

# **REGIONAL STUDIES**

**42:2  
Winter 2024**

**INSTITUTE OF REGIONAL STUDIES ISLAMABAD**

## **EDITORIAL TEAM**

Dr Muhammad Mujeeb Afzal – Editor-in-Chief  
Ambassador Jauhar Saleem – Managing Editor  
Aarish U. Khan – Editor  
Aizah Azam – Sub-Editor

## **EDITORIAL BOARD**

Dr Shabir Ahmad Khan – Associate Editor  
Dr Murad Ali – Associate Editor  
Dr Ghulam Ali – Associate Editor  
Dr Mehmood Hussain – Associate Editor

## **INTERNATIONAL ADVISORY BOARD**

Amb Riaz Mohammad Khan  
Former Foreign Secretary  
of Pakistan

Mr Qasim Niaz  
Member BOG, IRS,  
Former Secretary Commerce Ministry,  
Islamabad, Pakistan

Dr Michael Kugelman  
Director, South Asia Center,  
Stimson Center, Washington DC, USA

Dr Christophe Jaffrelot  
CERI-Sciences Po/CNRS and  
King's College,  
London

Dr Hu Shisheng  
Director and Research Professor,  
China Institutes of Contemporary International  
Relations (CICIR), China

D Suba Chandran  
Professor and Dean, International  
Strategic and Security Studies Programme,  
National Institute of Advanced Studies  
(NIAS), India

Mr Shahab Enam Khan  
Professor at Jahangirnagar University,  
Dhaka, Bangladesh

Dr Li Jing Feng  
Director, Regional Studies and Strategic  
Research Centre, Sichuan Academy of  
Social Sciences, China

Dr Hassan Abbass  
Director at NESAC,  
University of Washington, USA

Dr Salma Malik  
Assistant Professor  
Quaid-i-Azam University,  
Islamabad, Pakistan

Dr Khadga K.C.  
Associate Professor,  
Asian Institute of Diplomacy and International  
Affairs (AIDIA), Kathmandu, Nepal

Mr Asanga Abeyagoonasekera  
Geopolitics and Foreign Policy Analyst,  
Colombo, Sri Lanka

Dr Maria Saiffudin Effendi  
Assistant Professor,  
Department of Peace and Conflict Studies,  
NDU, Islamabad, Pakistan

# REGIONAL STUDIES

Bi-annual Journal of the  
Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad

---

42:2

Winter 2024

---

## CONTENTS

- Post-Indian Elections Scenario: Challenges  
and Policy Options for Pakistan 3-25  
— *Moonis Ahmar*
- China's Regional Economics: Historical Continuities  
and Modern Interactions 26-51  
— *Ayesha A. Malik*
- Historical Experiences on Water Sharing  
Disputes: Lessons for Bangladesh 52-73  
— *Hasina Afruj Shanta*
- Climate Change-Induced Urban Migration and its  
Impacts on Cities: A Case Study of Bangladesh 74-97  
— *Nadia Zaheer*
- Pakistan-Iran Converging and Conflicting  
Interests in Afghanistan 98-123  
— *Faiza Bashir, Noreen Naseer, and  
Tabassum Majeed*



# POST-INDIAN ELECTIONS SCENARIO: CHALLENGES AND POLICY OPTIONS FOR PAKISTAN

MOONIS AHMAR\*

## Abstract

*The pyrrhic victory of Narendra Modi and his assumption of office as the Prime Minister of India for the third time reflects how vulnerable the BJP will be while in power. Why Narendra Modi failed to achieve a simple majority in the 2024 general elections needs to be examined from a pragmatic perspective. Depriving BJP of securing a two-thirds majority in Lok Sabha tends to salvage India from further polarisation which was witnessed when Modi remained in power for 10 years with a two-thirds majority and implemented the most controversial acts like revoking the autonomy of the Indian-administered Kashmir, building the Ram temple in Ayodhya, and implementing the citizenship law. Implementing laws tightening regulations on interfaith marriages were also implemented in many BJP-run states. Modi's assertion during his election campaign against religious minorities and Pakistan failed to yield positive results as the majority of Indian voters refused to adhere to such rhetoric. India is the only eastern neighbour of Pakistan and issues influencing the country are bound to have implications on Islamabad, particularly when the track record of the Modi regime has been hostile towards its neighbour. As compared to the 2014 and 2019 elections when Pakistan was projected as a major so-called actor involved in alleged cross-border terrorism, during the 2024 elections,*

---

\* Dr Moonis Ahmar is a Meritorious Professor of International Relations at the University of Karachi, and former Dean Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Karachi.  
E-mail: amoonis@hotmail.com

*despite BJP's efforts to malign Pakistan, Indian voters by and large, overlooked Modi's rhetoric against Islamabad.*

**Keywords:** Narendra Modi, Rahul Gandhi, Arvind Kejriwal, BJP, NDA, INDIA, Congress, elections, Composite Dialogue

## Introduction

With 543 seats of Lok Sabha (the lower house) of the Indian parliament and 640 million voters, general elections in India began on April 19 and concluded on June 1, 2024. Elections in 28 states and 8 union territories for the 18<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha in seven phases were termed the world's biggest polls. Two alliances, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Inclusive National Democratic India Alliance (INDIA) led by Congress, stood against each other in one million polling stations.

The results of the Indian elections were announced by the Election Commission on June 4, 2024, according to which the NDA got 295 and INDIA secured 240 seats. The BJP, which in the 2019 general elections got 303 seats managed to get 240 seats which compelled Narendra Modi to seek support from other coalition parties to get to the majority number of 272 out of the assembly of 543.<sup>1</sup> Contrary to various exit polls in which it was predicted that the BJP on its own would get 400 seats, the results reflected the declining popularity of Modi as his party performed badly in its bastion of Uttar Pradesh (UP) and elsewhere.

The pyrrhic victory of Narendra Modi and his win as Prime Minister of India for the third time reflects how vulnerable the BJP will be while in power.<sup>2</sup> Why Narendra Modi failed to get a majority in the 2024 general elections needs to be examined pragmatically. According to the BBC, the results are a personal blow to Modi, who has always secured majorities in elections and dominated politics for over two decades as both, the Chief Minister of the state of Gujarat and India's Prime Minister. The verdict marks a surprising revival for the Congress-led INDIA opposition alliance, defying earlier predictions of its decline, and sharply

diverging from both exit polls and pre-election surveys.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, The BJP's significant drop in seats may be linked to joblessness, rising prices, growing inequality, and a controversial army recruitment reform, among other factors. Modi's harsh and divisive campaign, particularly targeting Muslims, could also have alienated voters in some regions. His ambitious slogan *Ab ki baar 400 paar* (this time will cross 400) aiming for more than 400 seats for his NDA alliance, may have backfired, with such a massive majority raising fears of constitutional changes among the poor. The BJP faced its largest setback in UP, a state larger than the United Kingdom and three times as populous. With 80 parliamentary seats, UP holds significant sway in national politics, with many considering it the gateway to Delhi. Both Modi and Rahul Gandhi hold seats there.<sup>4</sup>

Depriving the BJP of securing a two-thirds majority in Lok Sabha tends to salvage India from further polarisation which was witnessed when Modi remained in power for 10 years with a two-thirds majority and implemented the most controversial acts like revoking the autonomy of Indian-Occupied Kashmir, building the Ram temple in Ayodhya and implementing citizenship law. Laws tightening regulations on interfaith marriages were also implemented in many BJP-run states along with strict bans on cow slaughter. Modi's assertion during his election campaign against religious minorities and Pakistan failed to yield positive results as the majority of Indian voters refused to adhere to such rhetoric.<sup>5</sup> This paper examines critical questions surrounding the outcome and implications of the Indian elections. It delves into why and how the BJP's calculations to secure a two-thirds majority fell short, analysing the underlying factors contributing to this electoral setback. Additionally, it explores the ramifications of Prime Minister Modi's pyrrhic victory, shedding light on how this outcome could intensify the BJP government's vulnerabilities, particularly concerning the growing challenge posed by the INDIA alliance. Finally, the paper assesses the broader implications of these elections for Pakistan, offering insights into the potential regional and bilateral

consequences. Lastly, the paper also critically analyses the future of Indian democracy and reversing the process of Hindu nationalism because of the BJP's fragile strength in Lok Sabha.

### **Miscalculations of the BJP**

The slogan 'this time with 400 seats' propagated by the BJP was fraught with miscalculations. When the BJP learnt of slow voter turnout in the middle of the election process, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS); the patron organization of the BJP, tried to play its role in preventing the decline in voting. According to Rajiv Tuli, an official of the RSS, "... the decline in voting has been a cause of concern in recent weeks and we have been working to bring a shift in the numbers." Meetings, outreach campaigns, and even a renewed push to remind voters about ensuring a full majority government coming to power became critical after the first phase of voting.<sup>6</sup> Despite claims of the Modi regime that in the last 10 years of its rule, the country's economy boomed and India emerged as the fifth largest economy in the world, domestic fault-lines negated assertions of the BJP because of the widening gap between the rich and the poor, reflecting distinct class stratification.

Reuters rightly pointed out how the BJP's failure to look into internal issues had an impact on the election process. For instance, bread-and-butter issues seemed to be replacing religious fervour in many parts of the country. Jobless youth in the north-western state of Haryana held street protests against the BJP during the campaign. In western Maharashtra, farmers incensed over a ban on onion exports canvassed support for an opposition candidate.<sup>7</sup> Another miscalculation of the Modi regime was to arrest the Chief Minister of Delhi, Arvind Kejriwal, who was detained under criminal investigation on corruption charges but released on the orders of the Supreme Court by 2 June. As a fierce opponent of Narendra Modi, his Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), a member of the INDIA alliance, was perceived by the BJP as a major threat, particularly in the Hindi belt of northern India.



Addressing his party supporters after his release, Kejriwal asserted that when power becomes a dictatorship, jail becomes a responsibility.<sup>8</sup> In a press conference, he stated, "I have come to beg 1.4 billion people to save my country. Save my country from this dictatorship. Modi has started a very dangerous mission. Modi will send all opposition leaders to jail. They sent me to jail and the PM says he is fighting against corruption."<sup>9</sup> During his election campaign, Kejriwal lambasted the BJP and claimed that "Modi will lose the elections. Should he win by any chance he would have stolen a leaf from President Vladimir Putin, who jailed his opponents to win a huge margin. In case of a win, Modi will jail Udhav Thackeray and Sarad Pawaramong, among others."<sup>10</sup> During his election campaign in Punjab, Kejriwal asserted, "The dictatorship that is going on in our country is not acceptable. India has never seen such a period in the past 75 years, putting opposition leaders in jail. Modi government was harassing leaders of the Indian National Congress, Mamata Banerjee's TMC Party and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, MK Stalin's DMK, who are amongst the BJP's main political opponents."<sup>11</sup> By arresting opposition leaders like Kejriwal and Hemant Soren, former Chief Minister of Jharkhand and filing cases against Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, the BJP's popularity dwindled.

