race in the region while putting pressure on Pakistan to divert its scarce resources towards defense, which greatly affects other areas that require focus. Moreover, it may result in a crisis of confusion, whereby conventional and nuclear crises become inextricable. This entanglement could increase the likelihood that a conventional conflict escalates to nuclear levels by blurring the distinction between the two. It can also impede decision-making during a crisis, increasing the likelihood of error or misjudgment. In this paper, these issues will be discussed in greater detail, with regard to the effects that changes in Indian nuclear policy may have on regional instability, arms buildup, and the economic factors that may affect Pakistan.

Evolution in Nuclear Policies of India

In 2003, the Indian Nuclear Security Advisory Board (INSAB) released the official Nuclear Doctrine (DND), which the Cabinet Committee on Security (CSC) reviewed and approved, making it the official nuclear doctrine of India (Rajagopalan, 2016). The doctrine of India about nuclear weaponry is built on the principle of NFU, which means that India will never be the initiator of a conflict by employing nuclear weaponry (Kanwal, 2001). This concept, called 'assured retaliation', was born on the basis that no one would dare to start a nuclear war if they had a clear idea of what the retaliation would bring – even a weak retaliation would be enough to deter the adversary. India's nuclear doctrine holds the concept of deterring the enemy by the threat of retaliation with weapons of mass destruction as a last resort. Nevertheless, being officially proclaimed as an NFU State does not stop India from deliberately keeping ambiguity in its nuclear doctrine.

India's nuclear policy is built on several fundamental cornerstones, each one playing a vital role in shaping its strategic attitude and guiding its nuclear actions. However, the most important aspect of these principles is a strong reliance on the NFU, which explicitly states that the country will not initiate a nuclear conflict under any circumstances (Sajjad, 2022). It not only forms an appropriate basis for Indian nuclear policy but also provides considerable support to regional and global stability by

lowering the risk of nuclear escalation. The doctrine reflects the official NFU line, known for its nuanced ambiguity, which allows flexibility and adaptability in responding to evolving security challenges while further enhancing its nuclear capabilities. In line with Shyam Saran's view, a former Indian foreign secretary, this ambiguity could be exploited by India to expand its nuclear arsenal and develop new weapons and systems, such as Multiple Independently Targetable Reentry Vehicles (MIRVs) and Ballistic Missile Defense Systems (BMDs) (Kanwal, 2016).

Alongside the NFU policy is the concept of 'assured retaliation', on which the deterrence crusade relies (Rajagopalan, 2016). This principle guarantees that any enemy who contemplates a nuclear attack on India will be subject to a credible and principally strong retaliatory response, thus deterring probable enemies and increasing the state's security (Ehtisham, 2022). At the heart of India's nuclear doctrine is the principle of Minimum Deterrence, which serves as a guide for the nation as it strives to develop a credible nuclear deterrent while simultaneously limiting the size and scope of its nuclear arsenal (Levesques et al., 2021).

When seen through the lens of neo-realism, by signaling towards a potential move to FU as opposed to NFU, India pursues relative gains, as opposed to parity. This move by India would be seen as an aggressive step, seeking excessive power without any limit. This aggression could lead to a security dilemma, where India and Pakistan are cause and effect to each other, as Pakistan perceives India to be threatening them, and in response, Pakistan will take various steps to spur the arms race and create greater instability in the region.

Furthermore, the lust for strategic advantage can be seen in India's rejection of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the pursuit of its independent nuclear weapons. This firm stance affects the nuclear stance and its interpretation by other countries. The highly assertive nature of India's nuclear policy, in combination with the ambiguity of its nuclear doctrine, can generate doubts about signaling India's intentions and management of perceptions (Zakre & Davenport, 2017). The mixture of resoluteness and ambiguity can be a source of tension, complicate crisis management, and may even lead to the miscalculation of strategic goals.

Shifting Nuclear Doctrine from No First Use to First Use

South Asia's changing security patterns have sparked debate in India about revising its long-standing NFU policy. In the neo-realist approach, the possible transformation of India from NFU to FU indicates its quest to survive and dominate in an anarchic system. While addressing concerns over Pakistan's growing nuclear arsenal, India's Chief of Army Staff, General Deepak Kapoor, advised that India reconsider its NFU strategy in light of allegations of Pakistan stockpiling more nuclear weapons (Subrahmanyam, 2011). This viewpoint was also echoed by Jaswant Singh, the former minister for external affairs, defense, and finance, who emphasized the importance of policy modifications in 1998 and 1999, citing the drastic shift in global and regional security (Tellis, 2019). Additionally, Shivshankar Menon (2018), the country's former National Security Adviser, stated several points regarding nuclear strategy that demonstrated flexibility beyond the standard NFU doctrine. According to Menon (2018, p. 110):

> There is a potential gray area as to when India would use nuclear weapons first against another NWS [nuclear weapons state]. Circumstances are conceivable in which India might find it useful to strike first, for instance, against an NWS that had declared it would certainly use its weapons, and if India were

certain that the adversary's launch was imminent. But India's
public nuclear doctrine is silent on this scenario.

Certain aspects of India's nuclear strategy, such as NFU against non-nuclear-weapon states, are quite conceptual and may not reflect the stance employed by fully-fledged nuclear-weapon states. Therefore, his 2016 assertion that India's nuclear policy has much broader elasticity than is given credit for suggests a preparedness to adjust to the dynamics of the security environment (Sundaram & Ramana, 2018). In the year 2012, a task force, under the chairmanship of P.R. Chari, a former civil servant from the Indian Defense Ministry, presented an alternative blueprint of Indian nuclear strategy, thus bringing to life the debate on future amendments to the current nuclear posture (Joshi, 2015). This reassessment might not only be complicated but also very confusing, causing large-scale instability and possibly grave implications. As a consequence, the Pakistani side can interpret such acts as the initiation of hostilities on the factual level, imposing a possibility of initiating a preemptive nuclear action under the cover of the FU policy of India.

The Underlying Motives of India's Nuclear Doctrine Shift

While Pakistan has long been India's primary security concern, China's nuclear program has played a significant role in shaping India's strategic outlook. China's NFU policy has prompted extensive debate and speculation about its nuclear posture. Since conducting its first nuclear test in 1964, China has consistently highlighted its commitment to the NFU policy, asserting that China would never employ nuclear weapons at any time or under any circumstances. This stance has been reaffirmed in China's defense white paper and official statements (Zhang, 2015). However, doubts remain about the true nature and flexibility of China's NFU policy, raising questions about its sincerity and posing challenges for countries like India. The NFU policy states that a nuclear-armed nation would never initiate conflict with nuclear weapons and would reserve its use solely for retaliation after a nuclear attack on its territory or military forces (Cunningham & Fravel, 2015). Critics argue that this policy lacks value because it is non-binding and subject to change. China is known to maintain its nuclear forces in a manner consistent with NFU criteria, with warheads stored separately from missiles, which reduces the likelihood of a preemptive nuclear strike. Nonetheless, China's potential policy shifts and rapid military expansion fuel ongoing speculation and discussions. These debates are intensified by ongoing conversations within China about the NFU policy.

Furthermore, the absence of explicit mention of NFU in the 2013 defense white paper has led to confusion over the policy's strictness (Blasko, 2013). For India, China's NFU policy creates significant uncertainty and raises concerns about potential policy changes, thereby affecting regional security. Both India and China officially subscribe to NFU policies, yet China's unclear stance and military modernization prompt India to reassess its nuclear strategy. India might need to bolster its nuclear deterrent and adopt a more flexible posture to address potential threats. This could include acquiring advanced missile defense systems, enhancing retaliatory capabilities, improving intelligence, surveillance, and analysis infrastructure, or even moving toward a FU policy (Hussain, 2024). Such shifts could explain India's evolving strategy toward containing China. Ultimately, the only way to maintain deterrence might be to declare the FU of nuclear weapons.

Implication for Regional Strategic Stability

Strategic stability at the regional level can be defined as a condition in which neither party is able to initiate a nuclear war. This maintains the stability through the concept of mutual assured destruction, where both countries possess nuclear weapons that, if used, will cause intolerable damage to one another, and thus the option of launching a nuclear attack is implausible.

As per the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) (2023), India owns about 164 nuclear weapons, whereas Pakistan holds approximately 170. An adjustment of Indian nuclear policy may destabilize this balance of equilibrium, escalating into an arms race. The intensifying arms race may also increase defense spending, thereby endangering the country's budget. The risks of an escalation of conventional wars to nuclear exchanges pose another significant problem. This change towards NFU could commence an arms race, forcing Pakistan to improve its nuclear arsenal and method of delivery to remain credible, thus undermining its economy and likely moving resources away from socio-economic progress.

Notably, the two countries have faced each other in four major wars and numerous minor skirmishes since gaining independence. India might adopt an FU policy that could lower the threshold for nuclear use, which may further lead to an increase in escalation during conflict in the future. Besides command-and-control problems, the nuclear infrastructure of Pakistan is also a serious issue. According to the Nuclear Threat Initiative's (NTI) (2023) nuclear security index, Pakistan scores 49/100 on nuclear materials security, indicating areas for improvement. The confusion and insecurity that stem from India's potential policy shift might intensify these issues, thus increasing the chance of unauthorized or accidental launch of nuclear weapons.

India's geopolitical and diplomatic outcome, due to a possible policy change, can be a wide spectrum. A nuclear deterrence shift of the balance of power could eventually transform not only the relationships between India and Pakistan but also China and the United States. As a result, U.S. policy toward the Indo-Pakistani arms race could be significantly reshaped. Economically, it could make the deviation of finances against development to defense notable since Pakistan is no exception to these effects. According to the World Bank (2024), Pakistan still allocates a low share of its annual gross domestic product (GDP) to health care and education. This occurs at levels of 2.3% and 0.9%. The allocated resources may be reallocated to reduce social-sector expenditure.

The Vicious Cycle of Arms Buildup and Fiscal Strain for Pakistan

This shift of India toward an FU nuclear posture instead of NFU would undoubtedly trigger a new arms race in Pakistan that would compel Pakistan to reduce the nuclear threshold and speed up the acquisition of advanced conventional and nuclear arsenals. A historical example is the Indian Cold Start-type limited-war doctrine that, although never fully operationalized, nonetheless increased the conventional-nuclear interdependence and compelled both parties into an expensive arms build-up, resulting in Pakistan acquiring a short-range ballistic missile, Al-Nasr, a Tactical nuclear weapon (TNW), that overstretched deterrence in South Asia and increased the possibility of escalation at the tactical level. The projected change in doctrine, therefore, would not only exacerbate the strategic dilemma but also divert scarce Pakistani resources from development into a constantly accelerating military-technology contest, thereby weakening long-term stability in South Asia.

On 1st February 2023, India increased its defense budget to 5935.38 billion INR (72.6 billion US$) (Mustafa, 2023). This is the 13% increment from the year 2022-23 initial estimated defense budget of INR 5251.66 billion (Mustafa, 2023). This increase in India's defense budget, as seen through a neo-realist lens, will be interpreted as India seeking relative gains against Pakistan. This compels Pakistan to counter-build despite its less stable economy, illustrating the traditional security dilemma in which measures taken to secure one state create insecurity for another. Responding to India's increase in its nuclear aggressiveness, Pakistan ended up having to allocate more of its scarce budgetary resources to defense expenditures. In response to a question at the annual Air Force Day press conference in 2017, Air Chief Marshal BS Dhanoa stated, "As far as the Air Force is concerned, it is not only with tactical nuclear weapons, but any target across the border; we can locate, fix, and strike targets across the border" (Unnithan, 2017).

As a result, there is a high likelihood that Pakistan's capacity to allocate additional resources to socio-economic development will be severely constrained, leading to stagnation or decline in areas essential to the country's development. Consequently, Pakistan's allocation of a larger defense budget to counter India's counter-movement may strain the country's already limited financial resources, leading to cutbacks in other important development projects and fueling an arms race in Pakistan. In the years 2023-2024, a 16% increase in the Defense budget of Pakistan has been noted from Rs1,804 billion compared to the revised defense spending of Rs1,591 billion (Yousaf, 2023). Moving with the same speed, Pakistan could be subjected to the additional burden of having to increment defense budgetary allocation to achieve the desired level of credibility in deterrence with India, which has reportedly been considering a change in its nuclear posture (Mills, 2022). Such escalated military spending may create problems of financial discipline, and resources might be spent on the war front at the expense of education, health, and infrastructure.

Moreover, Pakistan has to buy advanced weaponry and delivery tools to keep pace with India, which in turn would trigger India to procure more advanced systems, resulting in a constant spiral towards arms build-up with no end. The ongoing race to develop military plus the possibility of an arms race pose a challenge to regional economic safety and stability in South Asia (Khan, 2014). Unfortunately, Pakistan's economy is in a dilemma. Currently, the country's real GDP growth, at 1.8% in FY24, is unsatisfactory (World Bank, 2024). The government is also tightening its fiscal policies, and the inflation rate is 26.0%. The underlying issue of poverty persists at 40%, compounding further with a fiscal deficit of 8% of GDP (World Bank, 2024). The arms race will, though, enhance the problems facing countries, for instance, straining budgets and obstructing efforts to revive economies. Thus, the shift of resources away from education and health to defense is an example of how the security dilemma causes not only strategic but also socio-economic implications. This arms competition does not exist in a vacuum; rather, it contributes directly to the threat of entanglement, where conventional-nuclear lines are lost in crisis circumstances.

Risk of Nuclear Entanglement
The nuclear entanglement concept implies the complicated intertwining of non-nuclear and nuclear military systems (Acton, 2019). Transitioning India's nuclear doctrine from NFU to FU will generate a profound nuclear intricacy in South Asia. Such a scenario offers a new dimension of strategic uncertainty, for it obscures the distinction between conventional warfare and nuclear conflict. It can increase the possibility of escalation

from traditional conflict to the use of nuclear weapons when added to the existing tensions and military conflict between India and Pakistan. In the national security context, entanglement has a dual meaning. First, it suggests the interconnectivity and interdependence of policy-making and subsequent consequences, finally leading to a web of micro and macro interactions. The idea of this paradox is related to the concept of quantum entanglement, where the states of two particles remain interconnected despite the distance between them (Acton, 2019). Given India and Pakistan's history of conventional conflicts and crises, the possibility of an FU policy is more probable to destabilize the relationship further. The uncertain nature of India's nuclear doctrine, with the shift towards a diverse approach, would confuse Pakistan, and it could take a reactive measure, therefore, increasing the risk of non-nuclear conflict escalating into a nuclear one. The adoption of India's Nuclear Doctrine from an NFU to FU would lead to a complicated holdup of the national security dynamics of both India and Pakistan.

Such is the FU policy conundrum that would open a new phase of dilemma and uncertainty for both Pakistan and India. Apart from ensuring strategic ambiguity, which provides flexibility and different advantages of deterrence, it also brings complexity in crisis management and decision-making at the strategic level. Given the real-time example of a BrahMos missile accidentally falling into Pakistan in 2022, which demonstrates the severe dangers of South Asian entanglement, the dangers would only increase if India officially abandons its NFU policy in favor of FU posture (Korda, 2022). India's NFU position during the accidental launch conveyed a sense of restraint, as Pakistan was more likely to perceive the incident as an accident rather than a deliberate nuclear attack. Nonetheless, concerning a doctrine of FU, any subsequent misfiring of a dual-capable system such as BrahMos would be misunderstood by Pakistan to have been an act of preemptive nuclear attack, particularly with a lack of dependable communications systems and where severe time constraints were in decision-making processes. In a state of anarchy where there is no central power to ensure security, Pakistan cannot risk thinking of benign motives when a dual-capable missile is shot on its land. With the threat of destruction, the leadership may be tempted to respond on the spot, and a conventional mishap may turn into a full-scale nuclear war. So, the doctrinal change in India not only reduces the nuclear threshold but also intensifies the misperception and miscalculation risks, where any technical error can cause disastrous results between the two states and the region at large.

Moreover, this indeterminacy might cause difficulties in the communication of intentions as well as the shaping of perceptions, which in turn could have an impact on India's strategic relations with other nuclear-armed states, including China. Therefore, under neo-realism, the doctrinal change of India increases the risks of entanglement, as any mistake can turn into a whole nuclear confrontation based on misconceptions, survival instincts, and the logic of the international system competition. This transmutation in India's position in the world would require a re-evaluation of its general strategic outlook and regional ramifications for stability. For instance, Pakistan's opinion of India's strategic assessment would likely influence its national security. The status of India's nuclear mission is uncertain, which in turn leads to the evaluation of uncertainties and challenges associated with defining India's nuclear behaviors and judgment lines. This would result in more insecurity and frustration, where Pakistan will have to readjust its inner logic of strategic thinking, as the entanglement being caused by India will demand an analysis of the regional stability implications. In addition to this, the complexity of this policy shift is significant in the

political and diplomatic arena. It can affect Washington, Beijing, Delhi, and Islamabad to strike a balance, and they might have to establish regional security architecture and crisis management mechanisms effectively. The strategic exchanges between contending countries, as well as the implications of these decisions, determine the intricacies and interconnected character of regional security.

Conclusion

This paper explored the potential transition of India to a FU nuclear posture, as opposed to an NFU, and its significant implications for the strategic stability of South Asia. India has a long history of nuclear doctrine rooted in the NFU, but with the steady increase in indicators of flexibility and pressure, there is potential for a shift in nuclear doctrine. This change, when examined in the context of neo-realism, indicates that India seeks relative gains and strategic advantage in an anarchic system; at the same time, it creates a strategic dilemma, forcing Pakistan to lower its nuclear threshold and intensify security measures. The ensuing arms race pulls limited resources of Pakistan away, into defense spending at the expense of the socio-economic development of Pakistan, further straining the finances and compromising long-term stability.

The vague stance of India, as well as the modernization of its defense, heightens the risks of nuclear entanglements in areas of overlap between conventional and nuclear. The accidental launch of the BrahMos missile highlighted how, under a potential FU doctrine, such an incident could be misinterpreted by Pakistan as a deliberate nuclear strike, thereby significantly increasing the risk of rapid escalation toward a full-scale war. This intricacy, together with ineffective communication channels and tight decision-making schedules, increases the risk of erroneous calculation. Lastly, the regional balance of power, particularly China's influence, shapes India's nuclear calculus and further complicates the security situation. India's ambitions to balance China by asserting doctrines create even greater insecurity for Pakistan, resulting in a vicious circle of competition that disrupts the already delicate balance in the region. Considered in combination, the shifting nuclear posture in India reveals the convergence of doctrinal ambiguity, arms accumulation, and strategic rivalry under neo-realism, which undermines deterrence stability, strains economies, and increases the likelihood of escalation in the South Asian crisis.

An active and well-rounded approach is needed to mitigate the complexities and challenges that may arise from a shift in India's nuclear doctrine from NFU to FU. Such strategies would comprise diplomatic, strategic, and confidence-building measures operating in concert to mitigate the risks associated with this policy. The first step could be for India to take transparency seriously in its nuclear doctrine, rather than maintaining strategic ambiguity. While the uncertain nature of ambiguity has created flexibility and impeded escalation, uncertainty may intensify tension and misunderstanding. The transparent approach is one of India's key strategies for signalling its intent, perception, and apprehension of escalation risk. However, articulating the circumstances under which India would resort to nuclear FU policy may be the first step to providing more transparency about its nuclear thresholds and redlines. Second, strengthening the institutions of CBMs should be a priority for India and Pakistan to mitigate the complexities associated with policy shifts. CBMs undoubtedly possess enormous power in reducing tensions, preventing the escalation of conflicts, and promoting mutual trust. This could comprise steps such as establishing direct communication channels between the military and political leadership of the two

countries, increasing transparency of nuclear capabilities and intentions through various means, and holding regular high-level meetings on nuclear issues.

The third step for India and Pakistan is to hold comprehensive bilateral dialogues to address outstanding issues and security concerns. These meetings provide an opportunity for both countries to discuss their issues, resolve their differences, and consider establishing joint security mechanisms. Frequent dialogues are an effective tool to fortify the ties of mutual understanding, promote openness, and contribute to the process of normalizing the relations. Lastly, the major powers such as the United States and China can play an important role in promoting stability in South Asia. This may include facilitating dialogue, supporting CBMs, and encouraging renewed engagement on nuclear risk reduction initiatives.