If the BJP had high hopes and miscalculations about a landslide victory, the INDIA alliance was also not lagging. For instance, Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge told reporters after a meeting with INDIA partners in New Delhi on 1 June that they expected to form the next government with over 295 seats.<sup>12</sup> INDIA secured 240 seats with Congress as the largest party in the alliance winning 99 seats. Both the BJP and INDIA miscalculated their projection of election results but accepted the election outcome with grace.

### **How INDIA Challenged the BJP?**

A year ago, it seemed that the BJP and the Modi regime were unassailable and that the opposition was fragmented. However, things changed when opposition parties decided to challenge the BJP's

confidence to secure a third term with a two-thirds majority. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA), formed in 1998 as a conglomeration of 38 political parties led by the BJP; and INDIA consisting of 24 political parties fought against each other. INDIA went to the election with a single-point agenda to deny Narendra Modi a third term in office. Formed in July 2023 and composed of Congress, regional parties like Aam Admi Party which governs Delhi and Punjab and Trinamool Congress which governs West Bengal, INDIA intended to contest elections on a one-on-one basis against the BJP hoping to win elections provided it maintained its unity; presented a workable manifesto and played a leadership role in competing against the charismatic personality of Prime Minister Modi.

The BJP which got only 2 seats during the 8<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha general elections in November 1984<sup>13</sup> managed to enhance its vote bank and emerged as a major political party by winning the 1999, 2014, and 2019 elections. In the 17<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha elections held in April/May 2019, the BJP won a landslide victory by securing 303 seats.<sup>14</sup> Whereas, Congress, which ruled India for 50 years since 1947, was facing a formidable challenge to its survival and had been out of power for the last 10 years.

Examining the formation of INDIA and its hope to effectively take on the BJP in the 2024 elections, it was argued that while the new alliance held a lot of promise, especially for India's minorities as well as other downtrodden communities that had been crucial, the ten years of BJP's rule reflected the transformation of both the Indian state and society. While communal schism existed in India during the Congress era, it was unlike today when under the patronage of the state, Hindu nationalists target religious minorities, particularly Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs. If Narendra Modi gets a third term with a two-thirds majority, one can expect the exclusion of secular characteristics in the Indian Constitution and the declaration of India as a Hindu state. When Prime Minister Narendra Modi could pass the Jammu and Kashmir

Reorganisation Act from the Indian parliament during his second term and target the Muslim minority, his ambitions if he got a third term need to be contemplated. Is there any force in India which can save the country from the onslaught of Hindu nationalism and prevent the ideology of 'Modism' from taking deep roots in the Indian state and society? In the past ten years, the Modi regime has managed to induct people into state institutions subscribing to the BJP mindset and it was feared that a third term could result in a transformation from a secular and democratic to a Hindu nationalist state. Enactment of the Uniform Civil Code, in essence doing away with religious personal law as applicable to minorities, should be seen in this perspective.<sup>15</sup> Under the title, *Indian opposition parties form alliance called INDIA*, Reuters in its 26 July 2023 article stated that the BJP was assaulting the character of the republic and idea of India as enshrined in the Constitution.<sup>16</sup> According to the same source, Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge said that the "main aim [of INDIA] is to stand together to safeguard democracy and the constitution."<sup>17</sup> Why did it take Congress and other like-minded parties so long to unite and challenge the BJP's assault on democracy and secularism? From gaining 2 seats in 1984 to 303 seats in the 2019 general elections, the BJP's 'great leap forward' is a vivid example of transforming the Indian state and society with characteristics of Hindu nationalism, exclusion of religious minorities, and religious chauvinism with the patronage of the state.

According to Ram Punyani, the President of the Centre for Study of Society and Secularism, Mumbai:

"The campaign began with calling the Congress manifesto an imprint of the Muslim League. Most other slogans and promises of Congress were turned into something anti-Hindu and intended solely for Muslims. Modi's propaganda reached a new low when he said Congress would do *mujra* (a dance which emerged during Mughal rule) for them. The system has been so tuned that the names of many Muslims did not find a place in electoral rolls and, on election day

Muslims were turned away by the police. Muslims have been effectively tuned into second-class citizens and have been made politically invisible. All this implies the prevalent hate against this hapless community.”<sup>18</sup>

The Indian election commission, which claimed to be independent and sovereign in its mandate, took no notice of the BJP’s anti-Muslim tirade. It is yet to be seen how the allies of the BJP would react if the Modi regime resumes its anti-Muslim policies.

Following the formation of INDIA, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi decided to revive the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) on its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The NDA diminished as an alliance since Modi came to power in 2014 and was re-elected in 2019 as he led the BJP to decisive victories, reducing the influence of alliance partners. However, the BJP considered reviving the NDA as it did not want to leave anything to chance to win a third term. Modi stated at an NDA meeting.

“We unite the people of India. They divide the people of India. They underestimate the ordinary people of India. People are watching why they are coming together, what is the glue that is bringing them together. People have made up their mind to give the mandate to NDA a third time.”<sup>19</sup>

As quoted in *The Hindu* in its 25 July 2023 issue, speaking to BJP MPs at a meeting of the parliamentary party, Modi said that the current opposition was the most ‘directionless’ the country had ever seen and that even reviled organisations such as the East India Company and the Indian Mujahedeen had the word ‘India’ in their names, but that had not deceived anyone as to what their real purpose was.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, Rahul Gandhi a leader of Congress who was convicted in a defamation case and disqualified from the parliament in March 2023 described the 2024 election as a “fight between Narendra Modi and INDIA.”

Talking to DW, a German TV channel, on 24 July 2023, Zoya Hasan, an Indian political scientist said that it was an extremely significant political development. The statement issued by the BJP's opposition offers an alternative narrative anchored in the constitutional idea of an India based on secular democracy, economic sovereignty, social justice, and federalism. It was presumed to be tough for the BJP to win a majority of seats in the parliament in the recent elections if the opposition parties sustained the momentum. INDIA cannot just limit the exercise to seat adjustment, it has to mobilise popular support for the alternative discourse on a one-on-one basis against the BJP.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, a prominent Congress leader told DW that, the principal opposition parties were likely to adopt a new template for Mission 2024 and focus on key national issues along with the state-specific ones to take on the BJP. The BJP has traditionally benefited in a triangular contest.<sup>22</sup> The BJP national spokesperson Tom Vadakkan told DW, "INDIA alliance is a stillborn baby and even the doctors do not know how to save it. It is a desperate attempt to bring disparate groups on one platform and is compromised from the start. It will not work out. Its construct is flawed."<sup>23</sup> BJP's argument about the fizzling out of INDIA was based on its premise that the popularity of Narendra Modi because of his performance in the last 10 years could not be questioned. Yet, Congress got a political boost when it contested the 2024 general elections by uniting other opposition parties.

It was rightly perceived that the launch of INDIA in July 2023 would not have a formidable impact on the BJP's election campaign to re-elect Narendra Modi for a third time unless the alliance focused on issues which a billion plus people of India were grappling with like growing class asymmetry, surge of communal violence, and gradual mitigation of democracy, political pluralism, and secularism. Neerja Chowdhry, an Indian political analyst covering general elections for the last several years, said in an interview with DW that the INDIA

versus the NDA battle had suddenly become lively because the BJP was pulling out all the stops and opposition in fighting back. The optics of opposition leaders on one platform have given a psychological boost to the anti-BJP bloc.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, the opposition leaders remained guarded about who came up with the name first but, according to sources, a select group of leaders met after the dinner hosted by the Congress. Several names got tossed around among this group. Former Congress president Rahul Gandhi, during the *Bharat Jodo Yatra* (unify India march), stressed the growing chasm between 'two Indias' and the Congress wanted the name of the alliance to address this. Sources said the name resonated with the others in the group too, especially since many felt that it was time for the opposition to recapture the 'nationalism' plank, which the BJP had been monopolising. But keeping with the Congress's strategy of not being seen as an overt driver of the opposition grouping, the Trinamool Congress was encouraged to propose the name at the meeting.<sup>25</sup>

Reuters reported on 25 August 2023 that Indian voters were growing unhappy with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government due to high inflation and unemployment but he was still on track to comfortably win a third term in elections due to his popularity. The *India Today* survey, conducted twice a year, revealed that 59 per cent of the more than 160,000 people polled between July 15 and August 14 said that they were satisfied with the performance of the Modi government, down from 67 per cent in the previous survey in January. Similarly, 63 per cent said that Modi's performance as Prime Minister was good, down from 72 per cent in January. And 22 per cent said his performance was poor, up from 16 per cent in January.<sup>26</sup> Congress party leader Rahul Gandhi, the survey said, got his highest approval rating in four years with 32 per cent saying he is best-suited to revive the fortunes of his party. It also said that Gandhi was the best-suited opposition leader to become Prime Minister with 24 per cent backing,

up from 13 per cent in January when he was the third choice. Gandhi quit as Congress president after leading it to one of its worst performances in the 2019 elections. He is, however, seen to have revived his image after a five-month-long *Bharat Jodo Yatra* across the country that he set out on in September last year. The INDIA alliance led by Congress includes powerful people, but in the case of Indian elections, one will need regional parties with a strong base in the south and east, where the BJP is weak.<sup>27</sup> India's sticky retail inflation hit a 15-month high of 7.44 per cent in July, pushed by soaring food price inflation which rose to 11.5 per cent, its highest in more than three-and-a-half years. India is the world's fastest growing large economy but an unemployment rate that has stayed around 8 per cent in recent months is considered a major challenge.<sup>28</sup> Opinion poll surveys do reflect the perceptions and give an idea about the win or loss of the BJP and INDIA in polls released two weeks before the elections.