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Gender Disparities in Climate Change Policies: A Case Study of Pakistan

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Abstract

Climate change poses significant challenges for Pakistan, a country increasingly affected by extreme weather events such as heatwaves, heavy rainfall, and the devastating floods of 2022 and 2025. These challenges are further exacerbated by gender inequality, which leaves women more vulnerable due to limited access to resources and restricted decision-making power, particularly in rural and agricultural communities. This study examines gender-based disparities in Pakistan's climate change policies, with a specific focus on the National Climate Change Policy (NCCP) and the Climate Change Gender Action Plan (ccGAP). Using an ecofeminist framework, the study finds that although these policies acknowledge the role women play in climate adaptation, their participation largely remains symbolic and constrained by prevailing socio-cultural norms. The research highlights the need for targeted institutional reforms, enhanced female participation in climate governance, and community-based programs that integrate women's agency and knowledge. To strengthen resilience and achieve equitable adaptation outcomes in Pakistan, climate policies must become more inclusive.

Introduction: Gender, Climate Vulnerability & Ecofeminist Perspectives

Pakistan is ranked as the most climate-vulnerable nation in 2025 due to the consequences of climate change and natural disasters such as floods, droughts, and earthquakes (Adil et al., 2025). The issue of gender inequality, in conjunction with the

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climate problem, poses a significant and pressing concern in contemporary society. The phenomenon presents many risks to the lifestyles, occupations, well-being, and overall welfare of women and girls across the globe. Throughout history, there has been a persistent challenge for climate change scientists, researchers, and policymakers in establishing the crucial linkages between gender, social equity, and climate change. With the increasing availability of data and research findings, it is imperative to engage in a discussion regarding the distinct consequences of climate change and the interconnectedness between women's empowerment and the efficacy of worldwide climate action.

The impacts of climate change exhibit variations among individuals due to factors such as age, geographical location, sex, adherence to gender norms, and socioeconomic status. The National Climate Change Policy (NCCP) acknowledges the susceptibility of women, elderly individuals, and persons with disabilities, particularly regarding evacuation methods (Ministry of Climate Change & Environmental Coordination, 20021; Khan, 2023). Additionally, it highlights the vulnerability of rural women in the agricultural sector. The significance of this emphasis is justified, as women make up 49% of the rural population involved in agricultural and animal activities. The occurrence of extreme events in recent years has had a detrimental effect on production, livelihoods, and food security in these sectors. Furthermore, the occurrence of climate shocks has resulted in movement, particularly male outmigration, exacerbating the susceptibility of women to various forms of violence (Memon et al., 2023).

This phenomenon also contributes to an increased burden for women, a loss of financial autonomy, adverse health outcomes, and a diminished capacity for decision-making and negotiation. The integration of a gender perspective into the discourse on climate change is a relatively recent development globally. Within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) forums, member states face significant challenges in demonstrating their commitment to adopting gender-responsive approaches in climate policy and implementation (UNFCCC, n.d.). The UNFCCC first acknowledged the connection between climate change, food security, and women's poverty at the Rio Summit in 1992 and emphasized it at numerous Conference of the Parties (COP) meetings (Masud & Khan, 2024).

The 2015 Paris Agreement and COP23 Gender Action Plan emphasize including women in climate policy through gendered mainstreaming. However, Pakistan's climate framework struggles to turn these principles into practical outcomes. Despite policies like the ccGAP acknowledging women's roles, research on gender disparities is lacking, making it harder to assess how policies support or hinder women's climate involvement. (Bajwa et al., 2023).

In order to close this gap, the present study analyzes the gender-based disparities in Pakistan's climate change policies and identifies the institutional and sociocultural barriers that prevent women from effectively participating in climate decision-making. By doing this, it aims to contribute to the broader discourse about sustainable policy reform and gender-responsive climate action. This study holds significant value for policymakers and development professionals to create inclusive strategies that improve women's resilience and strengthen Pakistan's overall capacity to adapt to climate change.

In the context of South Asia, where women frequently experience significant societal pressures, climate change emerges as a pressing concern. The floods that occurred in Pakistan in recent times have demonstrated that women are

disproportionately affected by the consequences of the climate crisis (Ullah et al., 2024). A paradoxical display of scarce water availability and catastrophic climatic events, namely floods, caused catastrophic effects on women. However, despite their susceptibility, women frequently encounter exclusion from discussions regarding potential remedies.

It is significant to mention here that 80% of those displaced as a result of climate change are women (Ahmed et al., 2023). This disparity can be attributed, at least in part, to factors such as limited access to education and a lack of personal agency. Within the population of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and climate refugees, it is evident that women shoulder a disproportionate burden of unpaid labor and caregiving responsibilities.

The issue of environmental degradation is known to have a significant impact on the occurrence of zoonotic illnesses, instances of school exclusions, and incidents of domestic violence. These adverse consequences further exacerbate the burdens faced by women in society. Notwithstanding, or perhaps due to this, Ecofeminism has emerged as a formidable influence (Khan, 2023). This particular school of thought (and movement) advocates for the active involvement of women in addressing environmental issues and emphasizes the potential for empowerment via their significant contributions in combating climate change.

Research Methodology

The study exclusively relies on secondary data obtained from documentary sources. Relevant data were extracted from textbooks, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, and official documents, including the NCCP and the ccGAP. Furthermore, reliable internet databases and official government websites are utilized in this study to ensure the inclusion of up-to-date data. Every document used in the study was publicly accessible and chosen for its applicability to Pakistani policy development, gender, and climate change.

A qualitative research design was employed for a thorough investigation of gender disparities in climate policy frameworks. This approach enables the interpretation of intricate social phenomena that are difficult to fully capture through quantitative methods, such as gender roles, cultural norms, and power dynamics. In order to investigate how current policies address or restrict gendered aspects of climate change, the study used both explanatory and descriptive methodologies.

The analytical process involved thematic content analysis of the data. Text was thoroughly examined to find recurrent themes, policy gaps, and trends about women's representation, participation, and vulnerability in climate governance. By manually coding the data, the researcher was able to group the information under thematic headings like gender mainstreaming, institutional barriers, and policy inclusion. Ecofeminist theory, which highlights the connection between gender and environmental justice, was used to interpret these themes.

For this study, the use of a qualitative document analysis approach is especially appropriate since it allows the researcher to assess current frameworks in a critical manner. It also draws attention to discrepancies between national implementation and international commitments and offers contextually sound suggestions for improving gender-responsive climate policies in Pakistan.

Climate Change and Pakistan

In 2025, Pakistan experienced the most severe monsoon floods in forty years, beginning in late June and lasting until mid-September. Heavy and prolonged rainfall in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Gilgit-Baltistan, Punjab, and Sindh resulted in riverine and flash floods, breaking major rivers and flooding vast areas. There was substantial damage to homes, schools, infrastructure, and farmlands, affecting around 4.9 million people (UNOCHA, 2025). The tragedy severely disrupted access to basic services and livelihoods, particularly in Punjab's floodplains. Significant response and financial shortages remain, particularly in early recovery and resilience operations, despite humanitarian partners increasing life-saving relief across vital sectors.

Climate disasters disproportionately affect women in Pakistan, as they manage households with little resources, care for parched fields during droughts, and carry children during flooding. Despite employing more than 67% of the nation's agricultural workers, they are mostly overlooked by the laws designed to protect them. Pakistani women, who are ranked last out of 148 countries for gender equality, face the climate crisis with little assistance, voice, or recognition. According to UN data, as elaborated by Kundi (2025), women account for over 80% of caregiving activities and make up the majority of displaced individuals; nonetheless, their challenges are rarely acknowledged in policy discussions. With a score of 56.7%, Pakistan ranks bottom in the World Economic Forum's 2025 Global Gender Gap Report, suggesting a systematic disregard for women's concerns in both policy and practice. (Kundi, 2025).

Pakistan, like several other nations, has faced difficulties in harmonizing its climate policy and implementation frameworks with the swiftly evolving requirements on the ground. In various contexts, the policy process has involved a lengthy and contentious discussion among individuals or groups with a vested interest, where the need to tackle important challenges requires making difficult choices between preserving the environment and improving human adaptability. In recent years, there has been increased awareness and consideration for vulnerable populations, particularly about the difficulties faced by women. However, when evaluating the effectiveness of climate policies, the outcomes are generally limited, if not nonexistent.

Pakistan remains highly susceptible to natural disasters due to the frequent occurrence of such events, its reliance on natural resources for sustenance and livelihoods, and the high number of people exposed to the impacts of climate change (Fayaz et al., 2024). Pakistan is ranked 18th out of 191 nations in terms of its vulnerability to earthquakes and internal conflict related to earthquakes and internal conflict (World Bank Group, n.d.). Scholars have highlighted that approximately 39% of Pakistan's population, which amounts to 220 million people, is currently enduring multidimensional poverty (Saddique et al., 2023). Additionally, up to 36% of households in the country are grappling with food insecurity (State Bank of Pakistan, 2019). The glacier-fed Indus River system is crucial for 90% of the agriculture industry, which in turn employs 42% of the labor force (FAO, 2018). Approximately 80% of urban residents lack access to potable water (Pakistan Today, 2025)

Pakistani cities have the highest ranking in terms of air pollution, and the presence of haze has reduced life expectancy by five years in Punjab and other regions (Farah et al., 2023). Pakistan has made significant progress in revamping its climate policy framework in recent years. Pakistan's newly implemented NCCP (2021) and the submission of the revised Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) highlight the country's fresh climate objectives and acknowledge the specific challenges faced by women in climate crises (Government of Pakistan, 2021). The emphasis on nature-

based solutions for mitigating climate change is commendable, especially through the Ten Billion Tree Tsunami Project. This project aims to capture approximately 150 million metric tons of carbon dioxide by 2030, alongside other efforts to reduce carbon emissions and promote economic growth (Ministry of Climate Change and Environmental Coordination, 2021).

Having already accomplished Goal 13 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) two decades prior, Pakistan is well-positioned to provide reliable guidance on climate action (Gopang, 2024). Simultaneously, it is imperative to prioritize SDG Goal 5, which focuses on achieving gender equality and requires addressing significant obstacles. Nevertheless, facilitating adaptation is a significant challenge in Pakistan's varied landscapes and communities, where vulnerability and resilience characteristics differ. There are inherent limitations in our ability to support communities in the field of climate, similar to other social areas such as healthcare or education.

The COVID-19 epidemic exerted significant pressure on the capacity of federal and provincial governments to provide fundamental rights and benefits to citizens while simultaneously providing substantial financial assistance to certain economic sectors and expanding social safety nets (Ahmed & Luqman, 2024). The severe economic recession that ensued has diminished household earnings and intensified poverty. The decline in Pakistan's HDI ranking (154th) can be attributed to both the lack of significant investments in human development throughout history and the persistent inefficiency in governance (UNDP Pakistan, 2024)

The issue of climate change requires policy action from both the government and society as a whole. However, current policy agendas largely consist of ad hoc responses to catastrophic weather events, and responsibility for addressing climate change is rarely shared across government departments. In Pakistan, climate change is recognized as a primary concern; however, it is generally accorded less priority than other crises addressed by federal or provincial decision-makers (Nasir et al., 2024). This pattern aligns with findings that Pakistani citizens perceive water scarcity and air pollution as significant threats to their livelihoods yet lack adequate information on adaptation and mitigation strategies and awareness of early warning systems for natural disasters.

Gender imbalance in Pakistan has long been a prevalent concern, and the escalating global warming phenomenon poses a significant threat with various catalytic effects on women. The situation is further exacerbated by the adverse effects of climate change. By implementing inclusive policies, it becomes possible to clearly define women's roles as recognizable obligations (Khan & Naeem, 2024). Furthermore, during a period of significant transformation, the inclusion of diverse perspectives can pave the way for effective mitigation and adaptation strategies. Vulnerable populations, including women and children, are often not actively engaged in action plans aimed at addressing the impacts of change and facilitating adaptation.

The governmental body responsible for overseeing and managing national disaster-related affairs is commonly referred to as the Ministry of National Disaster Management, which addresses all climate-related matters and Natural disasters. Pakistan revised its NCCP in 2021 (Shah et al., 2024). Simultaneously prioritizing both adaptability and the focus of mitigation techniques, and its primary emphasis on Nature-based solutions refers to approaches that utilize the inherent capabilities of natural ecosystems to address various environmental challenges.

The ccGAP actively advocates for gender equality (Asadullah et al., 2023). Incorporating women into the framework of core values. The evolution and formulation

of regional and nationwide policy Programs. Furthermore, it actively upholds its inclusive policy. The topics under consideration include conversation, capacity building, and pilot initiatives regarding women. Among the multitude of parties are prominent sector specialists affiliated with the IUCN. The entities involved in this context include the government, civil society, and think tanks. Academic leaders were convened as an integral component of the event (Lammers et al., 2024).

The procedure aimed at bolstering the role of women in climate-related endeavors. Individuals are taking proactive measures and enhancing their ability to adapt and persevere in challenging circumstances. The consequences are associated with climate change. Climate change is the most serious and urgent challenge we face. There is no need for additional evidence to demonstrate the rapid and widespread transformation that technology is causing in our environment. We also cannot question its lasting influence on our livelihoods, health, and lifespan. What we require is a strategy for ensuring our existence that strengthens our resources to confront the climate crisis and protects our communities from its unyielding assault (Bryan et al., 2024).

It is imperative to prioritize regional and international coordination, cooperation, and the exchange of evidence to ensure collective existence. Governments possess diverse capabilities and restrictive limitations that impede their ability to address global concerns, even under optimal circumstances; civil society also faces similar obstacles that are deeply entrenched in daily challenges for survival, progress, and protection against potential threats or risks. There is no way to overcome the climate challenge, anticipating a single entity to address the stresses encountered due to the deterioration of the environment and the resulting negative impact on society and the economy. Demands for comprehensive government involvement mean that the entire society must coordinate its efforts and work together. The utilization of resources has undeniably resulted in increased coordination (Sadruddin, 2024). The consequences of climate action, but the overall opposing power to the urgency to address climate stress must be heightened as we continue.

Climate Change Policies of Pakistan

For the past decade, Pakistan has continuously improved its official framework for addressing climate change through international obligations and changing national requirements. The primary papers that guide climate interventions in Pakistan are the NCCP, the Framework of Implementation of Climate Change Policy (FICCP), and the NDC. Some of these policies have undergone multiple revisions. The Planning Commission of Pakistan commenced a series of expert deliberations in 2008, leading to the creation of a report by the Task Force on Climate Change in 2010. This report served as the foundation for the development of the initial NCCP in 2012 (Sargani et al., 2023).

The Framework for Implementation of Climate Change Policy was developed and notified in 2013. During this time, the Paris Agreement (2015) was in effect, and Pakistan's NDC was requested. The contribution was made in 2016 by the government of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N). Subsequently, during the administration of Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI), NCCP was revised and officially announced in 2021, along with a revised version of the National Determined Contributions submitted to the UNFCCC in the same year (Ahmad et al, 2024).

Looking back at this timeline makes it easier to see and compare how climatic goals have changed, how national identity has been shown, and how much attention

has been paid to gender issues in these records. It is crucial to analyze these documents to enhance our capacity to address the climate challenge effectively while preventing the recurring oversights that result in further marginalization of certain demographic groups, despite the well-meaning policy actions taken (Lammers et al., 2024). The following analysis will illustrate multiple instances of policy omissions as well as several path-dependent formulations that could be improved through course adjustments.

This analysis primarily relies on the gender elements embedded in the national policy framework. The assessment focuses on assessing the efficacy of our policy tools in mitigating the hardships faced by women during climate-induced stress. The main focus of this study is to assess if these policies can effectively enhance resilience and decrease vulnerability, as well as the specific approaches they adopt to achieve climate fairness (Sadruddin, 2024). Examining these documents is crucial to enhancing our capacity to address the climate crisis while preventing recurring oversights that result in increased marginalization of specific demographic groups, despite well-meaning policy responses. The analysis demonstrates that several structural flaws and omissions still exist in the creation of climate policies; these need to be fixed quickly to guarantee gender responsiveness and inclusivity.

This analysis further explores the NCCP of 2012 and 2021, as well as the FICCP of 2013–2030, which share some similar interventions and suggested measures. Pakistan's NCCP of 2012 and FICCP of 2013 were formulated to address climate deterioration by implementing measures based on climate research (Shah et al., 2024). From an Eco-economist perspective, however, the technical-administrative orientation for climate management relies on scientific assessments that quantify the depletion and acquisition of environmental resources.

This strategy relies on standardized governance and planning in environmental sectors, linear policy procedures, and economic rationality, reflecting confidence in technology's ability to overcome ecological and resource deficits while overlooking the gendered and social aspects of climate vulnerability. Similar to international climate frameworks, Pakistan's policies place a high priority on technical adaptation and mitigation strategies. Although this approach improves administrative effectiveness, it frequently ignores the adaptive knowledge and lived experiences of marginalized groups, especially women. Following the same pattern, the NCCP 2021 offers a thorough technical response to climate change that planners and decision-makers can use as a useful guide (Khan & Naeem, 2024).

However, a wider policy imbalance is highlighted by its limited engagement with social dynamics. Without political will and taking socioeconomic disparities into account, it is still extremely unlikely that these policies can be successfully implemented, especially within Pakistan's contentious policy environment. According to the ecofeminist framework, climate change policies are not value-neutral; rather, they reflect prevailing power structures and social relationships. In this context, scientific and technical endeavors are frequently prioritized over the socioeconomic effects of environmental policies. There is still a lack of research on the relationship between ecological deterioration and human vulnerability, particularly its gendered aspects.

According to Khan (2023), existing frameworks necessitate a clear protocol that evaluates the impact of suggested interventions on marginalized communities, such as women, indigenous groups, and small-scale farmers. Climate strategies run the risk of perpetuating exclusionary outcomes in the absence of such measures. For instance,

technological advancements that disproportionately benefit wealthy landowners are usually given priority in agricultural modernization projects, which exacerbates class and gender disparities. Similarly, even though environmental infrastructure projects are meant to encourage sustainability, they have the potential to uproot communities that depend on forests from their natural habitats, thereby increasing the economic and social insecurity of women. These results show that top-down policies run the risk of exacerbating structural inequality unless they are supported by inclusive and participatory frameworks.

This analysis demonstrates that Pakistan's climate policies still follow a technocratic framework that fails to adequately incorporate gender equity into environmental governance. Connecting these findings to the ecofeminist viewpoint demonstrates that real climate resilience necessitates a shift in how policy frameworks acknowledge women's agency, knowledge systems, and crucial role in sustainable adaptation, more than just technical fixes. Pakistan's policies would be able to accomplish social justice and ecological sustainability if this intersection between gender justice and the environment were strengthened.

Gender Disparities in Climate Change Policies

Climate policies acknowledge the distinct burden that women bear due to climate stress, but they often treat this issue as an 'additional' concern, alongside factors like poverty that may be addressed by suitable adaptation measures. The NCCP 2012 dedicates a single page to the topic of gender, which is presented as a distinct and independent concept, lacking significant examples or relevance to other areas of climate action (Masud & Khan, 2024). This compartmentalized approach illustrates how gender has traditionally been addressed in climate policy in a symbolic rather than a substantive manner.

The NCCP 2021 delves deeper into gender considerations; however, it remains a secondary theme within the broader climate policy framework. The interventions largely mirror those of the previous strategy, with a heightened awareness of the hardships faced by disadvantaged groups living in forests or deserts and their acknowledged difficulties. The policy acknowledges the significance of gender equality in achieving long-term sustainability and resilience for the entire population. It emphasizes the importance of implementing gender-responsive measures, such as enhancing women's representation and restructuring institutions to promote favorable outcomes for gender mainstreaming. These inclusions are significant and inspiring (Ahmed et al., 2023).

However, from an ecofeminist perspective, these inclusions fall short because they do not address the systemic causes of gender inequality in environmental governance. Gender is treated as a secondary issue in the policy, which is indicative of a technocratic mentality that values quantifiable results over social change. Instead of addressing gender issues in discrete areas, true gender mainstreaming necessitates integrating gender viewpoints into climate policy at every level, including design, implementation, monitoring, and budgeting. By critically analyzing the power dynamics among actors, institutions, and procedures with a gender lens, planners can avoid symbolic actions that don't result in meaningful outcomes.

For example, existing frameworks encourage industries to reduce emissions, but they ignore systemic problems like illegal resource exploitation and the absence of penalties for environmental harm. According to Mumtaz (2024), these actions run the risk of sustaining injustice in the absence of a comparable accountability system for

exploitation, pollution, and harm to the community. A gender-aware policy framework would expose that Women, who are frequently on the front lines of environmental degradation but are not included in the advantages of economic development, would be disproportionately impacted by such omissions.

As the FICCP rightly notes, gender-insensitive climate policies often make inequality worse rather than better. Although useful, this admission also highlights the disconnect between the rhetoric of policy and its actual application. Recognition of disparities in representation, consultation, and knowledge sharing is reflected in the existing frameworks promoting women's participation. But as the data indicates, these disparities still exist in reality, impeding women's agency and preventing them from influencing climate responses in their favor.

Climate change has exacerbated gender inequality, which is ingrained in Pakistan's sociocultural fabric. In rural areas, where women are more exposed to climate change due to limited resources, mobility constraints, and decision-making access, the intersection of gender and climate vulnerability is most pronounced. Women's roles could be reinterpreted through inclusive policymaking as active agents of resilience and adaptation rather than passive recipients. But even though they play a crucial role in managing household and natural resources, women and children are still underrepresented when it comes to developing adaptive strategies (Mumtaz & Naeem, 2024). This disparity illustrates a recurring misalignment between the policy's declared goals and its working mechanisms.

In contrast, the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan 2017 under the Pakistan Climate Change Act explicitly delineates legislative provisions that facilitate greater female participation in the formulation and implementation of the legislation (Government of Pakistan, 2017). The 2021 revision, which places a strong emphasis on integrated planning and natural solutions, shows institutional learning but is still primarily technocratic, with little opportunity for grassroots gendered participation.

On July 21, 2022, IUCN and Pakistan's Ministry of Climate Change signed a partnership and updated policies to strengthen gender-responsive climate action (IUCN, 2022). This document establishes a fresh framework for addressing climate change by integrating women's empowerment and gender equality into discussions and initiatives (Khan & Hussain, 2024). The Green Climate Fund is providing financial support for this purpose.

Encouraging women to participate in the formulation of climate change policies and decisions is the objective of the CGMP. By promoting gender equality as a fundamental principle, the CCGAP engages women in the formulation of regional and national policy initiatives. Capacity building, pilot programs for women, and inclusive policy discourse are also supported. Long-term consultations with the government, experts, academia, and civil society suggest a growing understanding of women's leadership potential in climate action (Adnan et al., 2024). However, it is still crucial to determine whether these commitments result in actual institutional change or if they are merely aspirational.

Although the implementation of these initiatives reveals significant systemic gaps, they do represent a growing political recognition of gender dimensions. Women's experiences and needs cannot be fully incorporated into policy design when gender commitments are not carried out. Neglecting to execute these commitments to gender integration compromises the substantial incorporation of women's perspectives and requirements in the formulation of policies. This phenomenon perpetuates preexisting gender biases and imbalances of power, leading to the formulation of policies that

neglect to effectively tackle the unique challenges that women face in the context of climate change. Inadequate funding for climate change initiatives in Pakistan exacerbates gender inequality.

The insufficient financial support for initiatives that aim to empower, educate, and engage women hinders their capacity to significantly influence climate change policies and alleviate the adverse effects of the phenomenon on marginalized communities, specifically women (Masud & Khan, 2024). Gender budgeting, an essential component in climate policies that considers the varied needs and consequences of women, is conspicuously absent from both Pakistan's National Determined Contributions and its endeavors to mitigate climate change. Without this integration, policy commitments remain rhetorical and fail to translate into meaningful progress toward climate resilience and women's empowerment.

Financial planning foregoes an opportunity to develop policies that are more inclusive and cognizant of the diverse challenges that climate change presents to various genders by neglecting to incorporate gender perspectives. Financial decisions fail to consider the variations in the capabilities, vulnerabilities, and demands of women (Ahmed et al., 2024). Without gender budgeting, policy commitments are more likely to be empty rhetorical than practical, effective solutions. Insufficient gender-specific statistical data is available across a broad spectrum of social, political, economic, and environmental concerns. Due to the scarcity of data regarding the gender-related ramifications of climate change, policymakers remain oblivious to the imminent peril that climate change presents to susceptible women. Policy experts and academics must have a precise comprehension of current events.

This is necessary to ensure that policy options are meticulously designed for subsequent dependable assessments. For endeavors to be recognized and rewarded, additional funding and evaluation are necessary (Butt et al., 2024). Similarly, endeavors that do not yield desired results must be recognized, rectified, and, if required, terminated. The efficient formulation, evaluation, and implementation of policies are predicated on large, precise, consistent, exhaustive, longitudinal, and complete data sets. Comprehensive, longitudinal, and gender-specific data sets are necessary for effective policymaking to support accurate assessments and direct remedial measures. Accountability measures are also essential to adaptive governance to ensure that initiatives that fail are openly reviewed, revised, or abandoned.

Women make up about half of Pakistan's 238.1 million people, so it is unfair and strategically incorrect for them to be excluded from climate policymaking (Ahmed & Luqman, 2024). Despite being excluded from decision-making processes that directly impact their livelihoods, rural women, in particular, suffer the most from the climate crisis. According to reports from international forums like the Glasgow Summit, older men continue to hold the majority of the decision-making authority in climate governance, while women and young people are becoming increasingly frustrated with the slow pace of climate action. The patriarchal norms that influence environmental governance in Pakistan are reflected in this gendered power imbalance.

From an ecofeminist perspective, this disparity illustrates how gender inequality and environmental degradation are jointly produced by patriarchal and technocratic systems. Therefore, it is not only a moral imperative but also ecologically necessary to empower women in climate governance. By elevating women's voices in policy discussions and negotiations, civil society organizations are essential in closing this gap (Butt et al., 2024). Therefore, gender perspectives must be incorporated into climate solutions that are resilient and sustainable, inclusive participation must be

encouraged, and institutional barriers that disadvantage women must be removed. Only fair opportunities, gender-sensitive resource distribution, and proper acknowledgment of women's vital contributions to climate resilience can address structural injustices.

Way Forward: A Gender-Based Approach to Climate Policies

Due to the vast array of policy domains that climate change policies encompass, emphasizing the significance of a rights-based approach or a gender perspective expands their operational and ethical scope. It can also facilitate the realization of rights by providing women and marginalized groups with access to environmental endowments. A human rights-based approach examines areas of weakness, responsibilities, and disparities to eradicate unjust power imbalances that impede progress and threaten human rights, as well as combat discriminatory behavior (Afzal et al., 2024). Policymakers can guarantee that social justice and environmental resilience develop simultaneously by coordinating climate interventions with gender equity principles.

Practical applications of this approach encompass reassessing strategies for mitigating and adapting to climate change, incorporating security, healthcare, poverty reduction, and access to justice into evaluations, and infusing policy processes with greater methodological rigor. The SDGs serve as a benchmark for guidance and implementation within the current policy structure. Specific indicators for climate action that address gender-differentiated vulnerability and resilience would be beneficial in aiding communities in devising strategies to rescue themselves from climate stress by equipping and empowering them (Khan, 2023).

The UNFCCC received the second draft of Pakistan's revised NDC (Government of Pakistan, 2021) before COP26. Among the proposed initiatives are programs that aim to raise awareness among women and communities, enhance their participation, representation, leadership, and integration, provide training and education specifically designed for women, and facilitate their access to credit, information, and means of developing a livelihood. This is an excellent program that incorporates previous gender mainstreaming policy concepts to address women's vulnerabilities and develop resilience. However, the effectiveness of these measures is determined by institutional commitment, intergovernmental coordination, and the incorporation of gender metrics into climate monitoring frameworks.

How these objectives are achieved is contingent upon the willing capacities and timelines of the federal and provincial administrations. Moreover, a statistical baseline regarding the status of women in these domains is absent. Such a baseline would be advantageous in establishing objectives for practitioners to achieve in alignment with work plans at the national and local levels. However, this document provides evidence that policy thinking is progressing in the correct direction and serves as a crucial foundation upon which provinces can build their models. Similar to the NCCP, the NDC is a living document that, in future revisions, may incorporate additional details regarding its primary objectives for women (Masud & Khan, 2024).

As agreed at COP23, the NDC also acknowledges the UNFCCC's requirement that all member states submit a gender action plan. The document indicates the development of a Climate Change Gender Action Plan (cGMP), which will focus on the following five thematic areas: (i) communication, knowledge-sharing, and capacity building; (ii) women's leadership and gender balance; (iii) coherence between UNFCCC and the United Nations Convention against Climate Change; (iv) gender-responsive implementation and means of implementation; and (v) monitoring and

reporting (Khan, 2023). These thematic areas are intended to enhance knowledge and understanding of gender-responsive climate action.

The ccGAP should be regarded as an initial step toward gender mainstreaming, the objectives of which require sustained collaboration spanning multiple years before tangible advancements (Mumtaz, 2024). Instead of remaining a declaratory document, the ccGAP must be institutionalized through quantifiable indicators and sufficiently funded frameworks to guarantee long-term success. It is imperative to emphasize that the NDC functions as a mechanism for reporting to the UNFCCC, not as a means of guiding domestic climate policy, as it would via the NCCP and FICCP. It is the most recent batch of interventions processed domestically and the finest illustration of the policy's objective. While not intended to serve as an evaluation of Pakistan's domestic climate policy achievements, this information can be valuable for international climate registers. In addition, it should be noted that the NDC lacks an explicit mandate to oversee provincial action plans. To achieve true gender-responsive climate governance in Pakistan, it will be essential to bridge this policy gap by coordinating international commitments with provincial implementation frameworks.

Policy Recommendations

The urgency to acknowledge and capitalize on the potential of women as pivotal catalysts for change in the battle against climate change requires immediate intervention. The following are some suggestions for policies regarding climate change that are inclusive of all genders:

- Establish a Women's Rights Desk within the Adaptation Fund to determine funding priorities. It has the potential to be implemented across a range of institutions dedicated to promoting gender equality and empowerment, including development organizations that prioritize the economic empowerment and rights of women.
- Compile planning information, practice materials, case studies, and updates on forthcoming gender and disaster risk reduction initiatives into a reference book on the subject of disasters and gender.
- Develop a social paradigm that is equitable concerning gender and advocates for services that enhance the well-being of individuals, with a particular focus on women, alleviate stress, and facilitate effective time management.
- Offer prospects for female IT specialists to participate in initiatives that employ technology to forecast and alleviate climate change, including geospatial and early warning systems.
- Develop a dashboard that specifically addresses gender-related issues, such as violence and safety, women's representation in decision-making bodies, labor force participation, the digital divide, and the gender pay disparity.
- By providing a central location for data collection, analysis, and action aimed at reducing gender disparities and advancing women's rights, this type of dashboard could enable stakeholders to take decisive and focused measures.
- Establish digital skill training centers to facilitate skill development programs and digital literacy for women, empowering them to utilize smart city technologies and online services and participate in the digital economy.
- To promote women's access to public spaces, safety, and participation in urban planning, it is imperative to develop smart cities that are gender-responsive.

To encourage the participation of women entrepreneurs in eco-friendly products, renewable energy, and sustainable agriculture industries, incubators for green entrepreneurship for women should be established.

Conclusion

Pakistan faces substantial challenges due to the interrelated dynamics of climate change and gender inequality. Pakistan exhibits a heightened vulnerability to the adverse consequences of environmental changes. This study investigates the complex relationship between gender and climate change policies in Pakistan, with a particular emphasis on the effects these policies have on women. The study reveals that, despite progressive intentions due to insufficient integration of gender-responsive mechanisms of current policy frameworks, women's experiences and contributions are frequently marginalized.

The findings underscore the crucial importance of adopting a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to address these challenges. The research contributes to broader discourse by demonstrating how policy tools can either support or undermine structural inequality based on their inclusivity and responsiveness to gendered realities. The differential effects of climate change on the physical and socio-economic aspects of women's lives in Pakistan underscore the heightened vulnerability of women to its ramifications. The NCCP of Pakistan recognizes and acknowledges the vulnerabilities that exist, with a specific focus on the challenges encountered by rural women involved in agricultural labor. Nevertheless, the persistence of gender inequality is prevalent throughout the social structures of the nation, exacerbating the obstacles faced by women.

The research methodology employed in this study involved the use of secondary data sources. This approach emphasized the importance of adopting a feminist perspective when evaluating the issue of climate change in Pakistan. Furthermore, the study conducted a thorough examination of the existing body of literature on this topic. This approach offered insightful information from the existing literature and policy documents; however, it also presents certain limitations. Such as the inability to record firsthand accounts or recent on-ground developments relevant to this gender and climate change.

Ecofeminism has emerged as a significant social movement, advocating for the active participation of women in environmental matters and highlighting their potential to attain empowerment through large contributions to climate change mitigation. This study emphasizes the importance of acknowledging women as crucial change agents rather than just as victims of environmental degradation by analyzing climate policy through an ecofeminist lens.

To effectively tackle the gender inequality in Pakistan's NCCP, it is imperative to adopt a holistic approach that encompasses legislative reforms, societal adaptations, and ongoing efforts to empower women. Thus, this study provides a nuanced understanding of how equitable resilience strategies can be facilitated by incorporating feminist principles into the design of climate policies. Given the growing apprehension surrounding climate change, the insights derived from this study could potentially inform future initiatives aimed at fostering a society that is both robust and egalitarian. Ultimately, by bridging the gap between gender equity and climate resilience, this research contributes to policy discourses seeking long-term sustainability based on social justice.

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Russia's Strategic Culture and Geopolitics in Europe

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Abstract

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, which many in Europe interpreted as part of President Putin's ambitions to redefine the European regional order established after World War II. This order imposed structural constraints and introduced reliance on collective security in order to check Russia's long-held ambitions. However, despite the systemic constraints and collective security, Russia has continued observing Eastern Europe through a historical lens wherein Russia's strategic and geopolitical choices have continued to be influenced by its strategic culture. This study investigates how Russia's geopolitical behavior and strategic preferences are shaped by its strategic culture. Primarily, it analyzes the role of Russian strategic culture as the most important variable, persuading Russian policymakers to pursue assertive geopolitics. It also focuses on the factors that diminish the impact of structural constraints in Russia's geopolitical behavior.

Introduction

In December 2021, the U.S. intelligence community warned Europe of an impending Russian military offensive against Ukraine. The European Union (EU) failed to heed American warnings (Nardelli et al., 2021). It underestimated President Putin's threats and Russia's military buildup along Ukraine's borders (Vicente, 2022). However, the U.S.'s warnings materialized into a grim reality when Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, exposing the limits of the European security order.

The post-Cold War security policy of Europe rested on the assumption that structural factors such as economic interdependence, nuclear deterrence, regional and international institutions, the rising costs of war, and a host of other bilateral arrangements would deter Russia from becoming a military threat. European

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policymakers had assumed that under the existing structural conditions, military aggression or war would be inconsistent with Russia's geo-economic interests and strategic capabilities.

As events unfolded after the invasion of Ukraine, political and academic consensus soon broke down as scholars attributed Russia's attack to a range of factors, including North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) expansion, President Putin's ambitions, shifts in the distribution of power within the international system (Mearsheimer, 2022), and the increasing authoritarianism of the Russian government (Daalder, 2022). Amid this debate, the role of Russia's strategic culture in shaping its strategic preferences and geopolitical behavior remained largely overlooked.

This study investigates Russia's invasion of Ukraine through the lens of its strategic culture, highlighting its role as an enduring variable that has influenced Russian leaders to pursue recurring patterns of geopolitical behavior. The strategic culture is a sum of ideational factors stemming from the distinct historical socialization of a state. In its evolutionary course, a state develops norms, values, and systems through which it conceptualizes the connotations of statecraft. Since the history and evolution of every state is different, its conceptualization of war and peace will also be different. It highlights the incompatibilities that often emerge between the strategic preferences of Russia and those of European countries. This study recognizes the importance of the structural elements of European security architecture, emphasizing the role of structural components such as institutions, norms, and collective defense mechanisms in promoting stability and regional security. However, it argues that the utility of structural elements weakens in cases such as Russia, which has a history of military invasions, cycles of territorial expansion and contraction, and an enduring sense of strategic insecurity.

Theorizing Strategic Culture

Strategic culture refers to a set of discursive expressions and narratives of a state's leaders related to a state's security and its military affairs (Götz & Staun, 2022). Russia's strategic culture is the product of its historical socialization, elite perceptions, identity, and geopolitical insecurities. Debates surrounding the role of culture in state behavior have persisted for millennia. Classical philosophers such as Sun Tzu, Thucydides, and Kautilya have referred to the elements of strategic culture in national policy (Bhattacharyya, 2019).

The Chinese strategist Sun Tzu is perhaps the first scholar to have discussed the influence of culture on strategy. In *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu highlights psychological persuasion, information, and deception as critical factors that can influence the outcome of war. He also emphasizes the need for cultural intelligence in policymaking. Contemporary scholars note that Sun Tzu's ideas represent the antecedents of the modern concept of soft power in foreign policy and diplomacy (Ota, 2014; Tzu et al., 1963).

In addition to Sun Tzu, Greek philosopher Thucydides, as pointed out by Lebow (2001), highlights the cultural dimension of national policy in the *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Athens' assertion that 'the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must' points to the cultural element underlying military decision-making. It also illustrates how a society's 'cultural ethos' shapes its foreign policy

behavior. Thucydides' views of honor, identity, and policy continue to inform modern conceptions of strategic culture[3] (Lebow, 2001).

Another classical work that integrates cultural considerations into statecraft is Kautilya's *Artha Shastra*. His theory of foreign relations, *raja-mandala* or the *circle of Kings*, reflects cultural conceptions of kinship, proximity, and trust among states (Kangle, 1963). Kautilya underscores the importance of shared beliefs and social norms in diplomacy and governance.

Taken together, the writings of Sun Tzu, Thucydides, and Kautilya emphasize the enduring role of culture in foreign policy and military affairs. Their writings inform contemporary debates on the role of identity and culture in global politics. Their writings also reveal that culture is not peripheral to policy but constitutes it, deeply influencing how a state perceives itself and engages with the world.

The evolution of the concept of strategic culture from the ancient to the modern era reflects both thematic and analytical transformations. Sun Tzu, Thucydides, and Kautilya have emphasized the role of culture and historical experience in statecraft and diplomacy, while contemporary scholars of politics and international relations have reframed these ideas within the analytical framework of strategic culture to explain military affairs and security, linking historical experience, collective memory, geographical insecurities, values, and national identity to recurring patterns of strategic choices.

Building on these ideas, Snyder (1977) provides an elaborate approach to understanding the relationship between strategy and culture in the modern age, stating that a state's strategic behavior is not solely determined by rational calculations alone, but is deeply embedded in the cultural narratives and collective experiences. He defines strategic culture as the sum of ideas, conditioned emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behavior that members of a national strategic community share concerning nuclear strategy (Snyder, 1977). He further argues that every society has its unique historical, political, social, and technological experiences that inevitably lead to the formation of policy traditions and doctrines that produce distinct strategic preferences.

Building on Snyder's view, subsequent scholars expanded the concept further, giving rise to two distinct generations of strategic culture thought. These schools of thought emphasize various dimensions of strategic culture, from material and institutional factors to ideational, normative, and interpretive frameworks. The first generation of scholars studying strategic culture has focused largely on the Soviet Union (Johnston, 1995). They aimed to identify the fundamental elements that shaped military and security policy.

David Jones, for example, proposed that strategic culture operates on three levels: macro, social, and micro. At the macro level, he emphasized the influence of ethno-cultural traits and historical experience. The social level, he suggested, reflects a society's political culture, while the micro level captures the role of military institutions and civil-military relations. Johnston (1995) argues that writings, military doctrines, rhetoric, leadership behavior, strategic discourse, and war literature are vital units of analysis for understanding state behavior. Similarly, Jones (1990) viewed differences in macro-environmental variables such as political culture, geography, and historical experience between the U.S. and the Soviet Union as key explanations for variation in strategic behavior.

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[3] For more info read: Philosophy Break. (n.d.). *Thucydides' Melian Dialogue: Can international politics be fair?* https://philosophybreak.com/articles/thucydides-melian-dialogue-can-international-politics-be-fair

Building on these ideas, Johnston (1995) has argued that sources such as official writings, military doctrines, leadership behavior, and even war literature offer valuable clues about how a state understands and practices strategy. Similarly, Colin Gray (1999) highlighted that differences in political culture, geography, and historical experience between the U.S. and the Soviet Union help explain why their strategic behaviors diverged so sharply.