According to Anjana Pasricha, a senior Indian journalist, "They feel that if they contest alone, they will not be able to put up a credible challenge to the BJP but coming together will help them in putting up a decent fight." According to Rahul Verma, a fellow at the Center for Policy Research in New Delhi, "A coalition like this will enable them to pool their resources."<sup>29</sup>

The figures for 2019 showed that the BJP had about 37 per cent of the total vote and non-BJP parties accounted for 63 per cent. So, if they could consolidate a chunk of this through a one-on-one contest, the opposition vote would not get divided. That is the heart of their strategy to take on Modi. The INDIA alliance, whose name has been chosen to strike a chord of nationalism, had reaffirmed its goal as the protection of democracy. Pledging to safeguard the idea of India as enshrined in the Constitution, it said in a statement that, the character of the Indian republic was being severely assaulted systematically by the BJP. Critics have accused Modi's government of undermining democracy and press freedom, polarising the country

along communal lines, and using federal investigative agencies to target opposition leaders; charges it strongly denies.<sup>30</sup>

As commented in the editorial of a national daily, "While the new alliance holds a lot of promise, especially for India's minorities as well as other downtrodden communities that have been crushed by the Hindutva machine, the fact is that large ideologically diverse groupings can be notoriously unwieldy, and it will take the combined political wisdom of the RSS juggernaut will naturally pull out all the stops, particularly to its rabid voter base, and attract the increasingly chauvinistic Indian middle classes. Talk of forming a Uniform Civil Code, in essence, doing away with religious personal law as applicable to minorities should be seen in this perspective."<sup>31</sup>

The focus on INDIA's attack on the BJP was based on its 10 years of exclusive anti-minorities and anti-democracy policies. As narrated by a Pakistani analyst:

"The opposition's attack on Modi has principally focused on his authoritarian conduct and policies. Certainly backsliding during his 10 years in power has been substantial and far reaching. This, his critics say, has turned India into illiberal democracy. Judicial independence and media freedom have been undermined and civil liberties eroded. Modi's government has muffled dissent, intimidated the media, harassed and incarcerated journalists and mounted extraordinary pressure on the opposition. Two state leaders allied with Congress, Arvind Kejriwal and Hemant Soren have been jailed on dubious corruption charges in March, the Congress party's main bank accounts were frozen. Opposition leader Rahul Gandhi was expelled from parliament last year on charge of defamation for ridiculing Modi's name. Later, his jail sentence was suspended by the supreme court."<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, the writer argues that Modi has pledged to push ahead with his Hindutva agenda, for which the party points to several actions taken by the government, including the construction of the Ram temple, a citizenship law disadvantaging Muslims, and the revocation of Article 370 of the constitution, which gave Jammu and Kashmir special status. Modi has used toxic anti-Muslim rhetoric throughout his election campaign. He has



called Muslims infiltrators and said they have too many children to scare Hindu voters into believing Muslims will eventually outnumber them. He has repeatedly accused the Congress party of favouring Muslims and conspiring to transfer wealth looted from Hindus to Muslims. The BJP has also posted videos containing these allegations. This prompted the Congress party to petition the election commission to act against the violation of election laws.<sup>33</sup>

By securing 240 seats in a house of 543, INDIA has been able to deprive the BJP of its projected two-third majority and as a strong opposition will keep up the pressure on Narendra Modi and other known Hindu nationalist leaders to refrain from steps aiming to sustain their previous 10-year exclusive mode of governance.

### **Implications of Modi's Pyrrhic Victory**

When the 'honeymoon' period of the BJP-led coalition government is over, internal fault lines in NDA will reappear. The pyrrhic victory of Modi in Indian general elections will, however, have short- and long-term implications. Had the BJP secured less than 240 seats, it would have been sitting in the opposition, but to expect INDIA, a conglomeration of political parties with diverse political agendas, to form the government would be wishful thinking. INDIA was formed with a one-point agenda to deny Narendra Modi a third term along with its resolve to ensure an inclusive instead of exclusive mode of governance by protecting the rights of minorities and providing democratic space.

One can figure out two short-term implications of Modi's pyrrhic victory. First, the ruling coalition will try to maintain its unity because a rift in its rank and file will benefit the INDIA-led opposition alliance. Challenges and opportunities both for the Modi regime and the INDIA alliance will shape the short-term implications of the Indian elections. On this account, this challenging scenario will oblige Modi 3.0 to focus a great deal of attention on domestic political consolidation. That will likely see him double down on his Hindutva ideology to reinforce his Hindu base, especially as the BJP was

mostly unable to make inroads beyond its strongholds. Its hard-line policy towards Muslims is, therefore, likely to continue. Coalition partners are unlikely to restrain the BJP in that regard. To consolidate its Hindu constituency, the Modi government might pursue with even greater vigour its Hindutva agenda, involving actions such as the Uniform Civil Code, ending reservations for Muslims, and seizing mosques in Varanasi and Mathura to claim them as old temples. All these are part of its manifesto.<sup>34</sup> Yet, it all depends on the allies of the BJP and to what extent they will allow anti-Muslim and anti-minorities measures to continue. In the 'honeymoon' period of the BJP-led coalition government, things may not take an extremist line because of the diminished support leading to the holding of fresh elections.

Second, there will be no tangible headway to ameliorate India-Pakistan relations which deteriorated following the revocation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution on 5 August 2019. One can expect the maintenance of the status quo in India-Pakistan relations till the time the political landscape of Pakistan is stable and the coalition government in India decides to reciprocate efforts for mending fences with Islamabad. Therefore, again, anti-Pakistan tirades were not just election politics but indicative of the combative approach that the BJP government may adopt towards Islamabad. Domestic political problems will create the temptation to ramp up anti-Pakistan rhetoric and for Modi to further harden his anti-Pakistan policy. Backchannel communication between them led in February 2021 to recommitment by both sides to observe a ceasefire on the Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir per the 2003 understanding. Another irritant was added last year to the long list of disputes between the two countries when India threatened to unilaterally modify the Indus Waters Treaty's dispute settlement provisions.<sup>35</sup> Pakistan-bashing is an integral part of the BJP's mindset but it failed to have any impact on election results. This time, Indian voters, unlike the BJP's exploitation of the Kargil episode in 1999, the attack on the Indian parliament in December 2001, or the Mumbai attacks of November 2008, did not take Pakistan-bashing of the BJP seriously. The Pulwama and Balakot episodes of February 2019 along with the so-called

notion of cross-border terrorism which had an impact on the election results of 2019 did not work in 2024.

Long-term implications of Indian elections can be gauged from three possibilities. First, the BJP-led coalition government will survive for five years and it will try to implement its election manifesto by giving concessions to its allies and preventing their withdrawal of support during its term in office. Second, the INDIA alliance will keep up the pressure on the NDA because of its significant strength in the lower house. For that matter, INDIA will try to form a government in many Indian states where BJP is in power. Losing power in Indian states which have remained in its control like UP, Gujarat, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh will be a setback for Hindu nationalist groups. Third, Narendra Modi will be ousted from power through a vote of no-confidence to be moved by INDIA and the allies of BJP like the Janata Dal (United) which won 12 seats from Bihar and the Telugu Desam Party which secured 16 seats from Andhra Pradesh.<sup>36</sup> The Janata Dal (United) has a history of switching sides as it has ditched the INDIA alliance and sided with the BJP in the past.

### **Challenges and Policy Options for Pakistan**

India is the only eastern neighbour of Pakistan and issues influencing the country are bound to have implications for Islamabad, particularly when Modi's track record has been hostile towards its neighbour. As compared to the 2014 and 2019 elections when Pakistan was projected as a major so-called actor involved in alleged cross-border terrorism, during the 2024 elections, despite the BJP's efforts to malign Pakistan, Indian voters by and large overlooked Modi's rhetoric against Islamabad.

As the dust is settling down following the Indian elections, one can figure out three major challenges for Pakistan. First, the suspension of trade and travel and the downgrading of diplomatic relations with India. It was expected that with a change in New Delhi following the Indian elections, mitigation in hostility may be possible.

But, with the assumption of power by Narendra Modi for a third time as prime minister, there is little likelihood of positive transformation in the mindset of BJP vis-à-vis Pakistan. Islamabad is interested in mending fences with New Delhi provided its gestures are properly reciprocated. While India is in no mood to reverse its 5 August 2019 steps to revoke Article 370 and absorb the Indian-Occupied Jammu and Kashmir in its fold, how can the India-Pakistan relations in the foreseeable future thaw?

Second, the fragility of Pakistan's politics and economy tends to weaken its bargaining position vis-à-vis its eastern neighbour. With the strengthening of the economy and political stability, Pakistan will be in a better position to negotiate with India on issues which cause hostility in their relations. Henceforth, the domestic predicament of Pakistan is a major challenge in the way of having normal relations with India because the Modi regime will not take Islamabad seriously unless its eastern neighbour can effectively deal with its domestic quandary. Third, the Modi regime after re-consolidating its grip on power will turn towards Pakistan and resume its ambition of absorbing Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Kashmir. In Modi's coalition government, the key ministries of Home Affairs, Foreign Affairs, and Defence are with BJP stalwarts who are known for their bias and hard-line position against Pakistan. Raj Nath Singh as the Defence Minister, Amit Shah as the Home Minister, and S. Jaishankar as the External Affairs Minister are not known for having any soft corners for Pakistan. Retaining all three men in key ministries by Narendra Modi gives an avowed message to the opposition INDIA alliance and Pakistan of a hard-line stance in the days to come.

### **Policy Options for Pakistan**

Will the Modi regime continue to sustain an indifferent posture vis-à-vis Pakistan? Will the coalition partners of the BJP prevail over Narendra Modi to reciprocate this gesture towards Pakistan? Will SAARC remain in limbo for another five years because of Modi's 10-

year stance to isolate Pakistan in the South Asian region and not to attend the SAARC summit which was supposed to take place in Islamabad in November 2016? These are questions that are raised in the concerned circles of Islamabad with an apprehension that the status quo in India-Pakistan relations would remain.

What are the policy options for Pakistan in the post-Indian election scenario? Will Pakistan drop its conditions for normalising relations with India in the aftermath of the 5 August 2019 revocation of Article 370 of the Indian constitution which symbolically gave a special status to the occupied state of Jammu and Kashmir within the fold of the Indian union? Given domestic and foreign policy challenges, Pakistan has four policy options to deal with the post-Indian election landscape. First, not to insist on normalisation of relations with India if the Modi regime is not receptive and continues to sustain antagonistic rhetoric towards its western neighbour. By not attending the swearing-in ceremony of Narendra Modi as Prime Minister, the Pakistan side delivered a message to New Delhi that it should not take Islamabad's conciliatory posture for granted. Second, Pakistan should try to approach the international community and other members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to communicate to the Indian leadership that its intransigent position over the normalisation of relations with Islamabad will be counter-productive and is detrimental to regional cooperation, peace, and stability in South Asia.

Particularly, Pakistan should try to convince SAARC member countries that the policy of the Modi regime to put the South Asian association in limbo will only harm the region and damage the prospects of meaningful regional cooperation. Ironically, heads of state and government from Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, and Sri Lanka who participated in Modi's oath-taking ceremony should have taken the opportunity to remind the Indian Prime Minister of resuming the stalled SAARC process by attending the much-awaited Islamabad

summit. Third, Pakistan needs to seek economic and political stability by focusing on good governance and the rule of law along with investment in rendering quality education and health facilities. If Pakistan is domestically stable and strong not only will the world take the country seriously but also the arrogant and indifferent attitude of the Modi regime vis-à-vis its western neighbour will positively transform.

Finally, Pakistan needs to use its diplomatic clout with China, Russia, the United States, the European Union, Saudi Arabia, and Iran to communicate to the Modi regime that, in the coming five years, it should reciprocate gestures from Islamabad for normalisation in relations. The resumption of trade and travel after five years of standoff is the need of the hour. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the grouping initiated by Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) can also play a useful role in this regard. Taking advantage of the weak position of the Modi regime and its dependence on coalition partners, Pakistan can convince the aforementioned countries and organisations to prevail over the Modi regime for abandoning its intransigent position on mending fences with Islamabad. The resumption of dialogue between India and Pakistan can go a long way in unleashing the normalisation process in their relations.