The second generation of strategic culture theorists took these ideas further, seeing culture itself as central to understanding state behavior. Bradley S. Klein, for instance, argued that a state's strategic behavior arises from its historical experiences (Klein, 1994). Expanding this framework, Lantis (2016) identified three key dimensions that shape strategic culture: physical factors such as geography, climate, and technology; political factors including socialization, political systems, and elite beliefs; and socio-cultural influences such as myths, symbols, and foundational texts. Together, these elements paint a richer picture of how history and identity inform a nation's approach to security and military affairs.

Historical Continuity and Geopolitical Determinism

Russia's strategic culture is generally understood to be the product of three factors: first, a history of invasions and wars; second, a vast, open geographic expanse that is penetrable and lacks strategic depth; and third, the Russian elite, which has always remained hostile toward the West (Sokolsky, 2020). Resultantly, Russia's geographic vulnerability and its history of invasions by Mongols and Europeans have produced enduring behavioral patterns that Russian leaders have consistently adhered to.

Underlying Russia's behavior is a pervasive sense of encirclement that reinforces a siege mentality, legitimizing domestic authoritarianism and foreign assertiveness (Tsygankov, 2012). This 'encirclement narrative' portrays Russia not as an aggressor but as a besieged state, surrounded by hostile forces determined to harm its sovereignty and freedom. From the very beginning, when the Duchy of Moscow was formed after the collapse of the Golden Horde, Russia has faced a geostrategic vulnerability: encirclement. Fearing encirclement, Russia has consistently sought to appear strong and relevant, create buffer zones, and be recognized as a great power, all of which are central to its identity and pride.

Russia has usually sought to display strength through military intervention and diplomatic defiance, turning prestige into a form of security. In this enduring cycle of expansion, resistance, and recognition, Russia's past continually informs its present, and its quest for status becomes inseparable from its strategy for survival.

Russian geography has remained another important factor in shaping its strategic preferences. Billington (2004) claims that it's not Russian history but Russian geography that has shaped Russian thinking. Moscow has long faced strategic vulnerabilities and insecurities stemming from its geography. Mackinder (1904) argued that Russia's geography has shaped its destiny. With open borders and long memories of invasion, from Napoleon to Hitler, Russia has learnt to view even expansion not as ambition but as protection.

To survive, it had to push its borders outward and create buffer zones that could absorb danger before it reached Moscow. Over time, this logic became part of Russia's strategic culture (Johnston, 1995). Russia's war in Ukraine reflects the same historical thinking. For Russia, Ukraine is not just a neighboring state, but a critical piece of what Mackinder called the 'Heartland', the geographic core that determines

who controls Eurasia. Russian leaders believe that if Russia loses influence there, it risks losing national security and global status.

The fear of Western encirclement, heightened by NATO's expansion, sharpens it further (NESA, 2023). So, when Moscow describes its invasion as a defensive act, it's not merely propaganda; it's a reflection of this deeply rooted belief that geography has forced Russia to either expand or be threatened. In other words, keeping control over geographical space remains central to Russia's security. Russia's invasion of Ukraine lies partly in a kind of geopolitical inheritance that views geopolitical domination as necessary for Russia's survival. Hence, the result of this thinking is that geography still dictates destiny.

Realizing these vulnerabilities, Russian King Ivan IV laid the foundation of offense as defense. He used war and expansion as policy instruments to break Russia's encirclement. In addition to breaking the encirclement, Ivan IV further expanded Russia towards the Far East by conquering Kazan, Astrakhan, and some parts of the Golden Horde, paving the way for Russian hegemony in Siberia. Consequently, an unwritten norm emerged in Russia that admired strength, expansion, and dominance, and rejected weakness, cowardice, and non-expansion (Marshall, 2016).

Norms pertaining to geographical expansion and dominance have remained an influential factor in Russia's foreign policy for centuries. In addition to norms, geographical expansion possesses religious legitimacy in Russia in the shape of orthodox geopolitics. Arguably, geographical insecurities and religious sanction of expansionism, along with norms, have emerged as critical factors that shape Russian strategic preferences and foreign policy. This puts Russia in a unique place in Europe, as no other European state has inherited a similar historical heritage.

Russia at least fought once in every thirty-three years with hostile armies marching into Russia from the northern plain (Marshall, 2016). Poles attacked Russia in 1605, Sweden in 1708, Napoleon in 1812, and Germany in two world wars (Fuller, 1998). Considering repeated invasions, Russian leaders have opted to build a ring around Russian borders to prevent such attacks. This policy found resonance and following during the entire nineteenth century and the Cold War. Russia expanded into Western Germany, and today, when it is relatively weak, it considers these areas to be within its sphere of influence.

Therefore, being insecure despite having strong means to fight an enemy is a significant effect of Russian geographical history. According to Jones (1990), Russia cannot sail out of the Baltic Sea in the event of war. It must pass through the Skagerrak, a body of water controlled by NATO member countries Denmark and Norway, to reach the Baltic Sea. Additionally, Russia must look south for ports where it can exercise free passage. In this example, too, the realities of its geography led Russia to annex Crimea in 2014 so that it could use the warm water of the Black Sea.

More broadly, Russia considers the Black Sea important to its geo-economic strategy, as it provides access to the free markets of Europe (Stronski, 2021). But again, Russia could sail out a very limited number of ships from the Bosporus and could not use it in wartime for peaceful and military purposes under the Montreux Convention of 1936 (Segell, 2023). Jones (1990) again states that if it reaches the Mediterranean Sea, there, it must face eight NATO members that surround the Mediterranean. That said, Russia is as geopolitically encircled as the Duchy of Moscow was. The fear and insecurity have forced Russia to try to penetrate the encirclement.

In 2008, Russia attacked Georgia, and in 2014, it annexed Crimea, and in 2022 invaded Ukraine (Tchantouridzé, 2022). In the south, Moscow has demonstrated that it

can accommodate Turkey, regardless of the conditions, because Turkey holds the upper hand in the Black Sea. Together, these examples clearly suggest that geographical vulnerabilities shape the strategic environment around Russia that guides its strategic preferences and foreign policy.

Elite Socialization and Its Role in Decision-making in Russia

The Russian elite not only dominate key parts of the Russian economy but also occupy important positions in the government (Zimmerman, 2009). The widespread influence of the Russian elite allows them to play a decisive role in the decision-making of the state (Guillermo, 2022). The influence of the elite reached its zenith in the Soviet era, when the Russian elite occupied all major state functions and institutions (Lazarev, 2001). The decisive influence of the elite on policymaking and state decisions created a huge disparity of power between the elite and the wider society. As a result, the very process of decision-making has at times become significantly extractive.

The contemporary Russian elite comprises four groups: oligarchs, the state bureaucracy, Silo Viki, and Putin's Politburo, connected by an ideology or some form of consensus on running the government (Guillermo, 2022). The elite use their influence to persuade the government to adopt policies that benefit their businesses and to avoid policies that negatively affect their interests. Secondly, since they hold key positions in decision-making, Russia's strategic preferences remain largely contingent on their level of socialization, preferences, and values.

The elite's control over Russian media helps them promote the state narrative. During the reign of the Soviet Union, the famous Russian elite class, Nomenklatura, became popular due to its role in shaping Russian policy preferences. The word Nomenklatura referred to a list of key positions in the Soviet bureaucracy, filled by appointing suitable persons who belonged to the Communist Party and could not defect from the official narrative of Russia (Hill, 1991). Nomenklatura was not just an administrative function in the Soviet Union, but it was a mechanism for the distribution and exercise of power.

In recent times, the Russian elite played a crucial role in promoting Russia's narrative in the Crimean War (Zend, 2022). Their approach has been to control and influence public opinion through narratives of resentment and propaganda (Hobson, 2016). Similarly, Russian leaders in the past have shown remarkable continuity of thought in their attempts to expand territory to survive and defend themselves, blurring the line between defense and aggression. The Tsarists based their rule on faith and autocracy. In the Soviet era, Russian leaders replaced faith with socialist ideology, while President Putin has revived Russian nationalism to strengthen his rule.

Furthermore, Russian leaders have continuously adhered to the doctrine of the *Russkiy Mir*, or 'Russian World', which has remained the history of high vulnerability to foreign invasions since the inception of Kievan Rus, the old political entity from where Russia started expanding to four directions in the medieval age. Military strength functions both as a shield and symbol, proving Russia's resilience and reaffirming its great-power identity.

Russian War Literature and Its Role in Shaping Russian Strategic Preferences

Joe Woodward (2005) observes that writers inevitably confront war through critical reflection, transforming its destruction into meaning. There is no victor in war except literature (Paikova, 2021). European wars have always remained a theme in socio-political and literary discourse (Brosman, 1992). Russian writers have consistently

made war a subject of their writings. Tolstoy's War and Peace, published in 1869, Boris Pasternak's Doctor Zhivago, and Quiet Flows the Don by Mikhail Sholokhov, and other writers have portrayed the impact of war on society and humans. All these writers have criticized war and highlighted its disasters. However, war literature has relatively more fame than anti-war literature, the reason for which is governmental support, geostrategic insecurities, and Western opposition. In one way or another, strategic culture is reproduced through storytelling: how Russia remembers wars, victories, and humiliations. Even to this day, WWII, also termed the Great Patriotic War, remains central to Russia's identity.

Scholars such as Leo Tolstoy have written extensively on the destruction and horrors of the Napoleonic Wars. The developments that have taken place in Russian geography, coupled with Moscow's geostrategic disadvantages and periodic wars, have caused the Russian war literature to be very different than the war literature of Western European powers. In contrast to Western European war literature, qualities like valor and geographical expansion of the Russian empire have received much praise from the writers as well as from Russian society (Marshall, 2016). The wars Russia fought throughout its history are glorified. Every victory Russia achieved has been called the will of God. The Russian Romantic writer and poet, Mikhail Lermontov, as explained by Paikova (2021), remarks on the Russian War of Liberation in 1812 that Moscow would not have stood the war were it not the will of God.

Fast forward to post-war reconstruction, the Bolsheviks under Stalin took charge of literature in which they glorified flawless and confident leaders of Russian history (Kasack, 1989). Similarly, during German aggression in 1941, which Russians call the Great Patriotic War, a Russian poet named Arseny Tarkovsky wrote that the war against Hitler was a war of salvation. Russian literature of the 21st century, too, is a continuation of this very strategic understanding.

According to some reports, more than five hundred writers have signed a letter of support for the Russian war in Ukraine. Moreover, Russian state media continuously works to promote views that portray Russia as a great nation and save Russia from foreign threats. On the academic side, the school and college curriculum entail the mention of 'select Russian history and grievances' (Tabachnik, 2020).

Russian Political Conservatism, Values and Traditions
Conservatism is a political ideology that values religion, tradition, organic growth, and historical institutions (Timofeev, 2020). Contrary to common belief, it does not oppose change but favors gradual, organic evolution rooted in historical continuity (Suslov, 2019). Russian conservatism has deeply influenced the country's political thought and strategic culture. It emphasizes the supremacy of the state over the individual, the centrality of Orthodox Christianity, and the preservation of autocratic authority, all of which have shaped Russia's understanding of power, order, and legitimacy (Pipes, 2007). This worldview promotes societal unity and moral cohesion as the foundation of state stability, rejecting secularism and liberal individualism.

Historically, Russian conservative thought held that strong autocracy was essential to national strength. According to the NESA (2023) in *Memoir on Ancient and Modern Russia*, Karamzin argued that only centralized authority rooted in native traditions could secure Russia's unity and prevent societal decay. This linkage between autocracy, faith, and state continuity became a defining feature of Russia's political identity. Russian history and identity have always found reflection in its foreign policy (NESA, 2023).

The Slavophiles later reinforced these ideas by asserting that Russia possessed a unique civilization, distinct from the West, and should follow its own path based on Orthodox and communal values (Riasanovsky, 1952). This belief in Russia's exceptionalism and moral mission continues to inform its strategic culture, encouraging a defensive stance toward Western influence and a reliance on centralized authority for national survival.

Although suppressed during the Soviet era, conservative ideas resurfaced after the USSR's collapse. Since the early 2000s, they have reemerged as a core element of Russian political and strategic discourse (Suslov, 2019). The ruling United Russia Party formally embraced conservatism in 2009, framing it as an ideology that upholds tradition, state sovereignty, and cultural continuity (Roberts, 2012). Today, these values underpin Russia's strategic outlook, emphasizing stability, moral order, and resistance to external ideological intrusion.

Structural Constraints and Geopolitical Behavior of Russia

Insights from strategic culture theory stand in contrast to traditional theories of state behavior, which are largely grounded in rationality and power distribution. The neo-realist school of International Relations argues that state behavior is determined by the international balance of power and the anarchic nature of the system (Mearsheimer, 2001). It views strategic choices as driven primarily by fear and insecurity. Game theorists, such as Thomas Schelling, maintain that in the absence of communication, actors define outcomes by default and adjust their choices in response to others (Schelling, 1981). State preferences are seen as reactive and externally determined from the vantage point of game theory.

The theory of constructivism presents its own arguments claiming that state behavior is shaped by social interaction and ideational factors (Wendt, 1992). It emphasizes the importance and influence of norms, ideas, and shared meanings in shaping state identity and, by extension, its national interests. Although the constructivist school of IR falls very close to strategic culture theory, the latter encompasses a broader range of influences, including historical experience, geography, religion, and political traditions.

Departing from the dominant theories of International Relations, scholars suggest that strategic culture should be viewed within the framework of limited rationality in which choices are conditioned not merely by structure, but by culturally and historically embedded perceptions of threat, identity, and power. Within this framework, the European security architecture can be viewed as a policy to constrain Russia's geopolitical ambitions through structural means. Despite these constraints, Russia's behavior has remained assertive and often resistant to Western expectations.

Rooted in its heartland identity, Russian strategic thought prioritizes territorial unity and the maintenance of a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe as essential to national survival (Dugin, 2016). This pursuit of strategic depth and the protection of Slavic identity have long guided Russia's foreign policy, reflecting deep-seated cultural and historical continuities. The persistence of these patterns over centuries, whether in response to Napoleon, NATO, or the EU, illustrates the enduring role of historical experience in shaping Russian strategy. Strategic culture explains why Russia's reactions are not merely rational calculations but expressions of historical memory and identity.

Another important dimension of Russia's strategic culture is the protection of its political system from perceived external interference. Moscow views Western

involvement in Georgia and Ukraine as efforts to induce political change within Russia itself. Consequently, safeguarding the domestic political order has become intertwined with foreign policy objectives. Policy analysts have noted that Russia's strategic behavior reflects the interaction of elements that together define its political culture, including history, geography, nationalism, religion, and conservatism. A complex array of these factors has likely motivated President Putin to challenge Western constraints repeatedly over the past two decades, culminating in the war in Ukraine.

From a strategic culture perspective, these actions are not simply reactions to immediate pressures but are rooted in Russia's enduring worldview that prioritizes sovereignty, order, and historical continuity over integration with the Western system. Hence, Russia's policies have reflected a mistrust of the West and a dependence on coercion (Monaghan, 2017; Johnston, 1995). Moreover, from Russia's war against Chechnya to Georgia and Ukraine, wars have served not merely to secure territory but to demonstrate that Russia remains a force to be reckoned with (Giles, 2019).

The Incompatibility of the Strategic Preferences of Europe and Russia

Russia's long history of wars and invasions has profoundly shaped its strategic preferences and worldview, which explains why regional structures and other constraints have failed to encourage a change of behavior in Russia. Historical patterns of confronting and defending against Western invasions have an enduring influence on Russia's strategic view and planning.

The expansion of NATO, for example, is perceived in Russia as an existential threat to its security and sphere of influence (Rumer & Gurganus, 2019). For other Russians, the expansion of NATO marks a continuation of invasions that have marked Russian history (Putin, 2021). An important factor that causes deadlock and fundamentally different strategic outlooks in Russia and Europe is their evolution along divergent cultural and political trajectories, producing distinct sets of norms and identities.

This historical conditioning has cultivated a belief within Russia's strategic community that maintaining a secure buffer zone in Eastern Europe is essential to national survival. It also underpins Russia's emphasis on a strong military posture as a guarantee of sovereignty and deterrence. Within this framework, Ukraine occupies a central place. Russia views Ukraine as part of its traditional sphere of influence, and ensuring Kyiv remains outside Western institutions aligns with Russia's sense of identity, pride, and historical continuity. Russian strategic culture, shaped by this historical socialization, constrains the range of options available to its policymakers. It encourages continuity, consensus, and the development of nationalistic narratives that legitimize assertive foreign policies. Consequently, Russia's actions are less about short-term geopolitical gain and more about the defense of a historically rooted conception of security and order.

Throughout history, this worldview has frequently clashed with that of Europe. The European security order, grounded in principles of balance, interdependence, and relative gain, contrasts sharply with Russia's preference for autonomy, hierarchy, and absolute security. This divergence has deep historical roots. Following the Peace of Westphalia, Peter the Great transformed Russia into a continental empire, expanding its territory by nearly 100,000 square kilometers annually between 1552 and 1917 (Kissinger, 1994).

By the nineteenth century, Russia had become a central actor in the European balance of power, integrated into European politics yet distinct in its outlook (Hosking,

2012). The Treaty of Tilsit (1807) and Napoleon's invasion of 1812 reinforced Russia's enduring perception of its territorial indefensibility and the necessity of strategic depth. Even as part of the European system, Russia maintained a distinct approach to statecraft, prioritizing centralized control, territorial security, and civilizational identity. This persistent divergence in vision and strategy continues to shape the fault lines between Russia and Europe in the contemporary security order.

The Implications of Russian Geopolitical Behavior on Regional Order
After the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815, major European powers sought to establish peace in Europe through concert diplomacy and collective security. European powers tried to maintain a balance of power that would reduce the chances of war and hegemony. European monarchs recognized that maintaining a balance of power was key to peace (Kissinger, 1994).

In the beginning, Russia played an active role in the concert; however, with the passage of time, it began to act outside or against the framework of the concert. Russia attacked the weakening Ottoman Empire in 1853, thereby upsetting the regional order. Exploiting Ottoman decline, Russia claimed to protect Greek Christians while in reality it sought influence over the Black Sea straits and regional trade routes. In response to Russia's actions, European powers concluded that preserving the Ottoman Empire, however fragile, was vital to prevent any single state from dominating the Balkans, an issue later known as the 'Eastern Question' (Frary & Kozelsky, 2014).

Guided by imperial ambition and a strategic culture rooted in insecurity, Russia's assault on Moldavia and Wallachia alarmed the Allies, who feared Russian expansion into the Near East. Britain, France, and Sardinia intervened to restore balance, resulting in the Crimean War (Bechev et al.,2021). The costly conflict ended with the 1856 Treaty of Paris, which neutralized the Black Sea, secured free navigation of the Danube, and restricted Russia's role as protector of Christians under Ottoman rule. Though humiliated, Russia responded pragmatically, consolidating its position over time.

Russia's strategic culture is shaped by identity, history, and geographical insecurities, and it continues to drive behavior that frequently disrupts the European balance of power. More than a century later, similar patterns reemerged. In 2022, Russia's invasion of Ukraine once again destabilized Europe's balance of power. If Moscow were to secure permanent control over eastern Ukraine, it could dominate nearly a third of the global wheat market (Eisele, 2022). Such control would enhance Russia's leverage in global diplomacy, enabling it to convert economic influence into political capital.

Russia's actions in Ukraine, Crimea (2014), and Georgia (2008) reveal a consistent strategic logic rooted in its historical experience. Conservatism, geographic vulnerability, rivalry with the West, and the doctrine of 'offense as defense' continue to shape Moscow's worldview. These elements often place Russia at odds with the European balance of power, as it seeks not only security but recognition as a legitimate and indispensable actor in European affairs (Makarychev, 2014).

Conclusion
Western countries have long relied on the balance of power and structural tools to deal with Russia. They have sought to contain Russia through military, economic, and institutional constraints. However, despite these facts, Russia has often acted in ways that defy Western expectations. This defiance is best understood through the lens of

Russia's strategic culture, which deeply influences its decision-making and perception of security.

The way Russia sets its strategic priorities, views threats, and interprets power relations in the region is contingent upon the strategic culture of Russia. Resultantly, strategic culture has always remained relevant in Russia's decision-making. Europe has often overlooked Russia's historical experiences, geographic insecurities, and domestic norms. These factors differ sharply from Western political traditions. Backed by the U.S., European powers have continued to apply traditional Realpolitik in their dealings with Russia, which has further widened the gap in understanding each other and developing mutual trust. As global politics shifts with China's rise and the relative decline of U.S. influence, the clash between Russia's strategic preferences and Western approaches will increasingly challenge Europe's stability. Moscow's growing partnership with Beijing gives it leverage in the evolving East-West rivalry, allowing it to assert its influence more confidently on the global stage. European policymakers must move beyond structural deterrence and engage with the deeper cultural, historical, and psychological dimensions that drive Moscow's behavior to promote peaceful regional order and develop long-term stability.

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Liberal and Digital Peacebuilding: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

Patterns and trends keep changing with the commencement of each global political era, and peacebuilding is an evolving and continuous phenomenon. In the post-Cold War era, liberal peacebuilding entered the discourse of peace studies and conflict resolution as a bandwagon. Critical accounts of the limitations of liberal peacebuilding frequently reveal striking parallels between the inadequacy of peace processes and peace agreements. The threat is no longer confined within the designated territorial borders. Data theft, cyber-crimes and attacks, various biological and chemical agents through pandemics, etc., are posing a substantial challenge to liberal peacebuilding approaches and traditional methods. As each conflict has unique and divergent characteristics and dynamics, implementing liberal peace is not always pragmatic. The paper illustrates instances in which the liberal peace was not as fruitful as it ought to have been through five case studies. Liberal peacebuilding may be considered insufficient to address the emerging trends of conflict. In light of globalization and digitalization, the need to digitalize the peacebuilding process has become increasingly important. Subsequently, peacebuilders and conflict transformation practitioners are using digital technology to impact processes that can minimize violent conflict and improve sustainable human development. In terms of digitalizing peace processes, there is a dire need to include technology and innovative digital initiatives within peacebuilding. This qualitative study attempts to present a futuristic perspective by investigating the causes behind the insufficiency of the traditional approach and how digital peacebuilding methods might be used effectively to resolve conflicts in the future.

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Introduction

Peacebuilding is both a concept and an approach, with its practical dimension and scope ranging from being utilized before a conflict has risen to during an active violent conflict to a post-war or post-conflict resolution time period. This approach involves reconstruction, rebuilding, rehabilitation, reconciliation, and reintegration. In a nutshell, the process of peacebuilding involves establishing and restoring relationships between or among adversaries. The ultimate goal of this approach is to bring about sustainable, durable, and positive peace. Where the term 'peacebuilding' is generalized, the prefix of 'Strategic' gives it definition. Strategic Peacebuilding is a long-term plan, put into place by experienced and relevant actors, that not only proves to be the most effective but also reaches every stratum of the social pyramid, as told by John Paul Lederach in his book Building Peace (Lederach, 2005; Cox, 2021).

"Every conflict is unique. But it is fundamental to all conflicts that their long-term solution involves dialogue, trust, and goodwill" (Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, Former President of Indonesia). As every conflict is unique, so are the peace-building approaches. No single approach can fully settle each case. Where political reforms worked in Mozambique (1977-1992), they failed miserably in China (1989) (Wu, 2015). Every approach is tailored to the specificities of the conflict. They can be broadly categorized as either a bottom-up (the Lowest level of Lederach's pyramid) or a Top-down approach (the Highest Level) (Maiese, 2016). It depends on which actors are involved in the process and how they take the lead in managing or resolving, or escalating, a conflict. The actors may include, but are not limited to, state authorities, law enforcement agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Inter-governmental Organizations (IGOs), international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), local civil society, the United Nations, etc. (Michelle, 2024).

Another concept that is closely associated with Strategic Peacebuilding is the liberal model of peacebuilding. Post-World War II had internecine struggles and civil wars. The end of the Cold War marked the end of the international order. The Cold War confined the states at the time to intervene in humanitarian and political crises without showing support to the opposing power blocs. Intra-state conflicts were seen as 'proxy competitions' (Kalinovsky & Daigle, 2014). The disintegration of the USSR led to an increase in civil wars (Kollontai, 1994). Given this, the end of the bipolar world marked the victory of liberal and Western ideology over communism. From here onwards, it was evident that the spread of liberal ideology would encapsulate the world.

The end of the Cold War gave way to a new vision of American leadership, which paved the way for a major paradigm shift in global politics (Boutros-Ghali, 1996, p. 86). International peace, stability, and the fulfilment of liberal values were required to attain 'liberal peace'. Post-Cold War times stressed the management and resolution of the conflicts at hand. Liberal peace frameworks began to emerge with the support of policymakers, scholars, and non-governmental actors as a response to conflicts and post-conflict situations.

Liberal Peacebuilding has struggled to deliver sustainable and context-specific peace in many post-conflict societies, as seen in cases like Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, Kosovo, Iraq, and Mozambique, where top-down liberal reforms failed to address the deeper social, political, and digital-era drivers of conflict. At the same time, contemporary conflicts increasingly involve cyber threats, digital manipulation, and technologically enabled forms of violence that traditional peacebuilding frameworks are not equipped to manage. This creates a critical gap that liberal peacebuilding has not evolved to meet the demands of modern conflict environments, making it necessary

to explore how digital peacebuilding tools and approaches can address these limitations and strengthen future peacebuilding efforts.

As global conflicts evolved, liberal peacebuilding has struggled to keep up, leading to a reconsideration of its effectiveness. To address these challenges, this study raises two critical questions: Why could liberal peacebuilding not evolve to offer adequate mechanisms to deal with the emerging trends of conflict? How can the digital peacebuilding approaches fill the gaps left by liberal peacebuilding? To discover the answers to these concerns, this study first examines the notion of peacebuilding, including its critique, then dives deeper into the concept of digital peacebuilding and its potential benefits that address the gaps in liberal peacebuilding.

Defining Peacebuilding

The term 'peacebuilding' was initially coined by Professor Johan Galtung, the founding father of the discipline of peace studies and conflict transformation. It was Boutros Boutros-Ghali, who was the head of the United Nations at that time, who established the concept in his *Agenda for Peace* document in 1991. Agenda for Peace was considered as the preliminary step to establish a framework to deal with issues in the post-conflict peacebuilding phase of violent conflict zones. It is characterized as the establishment of circumstances to construct enduring peace by tackling the political, economic, social, cultural, and humanitarian challenges that may contribute to the recurrence of the conflict. It emphasized the need to tackle the underlying factors of violence, namely economic distress, social inequity, and political suppression. The text also called for the involvement of national and international actors in addressing these factors to avoid any resumption of conflict (Boutros-Ghali, 1992).

One of the central aims behind the introduction of peacebuilding was the belief that developed states have a responsibility to support weaker and conflict-affected states that are highly vulnerable to security threats. In practice, this rationale also became a catalyst for the interventionist policies pursued by major powers, particularly during the 1990s. As a result, peacebuilding efforts involved a wide range of actors, including states, international institutions, and international non-governmental organizations (Jason, 2014).

Galtung defines peacebuilding in two ways: liberal peacebuilding and sustainable peacebuilding (Indira Gandhi National Open University, n.d.). Liberal peacebuilding draws its philosophical foundation from Immanuel Kant's Perpetual Peace, also known as Democratic Peace Theory, which emphasizes that democracies do not wage war against one another because they are part of collective security arrangements, are accountable to their constituencies through electoral processes, and establish liberal democratic institutions that promote peace, economic cooperation, and free market economies. As a result, liberal peacebuilding emerged through doctrines of liberal economic reforms, rule of law, democracy, human rights development, humanitarian assistance, and institutional involvement, with modern states positioned as the central actors in post-conflict peacebuilding (Zambakari, 2017).

Post-war peacebuilding processes, such as institutional rebuilding, reconstruction, rehabilitation, reconciliation, and reintegration, are time-consuming and rely heavily on international funding, where accountability becomes a major prerequisite and is most effectively ensured within democratic regimes. Sustainable peacebuilding, on the other hand, is grounded in John Paul Lederach's discourse on sustainable peace and focuses on long-term structures and processes for peace development, including the training of actors from grassroots to ruling elites, inclusive

institutional and civil society engagement, and policy-oriented efforts that involve all segments of society. During the 1990s, the United Nations initiated peacebuilding missions in countries such as Nicaragua, Namibia, El Salvador, and Cambodia, reflecting the prevailing liberal ideology of the period and aligning with Boutros-Ghali's peacebuilding framework, which emphasized political and economic liberalization as foundational conditions for durable and sustainable peace after civil wars.

Conceptualization of Positive Peace

In this study, peace is understood not merely as the cessation of open hostilities but as a broader transformation of relationships and structures. Drawing on Johan Galtung's distinction between negative and positive peace, negative peace refers to the absence of direct, organized violence, whereas positive peace entails the presence of just and equitable social, political, and economic arrangements that reduce the likelihood of violence recurring (Galtung, 1969, 1996). Therefore, positive peace includes accountability, fairness, justice, legitimate institutions, social inclusion, respect for human rights, and fair access to resources and opportunities for everyone. This conceptualization is also emphasized by later scholars advancing structural and relational approaches to peace (Lederach, 1997; Richmond & Tellidis, 2020). Within the context of this research, positive peace is conceptualized as a sustainable and context-sensitive condition in which underlying drivers of conflict, such as exclusion, structural inequality, and governance deficits, are addressed, rather than merely suppressed. The critique of liberal peacebuilding developed in this paper is based on the argument that many liberal interventions have produced, at best, a fragile form of negative peace (Paris, 2004), while the exploration of digital peacebuilding investigates how technology-enabled approaches might better contribute to the conditions of positive peace by enhancing participation, local ownership, and conflict-sensitive decision-making (Richmond & Tellidis, 2020).

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, multiple–case study design grounded in secondary data with an aim to critically examine the limitations of liberal peacebuilding, while also exploring the potential of digital peacebuilding as a complementary and corrective framework. Instead of testing a formal hypothesis, the research follows exploration and interpretive logic, using theory-driven case selection and comparative analysis to highlight patterns, variations, and gaps in existing peacebuilding practices.

Five post-conflict examples were selected as case studies, which include Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, Mozambique, Iraq, and Kosovo. The rationale for this purposive selection was based on the following criteria:

- Intensive liberal peacebuilding interventions
- Relevance to the core research questions
- Diversity of contexts and conflict dynamics
- Chronological extent and digital-era relevance

The cases span the post-Cold War period into the 21st century, allowing the study to trace how liberal peacebuilding has interacted with evolving global trends, including globalization, digitalization, and the growing salience of cyber and information-related threats. Furthermore, the cases are not presented as an exhaustive

list of all liberal peacebuilding experiences, but as analytically rich examples that collectively highlight recurring structural shortcomings.

Challenges in Peacebuilding Processes

Many theorists, scholars, and academicians in peacebuilding consider political and economic reforms complementary to each other. However, with time, rebuilding war-torn societies became a challenge as the limitations of these strategies became more pronounced. Efforts like fair elections, power sharing, and instilling capitalist systems did not identify the roots of conflict. Many times, it just addressed the surface causes. This further resulted in undermining the fragile peace. Angola experienced a return to conflict after democratic elections following a war between belligerents: the communist People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) and the anti-communist National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) (John, 1999).

Despite attempts at peace and democracy in the 1990s, violence between the MPLA and UNITA resumed in 1992, ushering in a second era of civil war that lasted until 2002. In Rwanda, too, power-sharing plans through elections were marred by the horrific genocidal crimes committed by the Hutus. Cambodia's elections resulted in political instability, violence, massive protests, and a failure to implement economic reforms. Similarly, Nicaragua and El Salvador faced issues with implementing economic policies, leading to problems. In Bosnia, the economic policies implemented after the 2005 Bosnian Accords created difficulties. Additionally, in Liberia, Charles Taylor, who was democratically elected, instigated fighting by suppressing the opposition. In Kosovo, it reignited the conditions for conflict rather than for peace (Killingsworth, 2013). The cited examples demonstrate the challenges of liberal peacebuilding, as evidenced by its failure to maintain long-term peace in these conflict-affected areas. This highlights the critical need for alternative approaches to peacebuilding.

Critical Analysis of Liberal Peacebuilding

Liberal peacebuilding has had a significant impact on violent conflict zones and post-war societies. However, there has been immense criticism of certain aspects of peacebuilding mechanisms under the liberal order:

1. *Illiberal Practices*
    Each aforementioned conflict served as an example of how short-lived initiatives led to a resurgence of violence. Furthermore, it demonstrated that democratic elections and the reconstruction of devastated regions were insufficient to establish sustainable peace. To reinstate enduring harmony, grassroots efforts were required. As opposed to a top-down approach to state development, a bottom-up strategy or a combination of the two would be more achievable. Furthermore, as local conditions vary by country, it is important to consider social conditions by involving the local population. A lack of negotiated, contextualized, grassroots, and situation-specific peace initiatives in conflict-affected areas may exacerbate the current fragile peace and spark new hostilities.

2. *Pragmatic Realpolitik*
    International actors strive to prevent conflicts through the holistic transformation of societies in order to establish stability and harmony. However, there is evidence that these processes foster self-governance. From its inception, the liberal peacebuilding paradigm was doomed due to its biased ideals and vested interests.

This model has failed numerous times because of its enforcement. The peace processes are further impeded by the sponsors of international state-building initiatives failing to demonstrate sufficient political will and attention towards the completion of work.

3. **Liberal Imperialism**

Furthermore, there is criticism aimed at Western intervention in the domestic affairs of other countries. This kind of engagement erodes the sovereignty of a nation and transforms peacekeeping missions into the expansion of liberal imperialism. The more dominant Western nations endeavor to *colonize* the less influential and non-democratic nations by imposing their cultural, normative, and value systems. This paradigm embodies a sense of elitism and hierarchy. David Chandler characterized the practice as an *'Empire in Denial'* (Bindi, Tamba, & Tufekci, 2018). The United States' actions in Iraq and Afghanistan provide prominent illustrations of this phenomenon.

Comparative Case Studies of Liberal Peacebuilding Interventions

Afghanistan

The Taliban's refusal to hand over Osama bin Laden to the United States and its allies following the September 11 attacks prompted the invasion of Afghanistan and the overthrow of the Taliban regime. While the intervention succeeded in removing the Taliban from power, the subsequent state-building effort was heavily shaped by an externally driven liberal peace framework that emphasized elections, institutional engineering, and centralized governance (Kamal,2021). Over time, the conflict became protracted due to the involvement of multiple actors, and the US-backed democratic government was widely viewed as lacking sovereignty, legitimacy, and credibility, as it primarily served Western interests. The continued conflict between US and Taliban forces exposed the limitations of the liberal peacebuilding model, which failed to account for Afghanistan's historical, cultural, and political context. This failure became evident in August 2021, when the Taliban regained control of the country despite an estimated US expenditure of $2.313 trillion between 2001 and 2022. Scholars have consistently argued that liberal peacebuilding in Afghanistan overlooked the country's decentralized authority structures and indigenous mechanisms of dispute resolution, thereby undermining the prospects for sustainable peace (Zyla,2025).

Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone, a small state in West Africa, experienced a prolonged and violent civil war that formally ended in 2002, followed by immediate peacebuilding efforts, yet peace has remained precarious (Akhaze,2015). Together with the United Kingdom and the United States of America, the UN sent out one of its largest peacekeeping deployments. However, the underlying reasons of war were not addressed because formal state-building methods paid little attention to the history of Sierra Leone, with a particular emphasis on liberal institution-building in the post-conflict scenario (Ikpe et al., 2021). Over time, it has maintained a severely divided society that is plagued by injustice and corruption. Inequality and corruption were the primary causes of the dispute between the main parties in Sierra Leonean society. The foreign intervention did not alleviate these social and economic concerns.

Mozambique

Years of violence and conflict have tarnished the history of Mozambique. Since gaining independence seventeen years ago, the African nation has been embroiled in conflict. The parties in conflict inked a peace agreement in 1992. Under the supervision of the United Nations, hostilities ceased, and a peace agreement was ratified with the intention of fostering an enduring peace (Maker, 2022). The initial democratic elections brought an end to the United Nations' mandate. Furthermore, the United Nations adhered to the fundamental principles of its peacebuilding endeavors, which included democratization, demilitarization, and market privatization, among others (Vines, 2020).

The reliance of liberal nations on international organizations such as the IMF and the World Bank exacerbated economic conditions. As a result of the liberal policies, destitution, desperation, and rage increased. Before 2019, the nation was exceptionally dependent on loans and aid from abroad. Moreover, armed strife reemerged in 2013, which was subsequently resolved in 2019 via a peace accord. Mozambicans, however, have doubts about its durability (Waller, 2021). The lack of success observed in both domestic and international peacebuilding initiatives can be attributed to the limited duration of time invested by different actors

Iraq

Following the regime change and 2003 invasion of Iraq, the United States attempted to establish a liberal democratic political system, much like it had in Afghanistan. To bolster this transition from an authoritarian regime, novel institutions were established. Following the aforementioned examples, Iraq, too, encountered legitimacy concerns after the 2005 elections. The number of individuals participating in the mass demonstrations grew over time. High levels of institutional incoherence and corruption plague the Iraqi political system

Iraq's political system underwent a period of instability after the establishment of a liberal democratic framework. This was the result of unsuitable institutional engineering that transpired throughout the transitional period of state-building. The disregard for locally proficient technocrats contributed to the downfall of institutions and, ultimately, the failure of state building. An additional noteworthy element that contributed to the instability that ensued after the implementation of liberal principles was their inadequate consideration of context and situation specificity (Mako & Edgar, 2021; Sari,2019).

This deficiency hindered grassroots efforts that sought to promote reconciliation and inclusion. Another significant factor was the successful attainment of influence by ethnic elites over the political trajectory of Iraq, which gave rise to novel forms of marginalization. Furthermore, the ruling class persisted in its longstanding practice of preferential treatment. The active participation of local advocates in tailored efforts, rather than one-size-fits-all ones, together with actual tangible financial support, is essential, considering that Iraqi culture is not receptive to liberal ideas (Mako & Edgar, 2021). Liberal peacebuilding in Iraq had its own shortcomings since it did not reflect Iraqi culture, identity, ethnicity, or history, posing a substantial obstacle to the adoption of peaceful and durable peace measures as the state–society relationship did not conform.

Kosovo

Kosovo represents another conflict-ridden case of peacebuilding that followed the transitional administration model led by the United Nations, European Union (EU), Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), yet revealed significant flaws and limitations (Tziarras, 2012). More than twenty years after the Kosovo War and fourteen years after independence, peacebuilding remains overseen by the EU mission in Kosovo and the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo, while ethnic tensions persist internally and with neighboring states (Emous, 2023) Kosovo continues to face challenges such as power-sharing disputes, legitimacy issues, social exclusion of minorities, corruption, a weak judicial system, elite-driven politics, and political instability, raising questions about the effectiveness of liberal peacebuilding despite sustained international involvement (Visoka, 2020). Limited and non-inclusive local and civil society participation, combined with top-down institution-building approaches, has resulted in superficial reforms and limited progress toward durable peace. More broadly, Western interventions in fragile states such as Kosovo, Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, and Iraq have often imposed liberal norms while overlooking local realities, highlighting the need for alternative peacebuilding frameworks, particularly in an era of growing technological reliance (Balthasar, 2017; Garrido, 2019).

Conflict and Digital Technology

Rapid global industrialization and advances in information and communication technologies have transformed the world into a global village, enabling widespread participation in information production and consumption while reducing the state's ability to control the flow of information across borders (Srinivasan, 2018). The evolving nature of digital technology has significantly reshaped contemporary conflict dynamics. Stakeholders in conflict now use a wide range of digital tools to enhance their access to information, improve situational awareness, develop new strategic capabilities, and reframe conflict narratives in ways that advance their objectives (Druet, 2021). These technologies are strategically leveraged to support various aspects of conflict operations, such as enabling faster and more secure communication among individuals and groups, accelerating the speed, scale, and global reach of dissemination, including the spread of narratives by conflicting parties.

Digital technologies generate new data on conflict dynamics and public sentiment but are also increasingly weaponized through disinformation, polarization, hate speech, propaganda, psychological operations, and influence campaigns, particularly via social media, posing serious challenges to peace, justice, and social cohesion (Cherry, 2024). Subsequently, as such threats are coercive, digital technologies have also empowered peacebuilders and peacekeepers to impact processes that may help in mitigating violent conflict while also enhancing sustainable human development (Pauwels, 2021). With regards to the digitalization of peace processes, there is a strong drive to use technology and innovative digital initiatives in peacebuilding efforts. To comprehend how peacebuilding has adapted to the digital world, we must first understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on this space.