Pakistan's policy options can only materialise when its leadership is focused on strengthening the country economically and politically with good governance and the rule of law. By effectively dealing with its fault lines, particularly under the paradigm of human security, Pakistan can hope to meet challenges from its eastern neighbour, India, and come up with better policy options to deal with the scenario emanating from recent Indian general elections. If all the stakeholders including those wielding state power are on one page about how to respond to challenges emanating from Indian elections and how to normalise relations with New Delhi without compromising

on vital national security interests, one can expect a better policy formulation in Islamabad on mending fences with its eastern neighbour.

Both India and Pakistan face significant common challenges, ranging from poverty to environmental issues such as global warming and water scarcity. Despite these shared challenges, historical baggage, mistrust, and strident political narratives will impede the progress of both countries towards a constructive dialogue for the resumption of a trade and diplomatic relationship.

Given the existing hostility between the two countries, rapprochement remains a distant possibility. Instead, a tense standoff between New Delhi and Islamabad will likely continue to undermine the peace and stability of South Asia.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, Sharat Sabharwal, a former Indian High Commissioner to Pakistan, said that he did not foresee any major change in the foreign policy of the new Modi government compared to the previous one. He stated, "I think India would respond positively to improve relations with Pakistan provided it sees a constructive and pragmatic approach from the Pakistani side. While it is a given that better relations will help benefit both countries, holding an antagonistic stance exacts more of a cost on Pakistan. Pakistan's adversarial posture towards India, a country with an economy 10 times bigger, imposes a heavy burden on its economy. Suspension of trade with India also hurts Pakistan's economy much more than the Indian economy." India, with a population of more than 1.4 billion people, is the world's fifth-largest economy. It is becoming an increasingly assertive voice on the global front, hosting G20 summits, and joining various multilateral forums like the QUAD. Modi's first overseas trip after taking oath was to attend the G7 leadership meeting in Italy. Meanwhile, Pakistan, a country with 241 million people, is seeking its 24<sup>th</sup> loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) since 1958, to shore up its faltering economy amid a volatile political and security landscape.<sup>38</sup>

A policy of constructive engagement between India and Pakistan in the post-election scenario of the two countries is only possible when there is political will and determination on the part of leadership in New Delhi and Islamabad to transform challenges into opportunities. A strong Pakistan with a vibrant economy and stable political system will give the right kind of message not only to the Modi regime but also to the international community at large. Implications of Indian elections for Pakistan must be seen from that perspective.



## Notes and References

- <sup>1</sup> "India Elections 2024 Results: Modi Claims victory but Falls," *The Economist*, 6 June 2024, <https://www.economist.com/interactive/india-election-results-2024-modi-gandhi>.
- <sup>2</sup> "Indian Election Results: Modi Claims Victory for Alliance," *Associated Press*, 4 June 2024.
- <sup>3</sup> Soutik Biswar, "Why India's Modi failed to get outright majority?," *BBC*, 5 May 2024.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> Moonis Ahmar, "Will Modi's anti-Pakistan and anti-Muslim rhetoric work?" *The Express Tribune*, 21 May 2024.
- <sup>6</sup> "RSS steps in as Modi's BJP faces resistance, fatigue in election," *Dawn*, 21 May 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1834772>. According to Ritesh Agarwal, senior publicity officer of RSS: "RSS volunteers are hosting neighborhood meetings in their homes to persuade people to go out and vote."
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> "With Kejriwal back behind bars, Modi eyes election victory," *Dawn*, 3 June 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1837405>.
- <sup>9</sup> "Kejriwal exhorts Indians to resist 'dictatorship' *Dawn*, May 12, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1833009>.
- <sup>10</sup> Jawed Naqvi "Modi initiating 'detractors of democracy' in Pakistan and Bangladesh' says Kejriwal," *Dawn*, 18 May 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1834212>. During his election campaign Kejriwal termed the incarcerated founder-chairman of PTI, Imran Khan as the 'tallest leader of Pakistan' and said he too, was jailed by his opponents to contrive his defeat. Sheikh Hasina came up in similar vein jailed her political opponents in order to steal the election.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> Jawed Naqvi, "Opposition claims majority, but exit polls see Modi win," *Dawn*, 2 June 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1837243>.
- <sup>13</sup> "BJP's journey from just two seats in Lok Sabha in 1984 to winning two back-to-back," *The Economic Times* 23 May 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/elections/lok-sabha/india/bjps-journey-from-just-two-seats-in-lok-sabha-in->

1984-to-winning-two-back-to-back-majority/articleshow/69466223.cms?from=mdr.

- <sup>14</sup> "In 2019 general elections, BJP won disproportionate share of seats in closely contested constituencies: research paper," *The Hindu*, 1 August 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/in-2019-bjp-won-disproportionate-share-of-seats-in-closely-contested-constituencies-research-paper/article67143051.ece>.
- <sup>15</sup> "A new INDIA?," *Dawn*, 7 July 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1765759>.
- <sup>16</sup> Y. P. Rajesh, "Indian opposition parties form 'INDIA' alliance," *Reuters*, 18 July 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/indian-opposition-parties-form-alliance-called-india-2024-elections-2023-07-18/>.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> "Ram Punyani, "So, What happens to Hindutva Now?," *Dawn*, 23 June 2024.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>21</sup> Murali Krishnan, "India: Can the new opposition alliance oust Modi in 2024?" *DW*, 24 July 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/can-indias-new-opposition-alliance-oust-modis-bjp-in-2024/a-66332302>.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.  
The Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi criticised the opposition parties as opportunists and the corrupt who defamed India globally but were now trying to save their existence and their families. According to him, such political alliances "built on negativity" never succeeded. We unite the people of India, they divide the people of India, they underestimate the ordinary people of India," he said, referring to opposition parties."
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup> *Voice of America*, 20 July 2023.

- <sup>30</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup> "A new INDIA?," *Dawn*, 20 July 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1765759>.
- <sup>32</sup> Maleeha Lodhi, "India's illiberal election," *Dawn*, 13 May 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1833126>.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>34</sup> Maleeha Lodhi, "Is-re-engagement possible?" *Dawn*, 10 June 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1838931>.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>36</sup> "India election results: Which allies does Modi depend on now?," *Al Jazeera*, 5 June 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/6/5/india-election-results-which-allies-does-modi-depend-on-now>.
- <sup>37</sup> Syed Adnan Bukhari and Khurram Abbas, "Strategic Choices: Will Pakistan and India Normalize Relations in 2024" *The Diplomat*, 29 April 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/04/strategic-choices-will-pakistan-india-normalize-relations-in-2024/>.
- <sup>38</sup> Abid Hussain, "Will India break the ice with Pakistan in his third term," *Al-Jazeera*, 17 June 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/6/17/will-indias-modi-break-the-ice-with-pakistan-in-his-third-term>.

# CHINA'S REGIONAL ECONOMICS: HISTORICAL CONTINUITIES AND MODERN INTERACTIONS

AYESHA A. MALIK\*

## Abstract

*China's regional economic policy indicates the enduring relevance of its historic economic strategies. The policy communicates the historic vision of regional economic well-being by aiding the neighbouring economies while bringing internal economic development. Although the systems of dynasties and empires in China did not project a major global economic programme such as capitalism, global outreach initiatives remained a prominent feature of its past while certain economic thought from antiquity supported initiatives such as the ancient Silk Road. In the present day, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) is a trade and supply chain connectivity platform with China's participation but it does not present any threat to the prevailing regional economics in Southeast Asia. Emerging as a product of economic and political programmes, this economic connectivity partnership aligns with the agenda of continuity of historic economic thought and the existing trade and economic model of China. The Confucian ideals of greater good, shared interests, low taxes and free trade are manifested in RCEP's rule of origin and agenda of free trade. Therefore, the inclusion of China in RCEP indicates a regional economic policy where the continuity of its economic thought is interacting with new regional economic initiatives. This framework negates the*

---

\* Ms Ayesha A. Malik is a Lecturer at the Department of Strategic Studies, Air University, Islamabad, and a PhD candidate in the School of Politics and International Relations (SPIR), Quaid-i-Azam University (QAU), Islamabad.

E-mail: ayesha.malik@au.edu.pk

*Regional Studies*, 42:2, Winter 2024, pp.26-51

*perceptions of threat. It is tended to in this paper by presenting a prominent economic thought from antiquity and its endurance in the modern-day economic frameworks. Such interaction of past and present economic strategies is guiding China's regional economic approach which is presented as the outcome of the process.*

**Keywords:** *China, Confucian ethics, collective good, regional economy, economic integration*

## **Introduction**

China's regional economic engagements are multifaceted strategies for its regional and domestic economic goals. Unlike the Western models of regional economic engagements, which prominently propagate influential economic programmes such as capitalism, China's economic policy in the region focuses on fostering trade and mutually beneficial economic connections. Its economic policies of dynastic and imperial eras assisted trade and connectivity across Asia and afar, stimulating shared prosperity without commanding a dominant economic framework. As part of its economic policies, its regional outreach programme ascended it as a member of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Since it is a new framework of regional economic interaction, it has some unique features. The most prominent characteristic is its size. It is the world's largest free trade agreement. Initiated by the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), it follows the principle of inclusivity and diversity offering a more balanced approach to the regional economic partnership. Its focus on supply chain connectivity allows the trading partners to develop industry and channel the resources within the region. To facilitate trade and connectivity, an efficient financial system is ensured by promoting digital trade. It is a unifying approach for the collective growth of the Asia-Pacific. China's active participation in this partnership is often viewed as employing a framework of threat perception and, therefore, necessitates comprehension of this framework using an internal approach.

The link between historic economic thought and the contemporary regional cooperative model is essential to elaborate the economic thought programme from antiquity, the contemporary economic model of China, and the regional economic strategy of the RCEP. In this regard, this paper explains the economic programmes from the early periods and the Confucian system and develops their relevance with regional economic engagements.

The study follows an interpretative method to present the historical context of contemporary economic policies. In doing so, it relies on two datasets: one from the historical translations from the native Chinese speakers of the Confucian works, and, the White Papers from The State Council of Information of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The ethical principles and themes are interpreted for their context and continuity from the *Analects* (more about it below) to support the claim that the PRC's agenda of collective regional economic good has roots in its historic ethical economics. The White Papers consulted are the two recent documents from 2021 and 2023 that detail the PRC's role in international development in the new era and cooperative programmes and RCEP's manifesto. The Voyant language model is used to analyse the terms and language used in these official documents while the visuals reflect support for the presented argument. Based on data and analysis, which is used in an embedded technique, it is concluded that China's regional economic policies are not a threat to the existing economic governance system of the region, rather it is a continuity and an inevitable essentiality rooted in its past.