Impact of COVID-19 on Ongoing Peacebuilding and Peacekeeping Operations

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced unprecedented disruptions to peacebuilding operations worldwide. Its impact was not limited to public health but extended directly into conflict-affected environments where peacebuilding processes rely heavily on mobility, face-to-face engagement, and the steady flow of resources. The pandemic intensified pre-existing structural inequalities, strained weak health systems, and heightened socio-economic vulnerabilities, as well as conditions that often correlate with increased risks of tension and violence (Peace Direct, 2020; United Nations Peacekeeping, 2022).

For peacebuilding practitioners, lockdowns and travel restrictions severely limited fieldwork, community engagement, and mediation efforts. Many mechanisms vital to reconciliation, such as dialogue forums, confidence-building activities, trauma healing sessions, and local conflict resolution meetings, were postponed or moved online (Makosso, 2020). While digital tools enabled some continuation of activities, they also amplified unequal access to technology, particularly in rural and marginalized areas, thereby excluding precisely those groups most vulnerable to conflict escalation.

COVID-19 also reshaped operational priorities. Peacekeeping missions and local organizations were forced to shift resources toward crisis management, humanitarian support, and pandemic response, often at the expense of long-term peacebuilding objectives (Clark & Alberti, 2021). The pandemic demonstrated that effective peacebuilding requires both adaptable digital mechanisms and strategies that anticipate how global crises can undermine fragile progress. Studies on the pandemic have analyzed its many dynamics in various lenses and arenas. The fast spread of the virus targeted two major fault lines in Peacebuilding operations. The first is that it affected the baseline of conflicts and directly contributed to inequality. The economic hits that every state took didn't leave peacebuilding operations unscathed. Local peacebuilders came forward to report that their funding had started to dwindle, directly threatening the 'sustainability' aspect of their mission.

The second issue is that, as peacebuilding is primarily done in conflict-prone areas or in traumatized communities, the setting of the entire mission is fragile, and upheaval as massive as a pandemic deconstructed much of the progress of some missions. Connecting to the issue of inequality, it was noted that there was a significant revival of racist sentiments. The polarization of societies and parties renewed in several peacebuilding missions. On its own, there is seemingly little that joins racism with the virus, but as the coronavirus was globally dubbed as the *'Chinese Virus',* it becomes clear that it takes little to nothing to polarize people; when you add previous grievances to the mix, it is relatively easy to visualize how easily any progress made by the peacebuilding missions could be unraveled. The Government of South Sudan asked the United Nations not send troops to it that had recently served in high-risk countries such as China, Spain, and Italy (Day, 2019). Covid led to class exploitation and further promoted poor living conditions in the already sensitive conflict zones and further directly affected the troops too, as their rotation tours had to be rearranged and often stopped.

Several missions had to shift to crisis management mode while some had to cease completely, e.g., Colombia. The crisis also had a negative impact on the already vulnerable mental health of the people living in the conflict zones, with already repressed/unaddressed trauma. However, the pandemic has definitely brought about a change in the way we view peacebuilding. It has evolved into a digital space now,

giving more room for partnership and remote access with little to no cost in comparison to before. The focus has been on 'keeping communication channels open and retaining conflict sensitivity. Overall, COVID-19 did not create new conflicts but exposed and deepened the structural weaknesses already present in conflict-affected societies, underscoring the need for resilient, inclusive, and technologically adaptive peacebuilding approaches.

Digital Peacebuilding

Digital peacebuilding depends upon the corresponding nature of new and older technology. This will allow people to report and react to violent instances more quickly, given the early warning and response mechanism it entails. In this regard, context-specific digital tools are required, ranging from complex mechanisms such as blockchain cash distribution to simpler technologies such as SMS messaging. Moreover, peacebuilders make use of phones, internet bundles, laptops, cameras, email, websites, databases, and social media platforms such as Zoom, Skype, and Facebook to hold conferences and seminars, using radio and other digital platforms to connect people across borders in sharing critical information and spreading awareness regarding a conflict (Hirblinger, 2023)

The utilization of these tools has enabled peacebuilders to leverage the power of technology to eradicate conflict. They can improve capacity building programs, streamline conflict analysis, establish online communities, advocate for conflict resolution, influence public attitudes, protect marginalized groups, and use the internet and social media for social justice. Beyond the positive outcomes of technology for peacebuilding, individuals worldwide can become agents of change within their own societies by launching social media campaigns against corrupt and authoritarian regimes and by sharing firsthand reports of violence, social unrest, election fraud, and political instability. In this regard, the wave of social media protests heralded by the Arab Spring in 2010 allowed individuals to voice their complaints publicly against totalitarian regimes of several of the dominant Middle Eastern countries, such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, Algeria, Iraq, and Jordan (Kundt, 2014).

Tools of Digital Peacebuilding

In line with the assessment of digital peacebuilding, a concise taxonomy of its core functions is outlined below.

Data Processing / Data Management

Digital peacebuilding extensively relies on technology-enabled data collection and analysis to support early warning systems and conflict prevention. Tools such as FrontlineSMS, Magpi, and KoBoToolbox enable real-time data gathering and big data analysis, while crisis-mapping platforms like Google Crisis Map and MapsData help visualize conflict hotspots through descriptive, predictive, and diagnostic functions. (Gangopadhyay, 2024; Panic, 2020). Platforms such as Ushahidi and UNICEF's RapidPro further demonstrate how digital tools support interactive mapping and real-time information flows in conflict-prone settings (Omowon, 2024).

Geographic Information Systems and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles

Geographic Information Systems, satellite imagery, and drones are increasingly used to overcome access constraints, security risks, and high data-collection costs in conflict zones. These technologies support surveillance, humanitarian delivery, and emergency

response, and advances in crowdsourcing have made them accessible to both international organizations and smaller peacebuilding actors (Quamar et al., 2023).

Artificial Intelligence and Blockchain Technology

Artificial Intelligence enhances peacebuilding by enabling rapid analysis of large datasets through machine learning, natural language processing, and pattern recognition. Institutions such as the United Nations and the European Union employ AI-driven early warning systems to monitor conflict dynamics and generate real-time indicators for prevention and peacebuilding (Salisu & Samuel, 2025).

Gamification of Peacebuilding

Gamification integrates game mechanics into peacebuilding to encourage positive social behavior, civic engagement, and conflict-sensitive attitudes. While still limited in formal peacebuilding programs, examples such as *PeaceMaker* and *Acts of Kindness* illustrate how games can promote dialogue, empathy, and prosocial action in divided societies (Darvasi, 2019; Nicolaidou & Kampf, 2025).

Social Media Platforms

Social media analytics tools play a critical role in monitoring public sentiment, misinformation, and early warning signals during crises. Platforms such as Geofeedia, Hootsuite, GroundTruth, Aggie, MapBox, and Keshif enable location-based monitoring, real-time data aggregation, and analysis of propaganda and misinformation in volatile environments (Firmansyah, 2025; Thurman, 2018; Kelsey, 2017; Yao et al, 2007; Roberts & Marchais, 2018; Yalçın et al., 2017).

Impacts of Digital Peacebuilding

Engagement

Digital tools can also be used to strengthen communities to provide timely help in response to an uprising in a conflict. They can envisage civic engagement and social cohesion amongst people, thus helping communities to act and enforce certain initiatives during times of crisis. An example can be 'RYNDA.ORG', a platform that allows people to ask for or offer help to families struck by the Russian wildfire in 2010 (Asmolov, 2014). The platform was later transformed into a wider network for community help. Moreover, tech-enabled citizen engagement could help peacebuilders in fomenting platforms and spaces focusing upon social issues, thus directing the local populace to participate in social reform and change processes (Larrauri & Kahl, 2013). An example can be the emergence of Crowdfunding, another area to foster engagement through not only individual funding campaign platforms such as Kickstarter or Indiegogo but also through spaces that focus on funding for social causes.

Fostering Collaboration

Networking and experience-sharing through online platforms have indeed allowed peace practitioners to collaborate with communities to foster increased information sharing and enhance understanding between them. Virtual communication tools can be applied to support dialogue between warring factions by strengthening coordination and synergies important in conflict prevention. For example, in Cyprus, civil society organizations created a platform called 'Mahallae' in 2014, which allowed peace practitioners to exchange knowledge and experience generated over 15 years of peacebuilding and conflict prevention practices to contribute towards the capacity

building with regard to the Cypriot context. It also encouraged regional civil society organizations to collaborate in formulating innovative peacebuilding initiatives for future discourse (Kanol, 2016).

Promoting Peaceful Attitude

As conflict is a dynamic process that undergoes changes in attitudes, structures, and behaviors of participants, conflict management and peacebuilding encapsulate the very essence of making sure that such attitude change may not become the prime factor in escalating any violence. In this regard, digital peacebuilding allows digital platforms to magnify civil society efforts to change behaviors and attitudes that can be leveraged for conflict prevention and forming longer-term narratives that shape identities more positively. An example in this regard can be an organization called 'Soliya' which uses online tools to impact attitudes by helping communities resolve their differences from a confrontational approach towards one defined by mutual harmony, compassion, and cooperation (Elliot-Gower, 2016).

Influencing Policy

Digital peacebuilding also encourages projects and initiatives aimed at influencing policy through technological tools in conflict settings. Hence, a non-profit organization called 'Turning Tables' allows young people in marginalized communities and conflict-prone settings to express their grievances and societal and political views through music. Such projects engage young people in intercultural dialogue. Thus, conditioning underprivileged youth to express their political perspective for the coming years in the spirit of nonviolence (Larrauri & Kahl, 2013).

Risks and Limitations

A bigger dilemma revolving around digital peacebuilding is the access of such technology to people living in remote areas, where limited human resources and the absence of long-range finance often degrade the viability of tech-related efforts. The spread of communication is thus limited to urban areas where the economically well-off population takes the desired share of benefit, while those in rural areas are excluded. On the contrary, if the information does reach out, certain rogue elements are quick to manipulate the population to further their repressive political agendas.

In addition to this, there are risks of data breaches present even if high cybersecurity standards are put into place. Evaluating fragile contexts, such risks are intensified due to the fact that, as data security barriers are difficult to implement, sensitive information is hard to protect and may be jeopardized in one way or another. In these cases, if such data falls into the hands of rogue elements (warring factions or repressive governments), they can easily manipulate it to further their political agenda and hence inflict more harm on the vulnerable population.

Additionally, it substitutes for in-person engagement with people, a crucial element in fostering trust. Hence, there is a general possibility that trust may be lost between peacebuilders and warring communities as digitized processes such as online mediation and remote gathering capacities are brought in place of field visits. Moreover, if their expectations are not met, the local populace may turn against the procedure and abandon it entirely, resulting in no progress.

Conclusion

In conclusion, all the examples mentioned above reveal that international liberal peacebuilding has failed to attain lasting peace in post-conflict societies. The

consideration of democratization and marketization as cures for conflicts in these societies is destructive. The striving for universalizing liberal model of peacebuilding by international actors has been chastised. All the explanations connote that rather than creating conditions for positive peace, liberal peacebuilding builds results more in negative peace. It has done more harm than good. Therefore, to manage the shortcomings of liberal peacebuilding, other approaches need to be introduced. With increased digitization in our lives, work on peacebuilding can be pursued in this domain. This paper demonstrates that liberal peacebuilding, despite its prominence in the post-Cold War era, has often struggled to produce sustainable and context-sensitive outcomes in conflict-affected societies. Across the cases of Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, Mozambique, Iraq, and Kosovo, the evidence reveals that externally driven liberal reforms frequently resulted in fragile forms of negative peace marked by weak institutions, limited local ownership, and inadequate attention to structural inequalities and socio-political realities.

Digital peacebuilding oversees long-term and permanent peace by effectively evaluating the underlying dynamics and root causes of a conflict. It consolidates a broad post-conflict agenda by strengthening internal and external security, promoting economic and social reconstruction amongst conflicting parties through inclusive dialogue and interaction. It prevents the outbreak of violent conflict by establishing certain operational, structural, and systematic measures aiming towards nation-building and state-building. In this regard, the above tools, such as data processing, geographic information systems, artificial intelligence, gamification of peacebuilding, and lastly social media platforms, provide an in-depth analysis of how digital peacebuilding can be leveraged in monitoring conflict for real-time awareness and timely interventions. Aside from this, the transformative potential of the technologically powered network society has reinforced four key areas of digital peacebuilding, i.e., through effective engagement, fostering collaboration, promoting peaceful attitudes, and influencing policy.

In contrast, the emergence of digital peacebuilding presents opportunities to address some of these shortcomings by improving early warning capabilities, strengthening community engagement, facilitating inclusive dialogue, and supporting conflict-sensitive decision-making. Digital tools enhance the ability of peacebuilders to gather and analyze data, monitor emerging threats, and adapt interventions in real time. At the same time, these approaches introduce new risks related to exclusion, privacy, cybersecurity, and the erosion of face-to-face trust, emphasizing the need for responsible, ethical implementation. Concluding the analysis, peacebuilders and decision makers at the local, regional, and international levels must integrate technology into peacebuilding initiatives to facilitate a channel of information for impact evaluation and assessment necessary to prevent and manage conflict.

Ultimately, the findings highlight the need for a hybrid approach that integrates the strengths of digital innovation with contextually grounded, locally led peacebuilding strategies. By aligning technological tools with the lived realities of conflict-affected communities, future peacebuilding efforts can better promote the positive peace structures of justice, inclusion, and equitable governance that reduce the likelihood of violence and support long-term stability.

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Neo-Khalistan: Religious, Cultural, and the Political Revival of the Sikh Identity

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Abstract

Punjab's history has been marked by turbulence both before and after India's independence. In an environment filled with uncertainty, the Sikh minority has often felt marginalised in post-independence India, leading to several social movements advocating for recognition. One significant movement is the Khalistan movement, which triggered a prolonged insurgency in Punjab and marked one of the bloodiest periods in Indian history. This paper explores the Neo-Khalistan movement as a contemporary revival of Sikh religious, cultural, and political identity, extending beyond mere separatist aims. It traces the movement's roots to the Singh Sabha and Gurdwara Reform movements, illustrating how these historical initiatives have cultivated a unique Sikh consciousness that endures to this day. The study examines the shift from the 1980s Punjab insurgency to advocacy by the Sikh diaspora in countries like Canada, the UK, and the US. Organisations like Sikhs for Justice and the World Sikh Organisation are at the forefront of promoting Sikh rights and memory politics. The assassination of notable figures such as Hardeep Singh Nijjar highlights the escalating tensions between diaspora activism and the Indian government. This research argues that the Neo-Khalistan movement is motivated more by symbolic assertion and resistance to perceived cultural assimilation than by territorial ambitions. Ultimately, it concludes that the movement signifies a dynamic redefinition of Sikh identity in response to ongoing political marginalisation and historical grievances.

Keywords
India, Khalistan, identity, Punjab, Khalsa, Sikh

Introduction

Social groups do not exist in isolation; rather, they interact within a social environment to form a functional society. Identity plays a significant role in the minority politics of India. One of the prominent minority groups with substantial political influence,

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shaping the course of Indian politics, is the Sikhs. The small state of Punjab, which hosts the majority of the global Sikh population, is situated between Pakistan and India. It possesses a rich history shaped by significant events, political movements, and religious revivalism. However, the region has also been a hotspot of violence and rebellion, both before and after Indian independence. The Khalistan movement stands out as the most prominent among these violent movements, marking a significant chapter in Punjab's history since the partition.

Sikh identity is rooted in its values and tradition of resisting oppression and remaining resilient to preserve the community's right to practice its faith. The longstanding tradition of fighting oppression and resisting the onslaught of authoritarian dictates from powerful elites has shaped the character of the Sikh community since the religion's founding by Guru Nanak Dev in the 16th century. Neo Khalistan is a continuation of the struggle for a Sikh-majority homeland, grounded in a strong sense of identity and a prolonged fight for recognition. It also seeks to highlight the hidden dynamics of oppression within the modern Indian polity, where Sikhs, being a minority now less than 2 per cent of the population, face significant challenges (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

Sikhism, as a religion, has shaped the culture of its followers by introducing practices that were deeply ingrained in the community's consciousness, harnessing the perspective of a unified entity that takes shape as a nation or a *qoum* in tradition. The Khalistan Movement is a sociopolitical force closely tied to Sikhism and plays a significant role in North Indian politics. The movement seeks to establish Sikhism as a unique religion and identity, separate from other beliefs (Kyumpyo, 2009). Over the years, Sikhism has faced numerous challenges from external sources and the influence of other religions. The struggle to preserve the teachings of the gurus led to the rise of puritanical movements and militancy in the past, which resulted in violence in Punjab in the last two decades of the previous century (Kyumpyo, 2009).

The movement for a separate Sikh homeland was violently suppressed by India in the 1980s and 1990s (Duggal & Chughtai, 2023). Violence that ensued during the militancy period is categorized as one of the bloodiest in modern Indian history, and it permanently altered the political landscape of North-West India. The decades of the 80s and 90s are marked by brutal suppression of the insurgency through violent means, marked by counter-insurgency operations, police encounters, and policing of the state of Punjab through laws and policies that silenced the Khalistan insurgency. However, the movement remained alive and adapted with time.

In present times, the Khalistan movement expresses itself in the form of resistance against the state policies by underscoring the political and systemic violence against the Sikh community by the central and state governments. The efforts to revive Khalsa traditions among Sikhs and a Gen Z interpretation of the Khalistan movement focus on identity, tradition, language, and religious nationalism, which the author has categorized as the Neo expression of the Khalistan movement. Neo Khalistan is a departure from the violent past of the movement by highlighting the patterns of suppression, systemic injustices, and marginalisation of the Sikh people. The movement focuses on the aspects that underscore the disenfranchisement of the Sikh population in India. Moreover, the movement has also found a strong support base in the diaspora, challenging India's multicultural image abroad.

The paper seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of the Sikh identity and its relevance within the larger framework of Indian politics and society by analysing the interaction of religion and culture in shaping the Sikh identity. It will

examine the intricate dynamics that gave rise to the Khalistan Movement, its modern expression, the historical development, and the struggle to preserve the values and customs of the community in India. The paper also aims to rationalise the demand of Sikhs for a separate homeland; the friction of the Khalistan movement with the secular institutions of India, backed by a secular constitution. Utilising a thorough examination of these complex variables, this paper aims to illuminate the ongoing significance of identity in moulding contemporary Sikh politics and the passive influence of the Khalistan movement on Sikhs in India and abroad.

The focus of this research is to highlight the history and impact of the Khalistan movement in Punjab and its neo-expressions. The study highlights the evolution of the Khalistan movement from its inception and how socio-political changes in modern times have shaped it into a social movement. The research paper also underscores the juxtaposition of the religious and social institutions in Punjab with the secular outlook of the Indian republic. The study also examines how the Khalistan movement in modern India is a call for the reclamation of the Sikh identity, which often expresses itself in the form of resistance towards the central government's policies, such as protests and separatism.

Methodology

The overall research design of the study follows a qualitative method to conceptualize the notion of the Khalistan movement. The research delves into the meanings associated with the religions and cultural symbolism that represent the movement today. The research uses primary and secondary sources, drawing on archival documents such as the British Guzattiers of Punjab, to analyse the demographic composition, political structures, and the impact of religious reform movements on the population of Punjab, particularly the Sikh population. The study also consults existing research including research papers, research reports, and opinion articles of area experts, to draw a qualitative analysis of the dynamics of the Sikh society over the decades, and how political, social, and religious movements have shaped the Punjab's society, particularly the various aspects of the Khalistan movement in History and the variables that shape the movement. The research paper also consults historical accounts recorded in books and news articles

Theoretical Framework

The theory of Constructivism emphasises both ideational and material structures to understand the systems in which we live. Along with the material resources, constructivists argue that ideational structures also exist and are as impactful. At the core of the theory of constructivism is the Agent-structure problem (Riegler, 2012). Constructivist scholars have explained the agent-structure problem in various ways and have provided detailed accounts of the mutual relationship between agents and structure. Agents give rise to structures, whereas structures impact the agency or the actions of agents in shaping the course of their social interaction with norms. Nonetheless, agents and structures are intertwined in a dynamic relation where they both rely on each other for change and are hence mutually constitutive (Dessler, 1989).