### **Earlier Interventions of Economic Programmes**

Understanding China's past in terms of its economic thought reveals an intertwined rationale of economy, politics, and society. Along with the interwoven approach, the lack of empirical accounts indicates that the earlier system was guided by metaphysical

experiences.<sup>1</sup> Its foundations are traced in the thought tradition of Confucius. Emphasising social order, economic stability, and national security, the profound thought traditions of Confucianism laid the earlier foundations of ethical governance. The economic rationalisation in imperial China reflected these principles that Confucius outlined for the individual and the ruler. Intricately weaving the economic thought of empires, the Confucian thought provided imperial China with a highly structured society. Its belief in filial piety, adopting moral virtues by the individual and the ruler, respect for the authority and empire, and promotion of a harmonious social order hold greater significance than other traditions of thought.<sup>2</sup>

In modern-day China, it is believed that the terms economics and economy as concepts are foreign constructs because, in ancient pre-Qin times, economics was not a separate domain to be studied; rather it was considered a part of a comprehensive philosophy of Confucianism and Daoism that discussed economic affairs along with politics, law, and government.<sup>3</sup> The Yellow Emperor is mentioned in historical studies of strategic thought in International Relations (IR), and a philosophy of such mention explains mythology as the rationale of the earliest strategies.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the discussion on historical economic thought identifies the existence of mythical gods and emperors whose primitive teachings organised and introduced economic affairs. For instance, *Pao Hsi*, also known as *Fuxi* is described by Chen, an economic historian and analyst from the early twentieth century, as saying: "The Chinese really have no accurate knowledge about the earliest history of China, but it is said that the reign of Pao Hsi lasted one hundred and ten years and that the fifteen reigns which followed all adopted the name of Pao Hsi."<sup>5</sup> Exploring the economic heritage of China reveals that there has been no significant economic achievement in history that would have a global impact. However, China and its recent role in regional and global economic governance present an evolving relevance of this heritage.

Whilst there are several references to economic thought in the Confucian and Daoist literature, its historical usage is distinct from its modern employment. Ancient periods and the dynastic era mentioned economic thought with the essence of ruling the country, ensuring its national security and bringing peace to the world. In the Chinese language, these were *Jing Shi Ji Wuo* and *Jing Guo Ji Min*.<sup>6</sup> The study of economics was an aspect of national development. It is mentioned as an agenda of enrichment that specifically meant ensuring national security. In recognition of this factor, Chinese pre-historic thought has influenced strategic studies and not international political economy. Chronologically, the economic significance of periods or eras categorises this history as the *Ancient Period* (2070 BCE to 1000 CE), *Middle Ages* (1000 to 1800), and *Modern Era* marked from the 1800s to the twentieth century. Among these periods, the first one under study is the *Ancient Period*. According to the documents from history, the prehistoric or ancient period is the first one in chronological order. *I Ching*, meaning The Book of Changes is the foundational document of the said period.<sup>7</sup> It provides profound insights regarding the existence of human beings and their relationship with nature. Deeply rooted in Chinese philosophy and its cosmological ontology, it categorises the human experience with nature into two concepts; *yin* and *yang*.<sup>8</sup> Developing *yin* and *yang* as a binary by the sages in pre-historic times, *I Ching* claimed to be the first oracle. Its essence lies in the idea of divinity and its utility is found in the metaphysical basis of beliefs and practices. Metaphysical reality and belief are underlying ideological frameworks that work beneath conscious thought. They impact and influence human actions unconsciously. The legacy of *yin* and *yang* is maintained by its much-adhered idea that there exists a perfect balance between every set of binaries: black and white, good and evil, or earth and heaven, and the interplay of these binaries bring about changes for the world. Several interpretations are derived from this



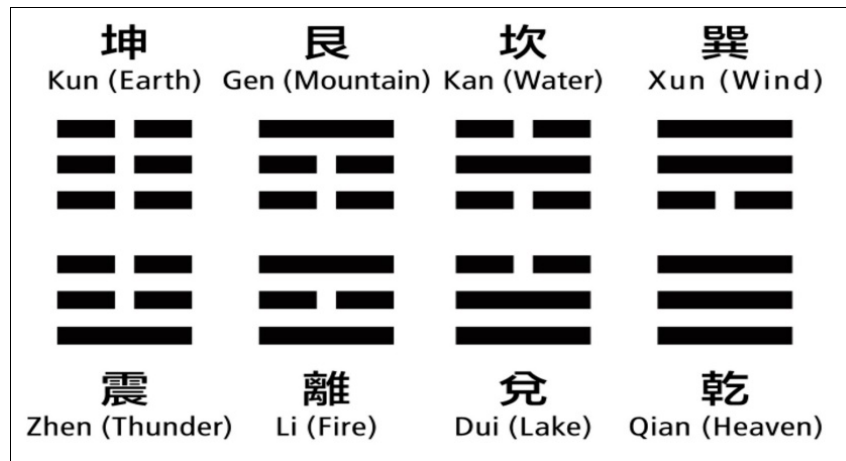
text. Some believe it to be presenting the cyclical nature of existence where a cycle of life and death continues through stages.

*I Ching* has impacted the thought traditions in Chinese political and economic thought. Confucian and Daoist ideas entail commentary on earth and heaven and the dynamic balance between them. This balance culminates in change for which the world should always be ready. One of the interpretations of *I Ching* asserts that this philosophy derives its essence from the belief in plurality. Chinese society of pre-historic times believed in a multiplicity of existence as per the context of space and time and, therefore, it argued about shifting patterns.<sup>9</sup>

The content of this thought exists in the form of diagrams, more specifically called *hexagrams* and their interpretations. It involved a method of using yarrow stalks; which was a plant with a mystical value as it collected energy from the top and then distributed it into its hollow veins and roots. Yarrow stalks are replaced with coins in the modern day. Stalks or coins are tossed to acquire patterns whose interpretation is given as lines and the development of a hexagram is completed by six rounds of tossing the material.<sup>10</sup>

**Figure 1**

**An image of the Hexagram<sup>11</sup>**



Initially beginning as a script for gods, spirits, and ancestors, *I Ching* transformed into a cosmic interpretation of change. It provided consultations for learning how the 'Dao' or 'Way' worked. Developed in antiquity by King Wen of the Zhou dynasty and the legendary character Fu Xi, the hexagrams are interpreted into meanings, judgments, and statements.<sup>12</sup> The economic policies were also influenced by these interpretations and meanings.

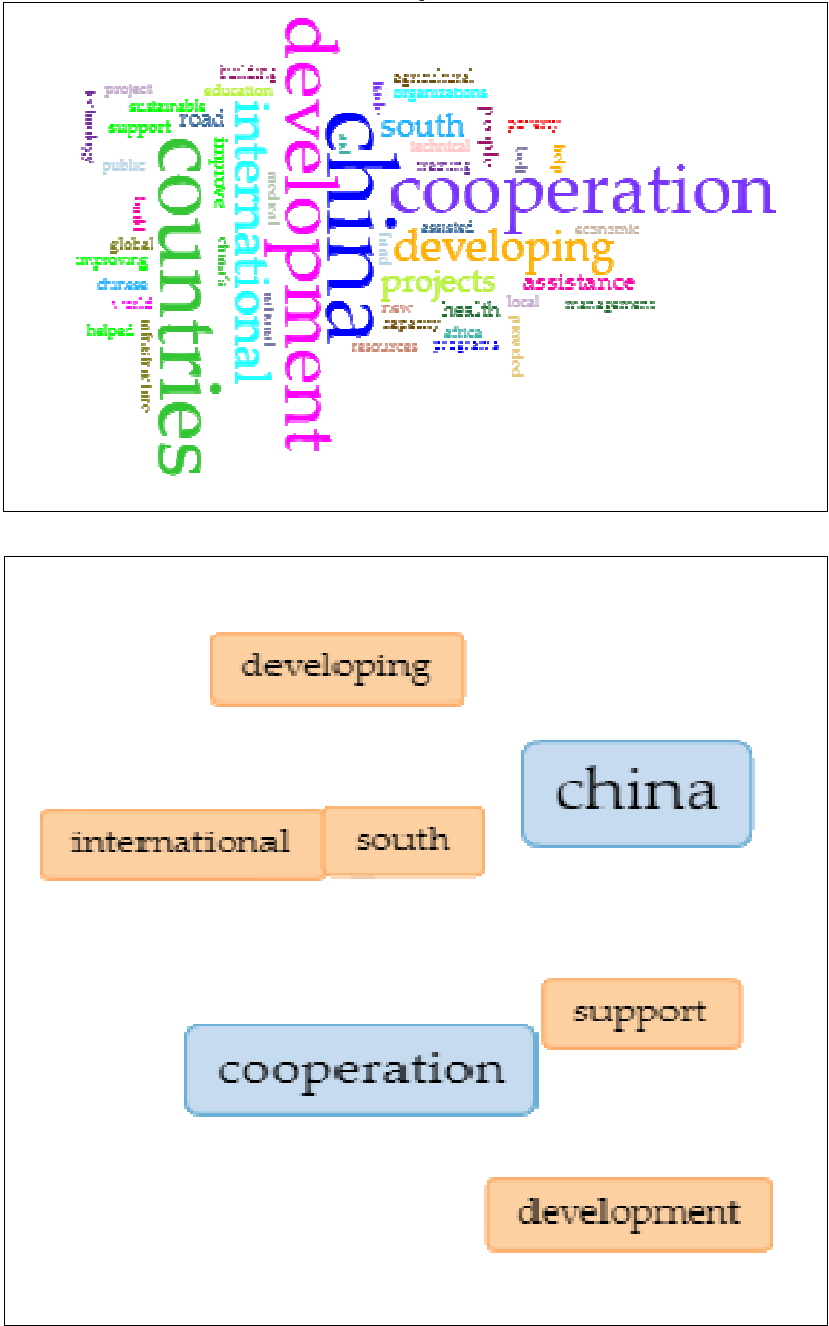
The economic system represented the administration of wealth and wealth was an asset to be shared collectively by individuals. Its subject matter worked under the framework of justice. Providing for food and economic commodities was the primary task for the political entity (dynasty and government) and was considered essential for a just system. The accessibility of food and necessities was believed to be fundamental for the prevention of an unjust society.<sup>13</sup> Such economic interpretations of *I Ching* are furthered by two of the most prominent thought traditions of China, i.e., Confucianism and Daoism.