The agency gives options that might have unforeseen repercussions that could cause a change as a result of the agents' decisions or actions. Entities like societies or governments are created when a large number of agents act freely and with a significant degree of identity in pursuit of their common goals. Although the definition of rational behaviour is contextual and differs from society to society, constructivism also

maintains that people are rational actors. As defined by their society, its conventions, and their belief systems, the context is pertinent to the decisions made by the actors. As a result, individuals establish what makes sense to them, and their behaviour over longer periods that are adopted by others in society can both create new norms and uphold preexisting ones.

Imagine it as a nation with several buildings that symbolise its authority over the executive and governmental branches. Do the existence of these material structures or the significance that the people of that nation place on those material structures account for the state's existence? A society's institutions are largely shaped by the personalities of its actors. According to Nicholas Onuf (2013), rules have a constitutive nature and offer the social circumstances necessary for actors to interact with prevailing norms and principles to form a social identity. This implies that the actors' identities are flexible and subject to change throughout time. Identity and consistent practice patterns are, hence, the building blocks of the establishment of institutions. Identity and institutions are linked in a dynamic and ever-evolving way, according to Onuf's (2013) constructivist paradigm. As identities evolve, so too may institutional norms and regulations. Institutional development may be influenced by changes in identity-based decisions and attitudes across time. Institutions and identities are therefore mutually constitutive and subject to change throughout time, controlling a society's institutions and identities.

Social Constructivism and Identity

Social constructivism holds that identity is more than just a descriptive phrase; it is an element of social and political reality. The identities of individuals and groups influence their political inclinations, attitudes, and behaviours, as well as how they see themselves and others. Political institutions, customs, and practices are partially influenced by the identities of the individuals and groups participating in or affected by political processes. One of the main determinants of political behaviour is identity. Depending on their membership in particular social, cultural, or political groups, people commonly express their views, engage in political activities, and make decisions (Jung, 2019).

In his seminal work Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment, Francis Fukuyama claims that contemporary identity politics are rooted in the third component of the soul, which he refers to as thymos or spirit. In order to comprehend Thymos, Fukuyama (2018) explores Socratic philosophy in depth and draws from the Republic, a conversation between Socrates and his pupils. Questions about human concern towards external acknowledgement and a sense of belonging to a particular way of life are at the centre of the dialectical interplay between the two. The seat of resentment among those who do not feel a part of a collection and demand recognition for their inner self is the part of the human conscience that demands dignity and feels resentment when confronted with a contrast between the inner and outer worlds, according to Fukuyama (2018). Francis Fukuyama's concept of thymos, which represents the desire for dignity, respect, and acknowledgement, illustrates the undercurrents of the neo-Khalistan movement. One way to interpret Sikh politics' emphasis on identity is as a response to their marginalisation in the broader Indian environment. The Khalistan movement's genealogy also emphasises isothymia, or the pursuit of equal regard, even though this distinction has not been intentional. The desire for equality, autonomy, and dignity, particularly when certain groups feel they are not accorded the same status within a state, fuels the call for emancipation (Fukuyama, 2018).

What is Neo-Khalistan?

The Khalistan movement has always been symbolised by resistance to authority, and its advocacy groups have a strong sense of community and religious distinctness with its own set of unique institutions and traditions. Sikh identity is created through a complex interplay of political, cultural, and religious factors, purposefully distinguishing it from the broader Indian national identity embodied in the secular constitution. The neo-Khalistan movement represents a dynamic shift in the Sikh psyche, designating the perspectives of the recent generations on identity, autonomy, and nationalism. The movement has evolved into a politics of grievance and resentment, historically, often accompanied by a sentiment of marginalisation (Rai, 2011). It is a decentralized movement, drawing influences from the collective tragedies of the Operation Blue Star, the Sikh pogroms of 1984, and the violent insurgency ensuing these events. It deviates from the classical Khalistan movement, which was characterised by a struggle for a Sikh homeland through political, or if needed, violent means. The Neo-Khalistan movement is not just identity politics, but also the politics of resentment.

The Classical Khalistan Movement

The classical Khalistan movement predated Indian independence. It represents the anxiety of the small Sikh community in a region dominated by great religions (Kapur, 1987). It is a theocratic movement, which has its roots in the political struggle for the preservation and recognition of Sikhism and greater autonomy before and after the independence of India (Kapur, 1987). The Khalistan movement aims to pursue the foundation of a state where Sikhs can practice their faith under the guidance of the Granth Sahib and their religious institutions. The concept of *Granth-Panth*, which illustrates an inseparable relationship between the scripture of the Gurus and its relation to the community, forms one of the foundational principles. Identity is a central theme of the movement as the movement draws inspiration from the historical legacy of resistance to outside rule and the nostalgia for the Sikh Empire.

      The movement went through phases of political upheavals and armed resistance. Tragic events like the Nankana massacre of 1923 and the Operation Blue Star, which are deeply rooted in the Sikh psyche, are connected to the community's desire to practice their religion under the autonomy of their religious institutions. Such historical events have shaped the Sikh community's outlook towards external political influence. In recent history, the Khalistan movement is deeply connected to the Operation Blue Star, in which the movement's leader, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, and his followers were killed in a confrontation with the Indian army. The event left a deep impact on the Sikh psyche as the destruction of the Golden Temple during the operation and the ensuing counter-insurgency campaigns, orchestrated by the Indian army, state police forces, and the paramilitary forces, resulted in massive human rights violations that mark the contemporary perspectives of the Sikh community on authority and governance (Chopra, 2010). The persecution of Sikhs that followed the operation Blue Star and the subsequent assassination of Indra Gandhi serves as one of the most traumatic events in Sikh history (Pennington, 2012, pp. 149-156).

Classical versus Neo-Khalistan Movement

The neo expressions of the movement differ tremendously from its classical iterations. It represents the sentiments of the Sikhs as a people having a distinct religious and cultural identity, emphasising the significance of collective experience, shared history, and cultural values intertwined with the principles of Sikhism, and a more cosmopolitan

nature of the Sikh community (Dyke, 2009). Neo-Khalistan represents a shift from political violence to an ideational interpretation of the movement, emphasising the significance of the movement by focusing on Sikh identity. In a way, the Neo-Khalistan movement is a form of Identity politics that explores the roots of the Sikh identity under the pretext of its genealogy and contrast with the struggle between the distinctness of Sikh religious thought from Indian secularism and Hindutva in modern times (Grewal & Sabherwal, 2019). The movement also espouses the anti-imperial, post-colonial undertones, reflecting on the power dynamics of the structural violence that always puts the Sikh community at the receiving end (Grewal & Sabherwal, 2019). The modern iteration of the movement is a critique of the embedded injustices in the political structures of India, where political violence and systemic injustices are perpetrated against the Sikh community. Despite India's republicanism, the Sikh community feels largely disenfranchised, and there are voices of political marginalisation and underrepresentation. This concern has its roots in pre-independence India, which especially pertained to the politics of Punjab as a question of minority representation in the region.

More recently, the movement has made inroads into the socio-political milieu of Punjab. The guiding principles, which include submission to the temporal and spiritual wisdom of the divine as represented by the religious Institutions of Sikhism, have strongly shaped the Sikh identity and have remained entrenched in the tradition (Pashaura Singh & Fenech, 2014). A common denominator between the classical Khalistan movement and the neo-Khalistan movement remains the emphasis on Sikhism as a guiding principle for Sikhs to struggle for home rule. Sikhi, as a way of life, is a subordination to the scripture, i.e., Guru Granth Sahib, and is substantiated by the religious institutions, Such as the Akal Takht (the seat of temporal Authority) and the Harmandir Sahib (the political and divine wisdom has always been derived from these institutions since their foundation. Another difference is the unconventional means through which the movement propagates itself (Singh, 2021).

Unlike the past, when autonomy and representation were topics of discussion in mainstream politics, the Neo-Khalistan movement reflects on these issues in social-media campaigns, human rights advocacy, democratic exercises such as referendums, pop culture, protests, advocacy in the diaspora, and activism in the home state of Punjab. However, the emphasis on the concept of *Granth-Panth* and the primacy of the Khalsa remains a common theme. The state-declared Khalistan militants are revered as heroes and cultural icons, regularly appearing on social media and Punjabi music as cultural symbols of resistance and defiance (Khanna, 2023). In short, the aspiration for greater autonomy persists; however, the means to communicate that aspiration has changed, as in the past it was militancy, but today it is advocacy.

The Genesis of Sikhi and the Search for Identity

The Sikh identity, which has evolved over several centuries, is a unique blend of diverse influences. It has been shaped by the teachings of Guru Nanak, the reforms initiated by Guru Gobind Singh, the challenging times of Sikh persecution, and the martyrdom of the Sikh Gurus (Shani, 2000). The rich history and culture of the Sikh community have played a crucial role in shaping its identity. Sikhism found its differentiation from Hinduism in Strict monotheism and rejection of idol worship (Grewal, 1983). Early in the 16th century, the founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak, established the philosophical cornerstone of Sikhism. His teachings focused on the value of selfless service, the unity of God, and the equality of all people. Despite gaining from the influences of the great

religions of the Subcontinent and their reform movements at the time, Sikhism has a distinctively independent identity manifested by its unique socio-religious practices. The essence of the teachings of Guru Nanak and the influences of other religions on Sikhism is elaborated by Marian W. Smith (1948) as stated:

> The intellectual and political atmosphere that surrounded Nanak's development was a peculiar blend of Hinduism and Mohammedanism. Born a Hindu, a Kshatriya or warrior by caste, he was reared in Punjab at a time when that area staggered under the full weight of Muslim influence. The initial conflict between the Hindu masses and Muslim conquerors was intensified by the latter's active program of conversion. Whether or not this program lived up to its full reputation for torture, its increasing success constituted a direct challenge to native religions. Nanak's answer was a reaffirmation of the spiritual essentials of Hinduism, plus an emphasis upon human dignity which has almost immediate repercussions in the political sphere. Nanak offered a doctrinal synthesis that answered the challenges of Islam and at the same time aimed at the very foundation of the top-heavy Brahmanical social structure. By emphasising an individualism already present in the Hindu tradition, he raised human dignity into a force which transcends other-worldly values, made excessive ritualism unnecessary, consecrated daily labour, and denied the validity of the caste system itself (pp. 457-462).

The period of Sikh persecution, especially under the Mughal monarchs, was a furnace that put the Sikh community's identity to the ultimate test. The Sikh community suffered greatly because of their unwavering refusal to abandon their beliefs in favour of the dominant religious dogma (Fenech, 2001). In this turbulent era marked by institutionalised discrimination and the enforcement of religious doctrines, the Sikhs remained steadfast in their dedication to Sikhism's core principles. The persecution also shaped how Sikhs interacted with outside forces; for instance, when Mughal emperor Aurangzeb executed Guru Teg Bahadur for accepting Islam on the invitation of the emperor, his son, Guru Gobind Singh, sought to protect the religion by calling the faithful to arms; however, he did not establish a martial tradition without justice (Kaur, 2007). Guru Gobind Singh introduced the concept of Sant Sipahi, or warrior saints, meaning Sikhs would defend their religion but never commit injustice in its name. To ensure this, he introduced beliefs and practices such as the Five Ks, which guided Sikhs in protecting their faith and opposing injustice. Sikhs remained firm in their distinctive religious identity amidst hardships, characterised by a unique blend of spiritual strength and a commitment to justice (Hew, 2008; Syan, 2014).

The Religious Revival of Sikhism in Later Periods
The 19th century Sikh reformation movements, such as the Singh Sabha Movement, underscore the emphasis on the foundational principles of Sikhi and re-enfranchised the Sikhs as a political and social force in pre-independence Punjab. Singh Sabha movement emerged to preach the gospel of returning to religious orthodoxy for two main reasons; one was the emergence of a Hindu renaissance movements such as the Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samaj that had a significant impact on Punjab's society, and another was the dilution of the moral values of the Sikhs as the religion began to dilute with Hindu practices becoming more commonplace (Gupta, 1990).

The Singh Sabha movement arose to preserve the religious essence of Sikhism. The objective of the Singh Sabha movement was to re-educate Sikhs on the foundational principles of the religion and to re-establish the Sikh identity, which was losing its essence, mainly due to the syncretic practices seeping into Sikhism from Hinduism (Mahmood, 1989). The movement opposed the advances of Hindu movements like Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj that aimed to integrate Sikhism within a wider Hindu religious framework. Swami Dayananda Saraswati established the Arya Samaj movement, a reformist Hindu organisation to revitalise and purify Hinduism. His arrival in Lahore and efforts to establish a strong base for his movement in Punjab, which included the denigration of Sikhism as a separate religion by Swami Dayanand, sparked a strong opposition to his movement by the Sikhs (Singh, 2018).

The dilution of Sikhism and its values into Hinduism was a cause for concern, which led to the re-emphasising of the core beliefs of Sikhism, particularly on the premise to distinguish itself as a separate religion and not an offshoot of Hinduism The creolization and hybridity of Hinduism with Sikhism in Punjab had consequences for the religion, and its impact was felt by the Khalsa Sikhs more than any other denominations within Sikhism (Singh, 1982). One of its compelling examples is the presence of Hindu idols in Gurudwaras, a practice introduced by the Udasis, a denomination of Sikhism that emphasises mysticism and practices idol worship as a connection to God (Singh, 1982). The Ascetic sect was also in charge of the gurudwaras, which was not acceptable to the Sikh denominations, particularly Khalsa Sikhs, who denounced idol worship as a Hindu practice and distanced themselves from it by advocating strict monotheism (Singh, 2012). The Sikh intelligentsia felt compelled to reorient and restructure the Sikh society by educating their community.

The urgency to reform Sikhism stemmed from the fear that it might disappear due to various reasons, mainly because of syncretic practices creeping in from Hinduism (Gupta, 1990). The Singh Sabha movement started to campaign for Sikh rights in the 1870s after the fall of the Sikh Empire, based on the belief that the Khalsa had lost its prestige, and it was vital to safeguard the core values of Sikhism through social and religious reform. The influence of this reform movement became more evident in the later census of British India.

The Singh Sabha movement acted as a barrier against the cultural dominance of Hinduism in India. It not only re-educated Sikhs about their scripture but also sparked an academic revolution within Sikh society by formalising Sikh religious thought through modern education. The establishment of Khalsa Schools and colleges throughout Punjab, including the renowned Khalsa College at Amritsar, was a direct result of this reform movement. Another outcome of the Singh Sabha movement was the formation of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee (Khurana, 2019), the Akali movement, and the Gurdwara reform movement (Myrvold, 2024), which became defining moments for Sikh identity after independence.

The Sovereignty of the Divine in Sikh Institutions
Sikh movements for greater autonomy and separatism draw influences from the historical reformation and Sikh rights movements, which dominated Sikh politics and society before India's independence. These movements shed light on the origins and components of Sikh identity and played a significant role in shaping later efforts that would determine the community's future. The Singh Sabha movement's clarification of the distinction between Hinduism and Sikhism has emerged as a fundamental ideological divide between the Khalistan movement and its opponents, who position

themselves against Hindutva, a majoritarian radical ideology advocating a nation-state premised on majority rule, often at the expense of minority freedoms.

Institution building within Sikh society began prior to the influence of the reformation movements. These socio-religious institutions served as the focal point of the reform movement. Furthermore, movement for self-determination in Sikhism does not adhere to the principles of the Westphalian statecraft; it is, in fact, quite advanced in this regard, as Sikhs are a global community that has always integrated itself into multicultural societies from the beginning, and the Sikh Empire was a cosmopolitan society. However, the Sikhs have always retained their religious and social autonomy and resisted external political influences. Another contrast of Sikhism with a rigid theocratic monopoly like the Catholic Church is the presence of republican institutions that offer legitimacy to the *Qoum* (nation), which represents the collective consensus of the worldwide Sikh population. The political and religious authority is not mutually exclusive in Sikhism, as following the example of the Gurus, who were the political figureheads, along with being the religious leaders of the nation.

Historically, the Sikhs have believed in the decentralisation of political authority. The idea of collective sovereignty in Sikhism is supported by the Guru Granth-Guru Panth conception, where the community and the scripture determine the political discourse (Rai, 2011). Another illustration of decentralization among Sikhs is the establishment of the Sarbat Khalsa by the final Guru, Guru Gobind Singh. The convergence of the Guru Granth-Guru Panth occurs in the Sarbat Khalsa, a council of Sikh people convened to address the challenges faced by the community. The collective accord of the community elects the religious council and presents their views at the Akal Takht of the Harmandir Sahib, which is the spiritual seat of authority in Sikhism (Rai, 2011). The Akal Takht holds legitimacy over Sikh affairs and derives its authority from the consensus of the panth (community).

Hence, for Sikhs, their religious institutions hold more significance than any other form of political system. After the reform movements, such as the Singh Sabha movement and the Akali movement, the Sikh religious institutions became the key determinant of the social and political life of the Sikh community. Popular reform movements aimed to re-establish the Khalsa tradition of Guru Gobind Singh, the last Guru of the religion, and his influence on Sikhism is both religious and political. The Khalistan movement's prominent figures, such as Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and senior Akali Dal leader Harchand Singh Longowal, were all Khalsa Sikhs and strongly believed in the revival of the Khalsa tradition and in the service of the Khalsa Panth (community). Moreover, institutions like the Akal Takht and Sarbat Khalsa have always kept the social and political dynamics of the Sikh community restricted to the religious fold, and these institutions draw legitimacy from the community, deflecting other forms of political authority as interference.

Sikhs have upheld the primacy of the Akal Takht over any other social and political institutions and have responded with aversion to any intrusive state policy (Singh, 2021). It is particularly evident in India, where the Sikh population is mostly concentrated around the holy sites. Sikhs around the world have shown respect to the law of the nations where they reside; however, Representation by the community's chosen representatives is regarded as superior to any democratic or elected form of representation, and outside meddling is repelled, as the Sikh value system does not entertain external meddling in the religious affairs of the community. Sikh history is marked by events in which Sikhs have protested for their religious rights against state authority. One of its prime examples is the Akali movement in the 1920s for the

management of the gurudwaras by the Sikh community as opposed to the colonial government. The violent struggle for a separate Sikh homeland on the model of a Westphalian state with defined territory and population was a reaction to the intervention by the Indian polity to assimilate the Sikhs into the Indian national sphere, where the primacy of the constitution and secular institutions would become a governing principle, rather than the community's own recognised institutions. In a way, the Indian constitution and secular institutions were juxtaposed by the Guru Granth - Guru Panth under a sovereign Akal Takht

Revival of the Khalistan Movement in India and Abroad

The primacy of the religious institutions and the interaction with the nation-state system have shaped the Sikh perception of autonomy. Within India, the modern iterations of the Khalistan movement demand Khalistan not just as a theocratic state, but also as an ethno-religious construct that represents the religious, cultural, and linguistic dynamics of the state of Punjab. As opposed to the movement's dynamics in the 80s, its emphasis is rooted in Sikh identity and the historical legacy of the Sikh resistance to external intervention. One of the leading differences that distinguishes neo-Khalistan from the classical variant is the role of the Sikh diaspora in propagating the movement. After its brutal suppression in Punjab by the central government, many advocates of Sikh right to self-determination found their support base among the diaspora, mainly situated in the US, Canada, and the United Kingdom, but remained deeply connected to the homeland.

The discourse on the Khalistan movement has majorly shifted from India to the Sikh diaspora community. The diaspora plays a crucial role in advocating for Sikh rights in the West (Hayat et al., 2024). Many overseas Sikh organisations are labelled as a threat to national security by the Indian government; however, these groups deny India's allegations and raise concerns about the Sikh community being deprived of their fundamental human rights in India. Social evils in Punjab, such as a rampant drug epidemic and worsening law and order situation, are attributed to the neglect of the central state governments by the Sikh rights organizations. Moreover, these organizations also highlight the religious and racial profiling of Sikhs as a threat to national security by the Indian government as a serious human rights violation. These émigré organisations and rights groups largely remain peaceful and are not considered a threat by the governments of their respective countries.

The clash of identities is more visible in the rhetoric of the Sikh advocacy groups based in North America and Europe, as these organizations decry the plight of religious minorities under a government that espouses the Hindutva ideology (Hayat et al., 2024). Many rights organisations, regarded as terrorist sympathisers by India, promote justice and self-determination for Sikhs in India. For example, Sikhs for Justice (SFJ) strongly criticises the Indian government for the Sikh Massacres of 1984, highlights systemic injustices against Sikhs in India, and advocates for a non-binding Sikh referendum on self-determination. Other rights organisations, Such as World Sikh Organisation (WSO), provide legal advocacy for Sikh rights in India and across the world. WSO also highlights the human rights violations perpetrated by the Indian government and holds remembrance days for the tragic events of Operation Blue Star and the Pogroms against Sikhs in 1984 (Purewal, 2012).

Many Sikh dissidents have been the victims of assassination attempts. One of the most notable cases is the assassination of Hardeep Singh Nijjar in June 2023 (Al Jazeera, 2024). A Canadian Sikh leader and outspoken advocate for a separate

homeland for Sikhs, Nijjar was a prominent figure within his community in Canada who championed the Sikh people's right to self-determination (Stepansky, 2025). Hardeep Singh Nijjar was one of the activists involved with advocacy organisations for Sikhs in the diaspora. Other prominent figures include Gurpatwant Singh Pannu in the US; Bhai Amrik Singh and Gurcharan Singh are vocal leaders of these advocacy groups. Nijjar's assassination sparked a new momentum in the Khalistan movement, leading to diplomatic tensions between India and Canada, as the Canadian government accused India of involvement (Cecco, 2025). This diplomatic fallout resulted in the expulsion of diplomatic staff by both nations (Al Jazeera, 2024). The killing of Hardeep Singh Nijjar deeply angered Sikhs both in India and abroad, fostering resentment that has persisted since the turbulent decades of 80s and 90s.

Recent voices within the Sikh community reflect on the complexity of the identity crisis of the Sikhs and the mistrust of the community in the government institutions. The contemporary Khalistan movement highlights the juxtaposition between Indian political structures and Sikh aspirations for autonomy, which has historically manifested in demands for greater autonomy and separatism. Vocal proponents of the movement today, like Amritpal Singh, decry the social decay of the Sikh society. He speaks about the rampant drug abuse and violent crimes in Punjab, and for him and his followers, the cause of the moral decay of the Sikh society is due to the deviation of the *Panth* (community) from the core values of *Sikhi*. The modern Khalistan movement believes in a religious revival and a return to orthodox Sikhism to rid the Sikh community of all social evils, which is not possible without self-determination (Fareed & Ali, 2024). Moreover, the proponents of the movement also make strong criticism of the rise of Hindutva and saffronisation of India, as a threat to the social and constitutional status of minority religions of India, which brings the movement into a confrontation with the far-right BJP government (Rai, 2011).

In comparison to the past, the revival of the movement in the 21st century did not result in militancy, but rather in opposition to the authority of the central government and a mistrust of the state government's policies. The successive governments in the center and in Punjab have faced criticism from the Sikh community's clergy and political figures for being interventionist and disrupting their religious autonomy. This juxtaposition forms the basis of the contemporary interpretation of the Khalistan movement. Moreover, the legacy of the structural violence perpetrated through state institutions during the period of militancy marks a significant resentment towards the methods of governmentality by the Sikh community. Furthermore, the underlying causes of distress within the community go beyond militancy and separatism. Other structural causes, like the lack of industrialization in Punjab, agricultural distress among the farmers, a rampant drug epidemic, and the historic claims over territory like Chandigarh and Punjabi-speaking districts in bordering states, have significant influences on the community's collective conscience. Such issues form the foundation of the Sikh resentment towards the power structures in contemporary Indian politics.

Conclusion

The revival of Sikh identity in contemporary times, often encapsulated in the term *Neo-Khalistan*, represents more than a call for territorial sovereignty; it is an evolving assertion of religious, cultural, and political selfhood in response to historical marginalization and present-day challenges. The Khalistan movement did not appear in a vacuum, but as an outcome of the socio-political dynamics of Indian society. It has

its roots in the pre-independence struggle for identity and the post-independence struggle for greater autonomy for the Sikhs in India. The movement represents an extreme approach to social and political reform, grounded in reformist efforts such as the Singh Sabha and Gurdwara Reform Movements. This reawakening draws heavily from collective memory, spiritual autonomy, and resistance to perceived assimilation into dominant religious or national narratives. The cultural autonomy emphasized by the movement is an expression of the collective memory of the Sikh community, which has its roots in the history of social and political development of their identity.

Moreover, while the original Khalistan movement was largely territorial and insurgent in nature, its modern iteration, particularly among the Sikh diaspora, is marked by symbolic nationalism, digital advocacy, and legal-political mobilisation. The martyrdom of figures like Hardeep Singh Nijjar and the resurgence of historical grievances post-1984 continue to fuel this identity-based momentum. Yet, the Neo-Khalistan discourse is not monolithic. It encompasses diverse strands, from calls for justice and preservation of Sikh distinctiveness to critiques of Indian majoritarianism and efforts to reclaim narrative space globally. In this sense, Neo-Khalistan is less a secessionist project and more a dynamic, transnational assertion of Sikh agency, one that navigates the complex intersections of memory, modernity, and marginalisation.

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The Afghan Taliban–TTP Nexus: Evolution from the First Emirate to Post-2021

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Introduction

The relationship between the Afghan Taliban and the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has been among the most consequential dynamics in South and Central Asian security for nearly three decades. Both groups are rooted in the Deobandi Islamist tradition and school of thought, and both emerged from the same socio-political milieu of Pakistani religious seminaries (madrassas), tribal borderlands, and jihadist mobilization after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, culminating in the Afghan War (1979-89). Yet, while the Afghan Taliban primarily sought to establish an Islamic emirate in Afghanistan, the TTP has waged an insurgency against the Pakistani state at the behest of the Afghan Taliban, as the TTP considers itself an extension of the Afghan Taliban. Their ties have oscillated between fraternity, operational collaboration, and strategic divergence since the TTP's formation in 2007.

From the rise of the first Taliban regime in 1996 to the post-9/11 Global War on Terror and, finally, the Taliban's triumphant return to power in Kabul in August 2021, the Afghan Taliban–TTP nexus has continually reshaped Islamist militancy and terrorism across the region, especially in Pakistan. It has tested Pakistan's counterterrorism strategies, complicated Afghanistan's search for legitimacy, and posed broader challenges for international security.

This article traces the historical evolution of this relationship. It analyzes their relationship before the formation of the TTP, i.e., the first Taliban regime (1996–2001), during two decades of insurgency and the rise of the TTP (2001–2021), and finally in the post-fall-of-Kabul period (2021–present). It concludes with analytical reflections on the ideological solidarity and strategic ambiguities that continue to define the Afghan Taliban–TTP connection and their implications for Pakistan and the wider region.

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The First Afghan Taliban Regime (1996–2001)

When the Afghan Taliban captured Kabul in September 1996, they quickly established the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, which was recognized by only three countries: Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. During this period, the Afghan Taliban leadership, under the supreme leader Emir ul Momineen Mullah Mohammad Omar, consolidated its rule over much of Afghanistan, imposing a strict interpretation of Sharia law.

While the TTP, as an umbrella organization, did not yet exist—it would not formally emerge until 2007, after the beginning of Pakistani military operations in former tribal districts neighbouring Afghanistan—the seeds of its future were being sown during these years. Many Pakistani militants who would later form the TTP leadership were radicalized, trained, and ideologically nurtured in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and at Al-Qaeda-run jihadi training camps. The Taliban's emirate provided safe havens for jihadi groups from around the world, especially Pakistani outfits such as Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and Jaish-e-Muhammad. As Ahmed Rashid has documented, the Afghan Taliban regime encouraged these groups to use Afghanistan as a base for the Kashmir jihad (Rashid, 2010).

Cross-border tribal linkages also played a decisive role. The Pashtun belt straddling the Durand Line ensured that Afghan Taliban fighters and Pakistani militants often shared kinship and madrassa networks. Seminaries in Pakistan's tribal areas and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, such as Darul Uloom Haqqania in Akora Khattak, Nowshera district of KPK province, were already instrumental in producing tens of thousands of cadres loyal to the Taliban cause. These early years laid the foundations for what would later evolve into the TTP: a Pakistani Taliban movement inspired by and aligned with the Afghan Taliban.

Pakistan, at this stage, was a staunch supporter of the Taliban regime in Kabul. Islamabad viewed it as a friendly government that could secure strategic depth against India. Islamabad largely ignored the presence and gathering of Pakistani and foreign Islamist militants in Afghanistan. This permissive environment strengthened the embryonic Taliban–Pakistani militant nexus.

The Global War on Terror and the Rise of TTP and the Exodus

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, transformed the Taliban landscape. The Taliban regime collapsed within two months, and its leadership retreated into Pakistan's tribal areas, particularly Quetta and North Waziristan. This cross-border exodus reshaped the region's militant geography.

For the Afghan Taliban, Pakistan became the primary rear base for regrouping and launching an insurgency against U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan. The so-called Quetta Shura, Waziristan Shura, and Girdi Jungle Shura were established, and field commanders operated on both sides of the border, i.e., from sanctuaries in former FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas) districts of KPK province and Baluchistan.

The Birth of TTP

The early 2000s conditions, including Pakistan's alliance with the U.S. in the Global War on Terror, military operations in FATA, and the 2007 Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) operation (Operation Silence) against Islamist militants in Islamabad, unified various Pakistani militant groups. In December 2007, Baitullah Mehsud declared the creation

of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan. Since its start, TTP has been a loose collection of groups rather than a single, unified entity.

The TTP declared its objectives as enforcing Sharia in Pakistan, waging jihad against the Pakistani military and state, and supporting the Afghan Taliban in their struggle against the US and allied forces in Afghanistan. Their objective was to remove American troops from Afghan soil and pave the way for the Afghan Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan. Abbas (2008) has emphasized that the TTP emerged not only as a militant group but also as a movement reflecting deep grievances in tribal areas against the presence of the Pakistani military, while borrowing ideological and tactical inspiration from the Afghan Taliban.

Mutual Support and Operational Overlap

The Afghan Taliban and TTP had different political focuses, with one concentrating on Afghanistan and the other on Pakistan. However, they were closely connected in practice. The Afghan Taliban used Pakistani tribal areas as safe havens and often gained fighters from the TTP crossing into Afghanistan. Conversely, the TTP received training, logistical support, and ideological guidance from both the Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda, along with foreign fighters from various Islamist groups. U.S. forces consistently reported that Pakistani Taliban fighters took part in cross-border attacks. Antonio Giustozzi (2009) observes that Afghanistan's insurgency grew more transnational, with the Taliban attracting fighters from throughout the region, including Pakistan.

Al-Qaeda's Bridging Role

Al-Qaeda played a crucial role as the connective tissue between the Afghan Taliban and TTP. Figures like Osama bin Laden and later Ayman al-Zawahiri cultivated ties with both movements, providing ideological justification for targeting Pakistani civilians and military targets, while remaining loyal to the Taliban emirate project. Vahid Brown and Don Rassler, in Fountainhead of Jihad, demonstrate how Al-Qaeda's presence in the borderlands created overlapping areas of influence and facilitated cooperation (Brown & Rassler, 2013).

Pakistan's 'Good Taliban vs. Bad Taliban' Dilemma

Pakistan faced an internal contradiction during these years. Pakistani security policymakers were unable to realize the nexus between the TTP and the Afghan Taliban and their ideological affinities. Though Pakistani forces fought against the TTP, they did not do much against the Afghan Taliban. This gave rise to the 'good Taliban vs. bad Taliban' dichotomy, where the Afghan Taliban were not touched, while the TTP were treated as existential threats.

The TTP responded with ferocity, launching some of the deadliest attacks in Pakistan's history, including the 2009 attack on the General Headquarters (GHQ) in Rawalpindi and the 2014 massacre at the Army Public School in Peshawar. Yet, despite intense counterterrorism campaigns like Operation Rah-e-Nijat and Operation Zarb-e-Azb, the TTP remained resilient, partly because of sanctuaries in Afghanistan and support from like-minded networks. By 2020, weakened by Pakistani military operations and internal splits, the TTP had survived. Its long-standing relationship with the Afghan Taliban remained intact, waiting for a shift in the regional balance of power.

Post-Fall of Kabul: 2021–Present

The TTP Resurgence

The Taliban's return to power in Kabul in August 2021 dramatically altered the regional security landscape. For the TTP, it was a moment of vindication. More than 8,000 of its fighters, imprisoned in Afghan jails, were released by the Afghan Taliban authorities. Recruitment surged, and the group expanded its operational reach inside Pakistan.

Despite formal denials, credible reports indicate that the TTP leadership operates from sanctuaries in eastern Afghanistan, particularly Kunar, Nangarhar, and Khost. Pakistan has repeatedly raised this issue with the Taliban government, but Kabul has neither expelled the TTP nor curtailed its activities. The Taliban's reluctance reflects both ideological solidarity and the practical difficulty of confronting fellow militants who once fought alongside them against US forces. Multiple UN reports have highlighted the continued presence of terrorist groups, including Al-Qaeda, in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, which indirectly supports the TTP's operations (United Nations Security Council, 2022).

Failed Peace Talks

In late 2021 and 2022, Pakistan sought to negotiate with the TTP through Afghan Taliban mediation. While temporary ceasefires occurred, talks soon collapsed when the TTP demanded the reversal of FATA's merger into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the release of all TTP prisoners, and the implementation of Sharia law. Islamabad deemed these demands unacceptable, resulting in renewed conflict. The negotiations' failure underscored the Afghan Taliban's hesitance or possible complicity in pressuring the TTP to make concessions. Moreover, Pakistan voiced its disappointment.

Escalation of Violence

Since 2022, Pakistan has witnessed a sharp escalation of TTP attacks, particularly targeting security forces in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Pakistani authorities accuse the Taliban government of harbouring and facilitating the TTP. The Afghan Taliban, in turn, maintain plausible deniability, insisting that Afghan soil will not be used against others, while tacitly tolerating TTP presence. TTP Emir Noor Wali Mehsud was openly roaming in Kabul and adamant on attacking Pakistan.

This situation has strained Pakistan–Afghanistan relations and prompted debates in Islamabad about revising its Afghanistan policy. For the Taliban, however, openly confronting the TTP risks alienating a powerful ally and fragmenting their movement at a delicate stage of governance.

Analyzing the Nexus

At the heart of the Taliban–TTP relationship lies an ideological brotherhood: both are products of the Deobandi jihadist tradition, both invoke Sharia as their goal, and both draw legitimacy from resistance narratives. Nevertheless, their strategic objectives diverge: the Afghan Taliban prioritizes governing Afghanistan, whereas the TTP aims to destabilize the Pakistani state. This creates tension: Kabul cannot openly endorse the TTP's war, but neither can it betray its ideological kin.

Moreover, the Durand Line has long been a contested boundary. The Afghan Taliban's refusal to formally recognize it as an international border complicates cooperation with Pakistan. The porous frontier allows TTP mobility, while Pakistan struggles to enforce security. This structural factor ensures the persistence of the Taliban–TTP nexus.

For Pakistan, the TTP resurgence poses an existential threat, undermining state authority in its western provinces. For Afghanistan, tolerating the TTP undermines claims of being a responsible government and damages relations with its most important neighbour. Internationally, the Taliban's inability to restrain the TTP raises concerns that Afghanistan remains a sanctuary for transnational militancy. Multiple UN reports have revealed the presence of Al-Qaeda in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

Conclusion

The Afghan Taliban–TTP relationship is best understood as a continuum of ideological fraternity, tactical collaboration, and strategic ambiguity. From the Taliban's first emirate in the 1990s through the insurgency years of the Global War on Terror to the present post-2021 period, the nexus has shaped militancy across South Asia. For Pakistan, this relationship is among the gravest contemporary security challenges, as TTP violence escalates under the shadow of Afghan Taliban protection. For Afghanistan, refusing to confront the TTP risks international isolation and internal instability. The trajectory suggests that unless Kabul decisively severs ties with the TTP, militancy will continue to destabilize Pakistan and cast a long shadow over Afghanistan's quest for legitimacy. The Afghan Taliban and TTP may differ in political objectives, but their enduring relationship underscores the difficulty of disentangling militancy from the complex geopolitics of the Afghanistan–Pakistan frontier.

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National and International Civilian Protection Strategies in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict
by *Timea Spitka*

*Hareem Fatima[1]

The book review examines the scholarly contributions of Timea Spitka (2023), a renowned scholar of identity, international intervention, conflict transformation, and their impacts on minorities. Her research offers careful examination and interdisciplinary analysis of how civilian protection is deployed within one of the most enduring conflicts in modern history. Drawing on human security, feminist peace research, and international law, the book demonstrates how state and international actors perpetuate the conflict under the guise of protection and offers a strong critique of the global protection regime. It also provides profound insights into peacekeeping by debating the myth of protection; what is claimed to be protected, what should be protected, and what actually is protected.

In contemporary peacekeeping practices, Spitka points out how protection of civilians is judged and prioritized based on their geography, identity, ethnicity, religion and political strength in the region. She argues that international law is susceptible to manipulation, frequently serving the interests of powerful states at the expense of less privileged citizens, while the role of NGOs and other international actors, whom she refers to as ice-cream soldiers, is dismissed as performative, limited, and ineffectual.

In the introductory chapter, Spitka explores the 'myth of protection' and argues that civilian protection can be selective, ineffective, aggressive, or even exploitative. She examines Pillar III of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), emphasizing its often selective and politically driven use. The author analyses the Israeli apartheid system and shows how Hamas's 2006 election victory resulted in collective punishment against Palestinians. The discussion then shifts to the joint governance of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Hamas. Spitka focuses her analysis of civilian protection at the national level by looking at the Palestinian Civil Police (PCP), highlighting its limited mobility, which depends on Israeli authorization. She also reviews the Preventive Security Service (PSS), Palestinian National Security

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Forces (PSF), Presidential Guard (PG), and the Palestinian judiciary. She notes that the Gaza Civil Police Force was established after Hamas's 2007 takeover of Gaza. The author criticizes Israeli propaganda against international intervention, pointing out its global campaigns and partnerships with Jewish student volunteers to shape the narrative. She further contends that Israel maintains silence from several countries through lucrative intelligence-sharing agreements, which help sustain international inaction.

Spitka shifts the discourse to gender inclusivity and violence against minorities, noting that at 16 and a half, recruitment and capacity tests for the Israeli military begin. She scrutinizes the Israeli apartheid regime, ethnic cleansing, and violent Israeli eviction practices, particularly in the West Bank and Gaza, exploiting sympathy for ongoing accusations of anti-Semitism. The author shifts the perspective to the 9-year blockade of Gaza and its major implications for women. She also criticizes the rule of Hamas' government in accordance with Sharia-based law and its control over how women dress, enforcing gender segregation and violent repercussions against homosexuality. She discusses the wave of Palestinian youth violence from 2015 to 2017, called the "Children's Intifada", against the Israel Defense Force (IDF).

In her concluding chapter, Spitka highlights the necessity for the United States, the European Union, and the United Nations to develop an inclusive peace strategy, emphasizing the importance of exerting substantial pressure on Israel. Spitka's perspective on peacekeeping is critical and normatively driven. Her hands-on experience of witnessing what was happening while residing in Ashkelon, 50 kilometers south of Tel Aviv, and her current affiliation with the Hebrew University of Jerusalem make her work insightful and unique. Her book covers a major gap in research before the Israel-Palestine conflict escalated in October 2023. It challenges the top-down approaches of peacebuilding. Her demonstration of the R2P pillars aligns with the modern UN peacekeeping structure for prevention, protection, and rebuilding. The incorporation of the resilience paradigm mirrors post-liberal missions applied in peacekeeping today. Spitka's narrative of a peacekeeping approach through non-military peace operations emphasizes the significance of civilian-centered strategies for achieving sustainable, long-term peace, which is relevant to current debates.

Modern peacekeeping faces similar challenges: political paralysis, selective intervention, and limited civilian protection. Although Spitka's primary objective is to highlight civilian protection strategies, the organization of chapters slightly shifts towards gender and inclusivity studies, violence against specific groups, and the history of the Israel-Palestine conflict. Moreover, Spitka's analysis avoids binary blame. Spitka's book is nonetheless a significant contribution to peacekeeping within protracted social conflicts. Its layered approach highlights the limitations of conventional state-centric and military-based protection frameworks and advocates comprehensive, human-centered protection.

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