### **Confucius: An Economic Programme of Prosperity and Economic Security**

Confucius's thought is considered primarily political and ethical, but it has had a profound impact on modern China and the newly developed economies of Southeast Asia. South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan are all influenced by Confucius's philosophy. This regional influence of Confucianism makes it essential to discuss the relationship between economic ideas and their significance. Unfortunately, his writings and works were destroyed and lost by an anti-Confucian movement in 221 BCE. At the time of the unification of the warring states, a political group known as the *legalists* burnt and erased the scripts of Confucius. Therefore, a collection of works by his disciples and critics was compiled to carry on his tradition of thought. It is called *the Analects*.<sup>14</sup> Several translations and interpretations of *the Analects* are available and a translation by a

native Chinese speaker and East Asian translators and illustrators' works are consulted for this study.<sup>15</sup> With reference to the economic thought in ancient China, as per *the Analects*, Confucius's political and ethical philosophy encompasses the concepts of 'propriety' and 'benevolence'. The first one alludes to the actions that are suitable for its corresponding historical time. His thought guided well over 2000 years of feudal China, and he believed in feudal patriarchal ethics. Repeatedly, he celebrated propriety and aligned the practice with 'righteousness'. On the other hand, *benevolence*, extending a similar line of thinking, is a tool to ensure propriety and righteousness. He considered benevolence as the basic virtue in a moral order, and its essence lies in thinking about 'collective good'. Being loyal to the emperor and the empire and dutiful towards family were social relations guided by a sense of achieving the greater good. Therefore, the economic relations were also guided by the same spirit of the greater good. It was a moral philosophy that takes its basis from a source that is considered reliable and coherent in terms of its epistemic justification. The reliance of Confucianism on moral philosophy and its mythical basis did not mean that Confucius did not believe in reason or rationality as a means to find the truth. In one instance, he discussed, "... what is not known does not imply that it cannot be known, but, there can be a way to know it, only I (Confucius) do not know it."<sup>16</sup> The regional impacts of greater and collective good are quite evident in today's economic programmes of China. The iterations that the PRC intends to work with its regional and global partners are often presented in the White Papers of the State Council. An analysis of the first one using a language model shows the emphasis of the PRC on cooperation for the South and international development.

Figure 2  
China’s International Development in the New Era (2021)



The White Paper from 2021 highlights that the pursuit of the greater good and shared interest are distinctive approaches that China follows. Among them, it clearly states that “with higher priority given to the former, is the underlying guideline.”<sup>17</sup> Prioritising the greater good for its international development programmes which also include the PRC’s special emphasis on the South-South cooperative arrangements reflects a connection of antiquity and present-day economic ideas.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, in guiding the leader, Confucianism believes that the ruler should demonstrate the virtues of courteousness, tolerance, trust, diligence, and kindness. These will ensure a system of governance based on effective administration and a peaceful and prosperous society. “If one is courteous, one is not treated with rudeness; if one is tolerant, one wins over the multitude; if one is of good faith, others give one responsibility; if one is diligent, one obtains results; and if one is kind, one is competent to command others.”<sup>19</sup> Embodied in these five virtues, benevolence is the guiding principle for resolving economic issues, according to his teachings. It can be safely assumed that this philosophy offered people-centric views. Benefiting the people, valuing the people, feeding the people, and bringing salvation to the people are some of the translated phrases from the *Analects*. These ideas were adopted for the economic policies of the corresponding periods and are reiterated in present times. A people-to-people approach is often communicated in recent programmes. Fostering closer people-to-people ties as the cornerstone of sound state-to-state relations and the social foundation of the BRI is emphasised.<sup>20</sup> In the White Paper that outlined BRI’s current phase in 2023, the underlying importance of people-to-people connection is stated as a way to enhance connectivity.<sup>21</sup>

Achieving a communal goal through individual participation has remained the ultimate objective of benevolence and its rule of conduct is structured as a hierarchy of participants and their certain

roles beginning with the individual, going through levels of family and society and finally culminating at the state's level. Since Confucius preferred society's interests over individuals', his followers advocated a tax-free market and border trade. Mencius, a Confucian philosopher from ancient China emphasised that the government should supervise trade but not levy taxes on it. Such idealisation of economic thought continued into the pre-Qin period, stretching from the Paleolithic age until the Qin Dynasty. A hundred schools of thought emerged in Confucianism, and various empirical and normative frameworks for studying economic affairs were used. The two most influential concepts among many others of those times that were introduced in the pre-Qin academic period and bear relevance for Chinese economic policies and society today, are *Shi* and *Huo*. The first one refers to the production of food, and the second is about the making of handicrafts. These two concepts covered the macroeconomic policies of the people and are discussed in the historical accounts of the *Han Dynasty* (202 BC-9 AD, 25-220 AD). The concepts are believed to have come from Heaven. In the Western *Zhou Dynasty* (1045-771 BC), the ruler *Da Yu* was given nine grand methods to rule the country; the third one is called the '*Eight Policies*'. *Shi* and *Huo* are the first of these Eight Policies.<sup>22</sup> In a country where the natural economy was the source of life, the production of food and handicrafts points towards agriculture-oriented economic policies. Confucius promoted *Shi* as the most important concern in the governance system. Once asked by his disciple *Zi Gong* about governance, he replied that three elements are most important in the process; "sufficient food, sufficient weapons, and the trust of the common people." He emphasised *Shi* as the most important element for ruling a country. He studied the relationship between production and consumption and the impact of the distribution of resources on production involving taxes.<sup>23</sup> Here, free trade, border trade and production for the welfare of the people can be identified as the most important domains for economic policy.

When analysed for their contemporary relevance, it is observable that PRC's initiative for the world's largest free trade agreement in South East Asia, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) is signed between China and 14 other regional partners. It aims at the elimination of tariffs, improvement of market access and regional integration in the larger Asia-Pacific region.

Market access, free trade, and regional integration were highlighted by followers of Confucius. Throughout a feudal political system, landlords granted lands to the farmers in exchange for rent or their produce. The quantity of produce and amount of rent were determined by the fertility rate of the land. Rent-paying farmers were not burdened with additional taxes by the government. Confucius presented the idea of 'light taxes' in those times. Low taxes were idealised to benefit society by creating an abundance of food. Farmers and consumers were to have more food when the incentive of low taxes would be offered by the government. The farmer was to produce more under low taxes and the government would receive taxes from a wider base, with more farmers producing and paying the tax. In case of heavy taxes, there would be less production by the farmers and the tax net for the government would also shrink. When incentive is detracted, motivation of production is abolished and public discourse expresses resentment against such policies. A famous strategist of the Confucian period Sun Wu explained this proposition in a dialogue with the king. Sun Wu predicted that out of the six most powerful governors of the Jin state, the ones who levied heavy taxes would be removed first. His analysis was based on two empirical elements: the unit area of land and the rate of tax levied by the government per unit area. Since there was no uniform system for land measurement, the tax per unit of land was different for each governor. The smaller the land measurement, the heavier would be the production tax even when the tax per unit was the same for all. Production in an area where land units were smaller in measurement would decrease as there would be

a heavy tax for a smaller size of production. Present time's relevance of these Confucian ideas of light taxes and incentives for the producers are followed inside China with an implication for its regional dealings. To promote economic activity, tax incentives are used by the Chinese government.<sup>24</sup> Creating favourable economic conditions for long-term societal welfare has been the PRC's approach to gradual development.

The significance of adequate food was emphasised by several authors and is a concern of human rights today. Mencius (372-289 BC), a Confucian scholar, established the relationship between the adequacy of food and the virtuous nature of man. If food were abundant, people would be nothing but virtuous. The freedom from hunger would ensure order in the society.<sup>25</sup> Adequacy of food is also discussed as an attribute of caring for people. Any sovereign who implemented the economic policies for providing food, clothing, shelter and recreation, was among the most loved rulers. These aspects of a ruler and his rule are discussed by *Mencius*, Xun Zi (298-238 BC), and Guan Zhong (d. 645 BC). *Guan Zhong* was appointed the Prime Minister and helped the ruler become most loved and respected by the economic reforms guided by the Confucian philosophy. People-oriented governance allowed free trade of goods that consequently guaranteed adequacy of food, clothing, and housing while making people more respectful and courteous towards each other and the ruler.<sup>26</sup>

The behaviour of the people, as Mencius emphatically stated, shall be based on 'goodness' (Jen), by which he meant compassion. Empathy for others and an exhibition of care for them entailed this idea. The feeling of goodness is an inherent trait of individuals and comes as a natural birth right. Education and learning are practised to keep this trait and if they are lost they shall be sought. Eternal goodness exists in a world where food is scarce as only if there were as much beans and mullet as water and fire, there would have been no such thing as a bad man.<sup>27</sup> The goodness of individuals shall be



transferred to the goodness of the government in a collective sense. The abolition of taxes, reduced numbers of parks and enclosures for those who had plentiful, abolition of savage penalties, support for senior citizens and the aged, and a system of schools that teaches the ontology of morals were advocated by him. The king who believes in goodness instead of profiteering can become the ruler of the entire world.<sup>28</sup>

Mencius and Xun Zi believed that when an oppressive sovereign rose to power after the Yellow Emperor, the qualities which the sages possessed for governing the people were lost. These tyrants were involved in maladministration as they took away basic needs in exchange for wants. Houses were demolished and in their place parks and ponds were constructed for recreation and fields were transformed into gardens that resulted in a shortage of agricultural yield, mainly food. Oppression by a government and a ruler is coded, linking it to *Shi*. When military expenditure exceeds food spending, oppression is committed. Starving people by maladministration, abusing them physically, and depriving them of their basic needs is tyranny and would create hatred towards rulers among the people. In his times, the rulers cared about the preparation for war more than they cared for the wellbeing of people and it resulted in resentment among people as they were deprived of propriety and courtesy. Oppression was also common by abusing the workforce and Confucius condemned it too.<sup>29</sup> Xun Zi while elaborating disorder in the society made resources and their scarcity an element leading to unrest: "If men are of equal power and station and have the same likes and dislikes, then there will not be enough goods to supply their wants and they will inevitably quarrel. Quarrelling must lead to disorder."<sup>30</sup> Today, the welfare of the people and economic development are the primary tasks of China's economic program. Its efforts to alleviate a large number of people from poverty are a remarkable achievement since the era of opening up. In such a society,

both individual's rights and duties are for 'enriching the country'. For Confucianism, a country is an embodiment of the family and individuals in the family fulfil their demands and duties to serve the larger goals of the country. These goals are social harmony and national unity and, therefore, they are more important than the personal demands of the individual which can be compromised for the order in the society. However, the submission of rights and duties to fulfil the goal of enriching the country did not restrict the freedom of investment and trade.

Another Confucian thinker, *Sima Qian* (145 BC) noted that businessmen of the pre-Qin period accumulated wealth by investing in the highest-yielding products in the right seasons. Sima Qian's philosophy is known as an ethical philosophy. It emphasises ethical justice as the basis for legal justice. For ethics, a social setting of individuals and groups requires them to join each other in unity, following the ethical ideas of benevolence and piety, to counter a common threat, i.e., nature. Ethical justice will in turn ensure the legal basis of justice for that society. Three aspects are deliberated upon regarding this proposition. First, originally, Confucius linked the adequacy of food and food itself as an idea that came next to the creation of heaven and earth. With the creation came the need for food and drink, and from there, economic life began.<sup>31</sup> Second, it is also developed that food is a transactional commodity for religious relations. Individuals shared and offered sacrificial food, which helped establish legitimate norms for social interactions and religion as a social bond. Third, economic bases are justified for shaping a feudal society in pre-historic China. Ethical justice leading to social justice and finally shaping up as a legal code involves rationalising everyday exchanges of economic and political life. Therefore, the feudal system of politics and its hierarchical character were seen as a natural attribute for social and legal justice.

Such a legacy of the economic system based on social and ethical justice informs the contemporary economic governance model of China with its implications for the region.

The following sections highlight the system of economic governance in China and its regional implications.

### **China's Model of Economy**

China's economic model is an investment-led model, an export-reliant economy, an infrastructure-friendly GDP, and an economic mechanism that follows supply to induce demand, resulting in more production.<sup>32</sup> As a factory for the world, the Chinese economy was focused on producing and exporting. From a stagnant and closed economy to a vibrant and open economy, the agenda of reforms played a vital role in achieving this model. The opening-up era exposed Chinese economic governance structure and policy to the external economic programme of embedded liberalism. It was perceived that China would maintain its journey towards further liberalisation of the economy after this transition. Its ascension to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) was also welcomed as a move towards liberalisation but despite external influences and international norms, the Chinese economy identified itself as a socialist market economy where a hybrid model of economic governance is at play. It reflected a nuanced approach by integrating a global economic programme with its socialist aspirations. Globalisation and global economic governance impacted such an economic model by internalising the economic governance structure of external sources. However, the recent performance of the Chinese economy indicates a varying trend. The investment-led model of growth has been more accommodating towards the state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and an imbalance emerged in the much anticipated liberal model. It remained the major economic orientation since opening up and the over-reliance on SOEs and facilitations for them by the local governments

through infrastructural assistance was mentioned by many as an unbalanced mechanism.<sup>33</sup> The investment-led model of economic growth ignored domestic consumption and despite rigorous reform eras since the opening up decade, economic growth and change maintained a similar pattern. Explaining and understanding this particular pattern is important to analyse whether China's economy has the potential to become a global model or not.

The objectives and operations of the Chinese economic model are derived from a continuous process of reforms and transition. A review of such policies is given in Table 1 below.

**Table 1**

**Major Policies of China's Investment Model 1981-2023**

<b>Reforms Policy</b>	<b>Policy Area</b>	<b>Policy Objective</b>
Dual Track Pricing System 1981	Trade and investment	To gradually transition the economy from a centrally- - planned governance structure to a market-led growth model
Rural Financial Reforms 1980-2000	Financial sector	To transition the rural population into urbanised citizens and improve financial conditions by an increase in surplus production
Reforms in the Banking System 1984-1990s	Financial sector	To encourage market-led management of the financial sector.
Shenzhen Stock Exchange 1990	Investment sector	To facilitate investors and companies and to organise the market on its own pattern.
Shanghai Stock Exchange 1990	Investment sector	To facilitate local and international investors further
Reforms of State-Owned-Enterprises (SOEs) 1990	Investment sector	To make SOEs more competitive and efficient.
Expansion of the Financial Market	Investment and trade	To introduce new financial products and instruments for

2010		facilitating the private financing sector
One Belt, One Road Initiative 2013	Investment and trade	To promote China's financial cooperation across regions and continents
Shanghai-Hong Kong Stock Connect 2014	Investment sector	To establish better coordination for the existing stock exchange system
Deposit Insurance System 2015	Financial sector	To protect depositors and stabilise financial activity
Supply-side Structural Reforms 2015	Investment sector	To facilitate the supply side and support industrial policy
Yuan Internationalization 2015	Trade and investment	To promote the offshore Yuan market in several financial centres
Opinions on Promoting the Development and Growth of the Private Economy 2023	Investment sector	To support private business and investment

These reform programmes introduced global capitalist aspirations to the Chinese economy while keeping the internal system of economic governance intact. The eras of state formation and state transformations in China retained the debates on whether the state should imitate the Western economic policies or should there be a Chinese indigenous model of economy. The latter thought is represented by a group of reformists known as the *New Left*. The New Left has been the most significant voice since the early 1990s. Emerging as a response to the rapidly modernising China, it criticised the state's adoption of neoliberal policies and emphasised a return to socialism. Advocating statism and social justice, this group further diversified itself and is an influential movement in present-day China.<sup>34</sup> The emphasis of present-day economic policies on Chinese economics with a socialist character reflects such thought programmes. Their

relevance for Chinese character reiterates historical context and the regional economic engagements are its manifestations.

### **RCEP: Regional Economic Policies and the Continuity of History**

The PRC actively engages in economic integrative and interactive policies with its neighbours. It has initiated several bilateral and multilateral cooperatives in this regard. Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) is an inter-regional economic partnership for trade and economic partnerships. One of the key components of this economic integration programme is developing free trade areas. China, through RCEP now, has a free trade agreement with ASEAN and its non-Asia members: Australia and New Zealand. Such an effort accounts for China's opening up policies for regional economic integration and promotion of free trade. The historical policies of low taxes for more investment, production, and enhanced economic activity for people's prosperity are evidently relevant through such programmes.

Put forward and driven by ASEAN, the negotiations for this agreement began in 2012 and in 2013 China's focus on the RCEP continued to ease trade laws. It is often analysed as a means for the PRC and Asian partners to redefine trade rules since the US is not a part of the agreement and expressed its concerns about an Asian trade partnership of this magnitude as a threat to the Western liberal order. The idea of an Asian trade partnership will only take the monopoly of the supply chains further away from the US control.<sup>35</sup> Employing competition mechanism logic, China's ambitions for its regional and global influence guide its regional multilateral choices. The withdrawal of the US from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in 2017 left a power vacuum in the region, which is filled by China's quick accession to the RCEP. The regional partners also acknowledge that it is the TPP of the US that motivated China for the RCEP. However, the Chinese views depict it as an inevitability of domestic reforms.<sup>36</sup> The hyper-

investment and production model of China's economy requires access to diverse markets while facilitating its investment and supply chain industry. RCEP lowers the tariffs for exports and eases market entry barriers in Southeast Asia for the PRC. The RCEP has facilitated 30.4 per cent of China's total trade volume since becoming operational in 2022.

Among PRC and RCEP, exports and imports have expanded progressively. The number has increased to \$218 billion for imports and \$203 billion for exports on a year-on-year basis. Deciphering of the data shows trade of labour-intensive products and mechanical and electrical goods contribute to 52.1 per cent of exports and 17.8 per cent of imports. From the total share of the imports, agriculture products, metal ore, ore sand, and mechanical and electrical products make up 48.5 per cent, 9.6 per cent, and 6 per cent of China, respectively. Out of these imports, the PRC imported agricultural products worth \$6.79 billion from ASEAN only.<sup>37</sup> These numbers of the deconstructed data reflect the growing Chinese dependence on this trade partnership. A strong trade base is developed with diverse exports. The emphasis on labour-intensive trade and mechanical and electrical imports shows China's interest and focus on the traditional and advanced high-tech manufacturing industries.

During the negotiations, China emphasised strengthening its economic relations with its neighbours. It pushed for such provisions while negotiating that could benefit its key industrial sector which supports its trade and export-led economy. By developing a layout for the industrial production and Asia-based supply chain networks, RCEP is emphasised by China to enhance its regional economic relationships. Data from a few companies is represented in Table 2 to showcase the early yields of the RCEP for China.

**Table 2**  
**Tariff Data of Chinese Companies Benefitting from RCEP<sup>38</sup>**

<b>China's Company/ Industry</b>	<b>Project Details</b>	<b>Impact of RCEP</b>
Hohhot, Inner Mongolia/Sea Buckthorn Juice	Export to RCEP member countries.	The tariff rate has been reduced by 3 per cent improving competitiveness.
Saihan Customs	Distribution of RCEP certificates of origin	RCEP covers goods of 433 million yuan for exports
Inner Mongolia North Peace Textile Co.	Cashmere textile export	RCEP has facilitated low tariffs and from the year 2022 to 2024, 1 million yuan is saved.
Pearl River International Development Co., Ltd.	Digital economy and new energy resources.	Cumulative trading through a one-stop supply chain with an export value of 170 million Yuan through RCEP.

The emphasis on export enhancements through RCEP is a reinforcement of China's contemporary economic model. The export- and investment-led economy is yielding benefits for both its traditional and advanced and futuristic industries by profiting from the low tariffs and easy trade barriers. The agenda of free trade and economic integration of the region has references to Confucian thought. Such reflections highlight a continuity of policy from historical to contemporary affairs. The historic vision of maintaining a balance and leadership role is manifested as China is becoming the regional economic hub. Its 15-member RCEP aligns with its long-term agenda of regional economic integration. The Confucian ideals of harmony and ethical leadership, following its principles of righteousness and benevolence, create a narrative of a win-win partnership for its regional economic partners. The essence of mutual benefit is fostering connectivity, development, and mutual economic



growth while emphasising the existing economic model of the country.

Furthermore, one of the prominent principles of RCEP is the rule of origin (RoO) which signifies mutual benefit and economic growth.<sup>39</sup> It emphasises that a product or commodity which is manufactured in a member country will be traded under preferential taxation. It does not restrict this trade by any other measure even if the raw material or parts of the product are imported from non-member countries. It allows companies of the member states to benefit from lower taxes within the free trade bloc. Such an approach encourages the development of sustainable and long-term economic policies which is a significant aspect of Confucian thought. Bridging ancient wisdom with contemporary economic governance thought, the RCEP is an agreement for long-term and sustainable growth. China's participation in this agreement reflects a merger of the continuity of its historical economic orientation and the present-day economic model. Finally, it can be concluded that China's participation in the RCEP is in line with its existing economic model and the historical continuities of economic thought.

## **Conclusion**

China's regional economic policies are often viewed as a threat to the regional economic balance but an analysis of the historical thought traditions and the resonance of these socio-economic programmes in the current policy choices reveal a pattern of the continuity of history. The PRC's regional economic policies are not aimed at threatening the existing order of regional economic governance and are rather a manifestation of its internal economic model. Its reliance on exports and production needs a favourable regional economic governance system and following the global demands of supply chain and trade regimes, it is strengthening these practices through its regional engagements. Its accession to the RCEP

supports its trade model while securing the regional supply chain industry. Therefore, the regional economic policies of the PRC are a manifestation of its internal economic model which in turn is a continuity of its history. Its outward economic approach is not a threat to its neighbours but a reflection of its ethical leadership narratives from the past.

## Notes and References

- <sup>1</sup> J. Mohan Malik, "The Evolution of Strategic Thought," In Craig A. Snyder, *Contemporary Security and Strategy* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 13-52.
- <sup>2</sup> Bryan W. Van Norden, *Confucius and the Analects* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 4.
- <sup>3</sup> Morris L. Bian, "Building State Structure: Goumindang Institutional Rationalization during the Sino-Japanese War, 1937-1945," *Modern China* 31, no.1, (January, 2005), 35-71.
- <sup>4</sup> J. Mohan Malik, "The Evolution of Strategic Thought," 15.
- <sup>5</sup> Chen-Huang Chang, *Economic Principles of Confucius and his School* (New York: Columbia University, 1911), 121.
- <sup>6</sup> Zhao Jing, "Fu GuoXue and "economics" of ancient China," In *The History of Ancient Chinese Economic Thought* ed. Cheng Lin, Terry Peach and Wang Fang (New York: Routledge, 2014), 67.
- <sup>7</sup> Cheng Lin, Terry Peach and Wang Fang, *The History of Ancient Chinese Economic Thought* (London: Routledge, 2014).
- <sup>8</sup> Gan Naiguang, *The History of Pre-Qin Economic Thought* (1926).
- <sup>9</sup> Karyn Lai, *An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
- <sup>10</sup> Hellmut Wilhelm, *Change Eight Lectures on the I Ching* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1960).
- <sup>11</sup> China File, "What is I Ching," 25 February 2016, <https://www.chinafile.com/library/nyrb-china-archive/what-i-ching>.
- <sup>12</sup> Wang Bi, *The Classics of Changes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).
- <sup>13</sup> Huanzhang Chen, *The Economic Principles of Confucius* (New York: Columbia University, 1911).
- <sup>14</sup> C.C.Tsai, *Confucius: The Analects* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018).
- <sup>15</sup> Yang Bojun, Wu Shuping, Pan Fuen, Wen Shaoxia, *The Analects of Confucius* (Tokyo: Qi Lu Press, 1993).
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid. XI, 1.

- <sup>17</sup> China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era, *The State Council Information Office of The People's Republic of China* (January, 2021), 6.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid.15
- <sup>19</sup> *Analects*. XV11, 5.
- <sup>20</sup> China International Development Cooperation in the New Era,21
- <sup>21</sup> The Belt and Road Initiative: A Key Pillar of the Global Community of Shared Future, *The State Council Information Office of The People's Republic of China* (October 2023).
- <sup>22</sup> Wu Baosan, "On the major fields and significance of the study of the history of ancient Chinese economic thought," In *The History of Ancient Chinese Economic Thought* ed. Cheng Lin, Terry Preach and Wang Fang (New York: Routledge, 2014), 58.
- <sup>23</sup> Yang Bojun, *Analects*, XII, 7.
- <sup>24</sup> ArendseHuld, "China's Tax Incentives for the Manufacturing Sector in 2023," 14 August 2023, <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/china-preferential-tax-policies-for-manufacturing-sector/>.
- <sup>25</sup> James Legg, "Mengzi Teng Wen Gong II," *The Analects XueErChinese Text Project*, <http://chinese.dsturgeon.net/text.pl?node=1082&if=en>.
- <sup>26</sup> Gangjian Du, Juanjuan Sun, "The Justification of Chinese traditional thought on the right to adequate food," *Hal.Science* (2010), <https://hal.science/hal-00716447>.
- <sup>27</sup> Arthur Waley, *Three Ways of Thought in Ancient China* (London: Routledge, 1939).
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid. 112-130.
- <sup>29</sup> James Legg, *The Analects XueEr Chinese Text Project* <http://chinese.dsturgeon.net/text.pl?node=1099&if=en>.
- <sup>30</sup> XunZi, "The Regulations of a King, In *Xunzi: Basic Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).
- <sup>31</sup> Huanzhang Chen, *The Economic Principles of Confucius*, 57.
- <sup>32</sup> Mark Beeson, "Goeconomics with Chinese characteristics: the BRI and China's evolving grand strategy," *Economis and Political science* 6, no. 3 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/20954816.2018.1498988>.

- <sup>33</sup> Michael Pettis, "China's Financial Evolution Will Take the Slow Road," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, <https://policycommons.net/artifacts/427856/chinas-financial-evolution-will-take-the-slow-road/1398906/>
- <sup>34</sup> Letian Lei, "The mirage of the alleged Chinese new left," *Journal of Political Ideologies* (July, 2024), 1-22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2024.2370972>.
- <sup>35</sup> Henry S. Gao, Gregory Shaffer, "The RCEP: Great Power Competition and Cooperation over Trade," *UC Irvine School of Law Research Paper* 2021, no.9 (February, 01, 2021), <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3777604>.
- <sup>36</sup> Haiwei Jiang and MiaojieYu, "Understanding RCEP and CPTPP: from the perspective China's dual circulation economic strategy," *China Economic Journal* 14, no.2 (2021):144-161, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2015.1109509>.
- <sup>37</sup> Yi Wu, "How the RCEP Has Benefitted China: Initial Findings from 2022," *China Briefing*, 16 May 2022, <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/how-has-the-rcep-benefitted-china-findings-from-the-initial-months-of-operation-2022/>.
- <sup>38</sup> Xinhua, "Economic Watch: Chinese companies ride RCEP momentum to boost exports," *Xinhua News*, 22 February 2024, <https://english.news.cn/20240222/154d73c0fc914ad88f0555fa18611adf/c.html>.
- <sup>39</sup> Duy K. Dinh, "Rules of Origin in RCEP Agreement: Advancement and Convergence," *Global Trade and Customs Journal* 16, no. 6 (2021), 248-255, <https://doi.org/10.54648/gtcj2021028>.

# HISTORICAL EXPERIENCES ON WATER SHARING DISPUTES: LESSONS FOR BANGLADESH

HASINA AFRUJ SHANTA\*

## Abstract

*Water is the most important resource for survival. Lack of sufficient water has become a major global concern. Transboundary rivers are the main sources of safe drinking water for which dispute over transboundary river water sharing is also growing. This study is a comparative discussion of the Nile, Colorado and Mekong rivers disputes with the Ganges River dispute between Bangladesh and India. Applying the case study method, the paper analyses the nature of the dispute over these rivers and the dispute solution methods followed by the basin states of these rivers. The study finds some momentous ideas that made the dispute resolution efforts of these rivers significant. As Bangladesh and India are highly water-stressed countries with a long history of transboundary water conflict, the study attempts to draw lessons for Bangladesh from these historical experiences of the Nile, Colorado, and Mekong in resolving its longstanding water dispute with India.*

**Keywords:** Nile River, Colorado River, Mekong River, Ganges River, water dispute, conflict resolution

---

\* Dr Hasina Afruj Shanta is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Chittagong, Bangladesh.  
E-mail: shantaafrij@yahoo.com

## **Introduction**

Since ancient times, conflicts over water resources have been noticed globally. But in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, competition over water resources has increased because of the scarcity of freshwater compared to the growing global population. Global scarcity of water resources has sharply increased water disputes over the common river basins. There are 263 common river basins worldwide of which disputes over several river basins stand out due to over-exploitation of water resources.<sup>1</sup> Among the disputes observed around the world regarding the distribution of river water, the disputes over the Nile, Colorado, and the Mekong are the most significant in terms of the gravity of the problem, significant conflict resolution methods, and collaborative efforts. Of these three, the Nile and Mekong are shared by as many as five countries. The Colorado River, on the other hand, runs through the US and Mexico only. However, seven states of the United States depend on the water of the Colorado River. Besides, the dispute over the Colorado River is linked with the Rio Grande River which further complicates the matter. The Nile, Colorado, and Mekong rivers disputes have a long history of conflict and negotiation. Yet, in terms of conflict resolution, they are more successful cases than many others. However, it is also true that when it comes to the issue of common river water sharing, it is never possible to fully protect the interests of all the co-riparian countries. Rather, an amicable solution is sought with the consent of all the basin states through which the maximum interest of each country can be secured. Similar efforts have been made in the cases of the Nile, Colorado, and Mekong rivers disputes. This paper offers a rigorous discussion on the Nile, Colorado, and Mekong rivers disputes with the long-standing Bangladesh-India water dispute on the River Ganges. It also tries to draw lessons for Bangladesh from these historical experiences to resolve its water dispute with India on the Ganges.

## **The Nile River Dispute**

The Nile River dispute has a long history of negotiation. Negotiations to resolve the dispute began in the colonial period. So far, two agreements have been signed. One was in 1929 by Egypt and Britain and the other in 1959 by Egypt and Sudan. The Nile flows through eleven countries, namely: Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, The Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Tanzania, and South Sudan. Among them, Egypt and Sudan are major lower riparian countries and Ethiopia, Uganda, and Tanzania are the upper riparian countries. Depleting water availability, increasing demand for water, development activities, and environmental degradation have heightened conflicts on the question of sharing the Nile River water. The fear is that the conflict over water sharing might exacerbate in the near future.<sup>2</sup> Historically, Egypt had always been the user of the major chunk of the Nile water flow. The core water allocation agreement on the Nile has allocated a vast portion of the Nile River flow to Egypt. Since colonial times, the United Kingdom has been dependent on agricultural exports from this region, so it had a great interest in the allocation of Nile River water among Egypt, East British Africa, and Sudan for irrigation purposes. Egypt was also interested in the water agreement as it assumed that the UK would secure the interest of Egypt and compel the other British-controlled upper riparian countries to respect the interests of Egypt. The understanding between the United Kingdom and Egypt on the question of the Nile water sharing was crystallised in the 1929 Nile Water Agreement.<sup>3</sup>

## **Controversy Over the 1929 Nile Water Agreement: A Move Towards the 1959 Agreement**

Although the lakes of Central Africa, the Blue Nile, and the Atbara River of Ethiopia are major tributaries of the entire flow of the Nile, the 1929 agreement allocated 48 billion cubic metres (bcm) of



water per year to Egypt out of 84 bcm while Sudan was allocated only 4 bcm per year. Another 32 bcm per annum remained unallocated for the use of upstream riparian states. This agreement undermined Sudan's interests in the face of Egypt and made it dependent on Egypt's approval for any kind of irrigation, power, and water diversion projects. In other words, it gave Egypt the right to inspect any project related to the Nile water that had the potential to affect the water flowing through its territory. During the 1950s, when Sudan expressed its dissatisfaction about the water allocation stipulated in the 1929 agreement, the Egypt-Sudan confrontation led to a military confrontation regarding the Sennar Dam project of Sudan on its portion of the Blue Nile. However, when the military regime under Gamal Abdel Nasser came to power in Egypt in 1958, negotiations restarted between Egypt and Sudan and finally on 8 November 1959, a new agreement was signed considering the political and agricultural changes since 1929. According to this new agreement, the share of Egypt increased and stood at 55bcm per year while the share of Sudan also increased and stood at 18bcm per year and 10bcm per year remained unallocated for the upper riparian states.

### **Entebbe Agreement 2010**

Only Egypt and the United Kingdom were the signatories in the first two agreements. Even though the Nile River flew through eleven riparian countries, the other upstream countries were not directly party to the agreement.<sup>4</sup> Both the agreements kept the door open for upstream and downstream riparian conflicts and, as expected, the upstream countries, particularly Ethiopia, raised their voices and articulated displeasure about the treaty. It also raised questions about the validity and binding nature of the treaty. Other riparian states like Tanzania and Kenya also followed Ethiopia and refused to abide by these agreements because they were not parties to these treaties. They were not even consulted on the issue before the signing of the treaty. Recently, Kenya and Uganda expressed their

interest in expanding small and medium-scale irrigation projects in the region of Lake Victoria and some members of the Kenyan parliament have robustly disagreed with the compulsory aspects of the 1959 treaty.<sup>5</sup> Strong upstream collaboration in recent years resulted in the Entebbe Agreement in 2010 which restructured the allocation and control over the Nile resources. Six countries including Ethiopia, Rwanda, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, and Burundi signed the Entebbe Agreement. Soon, South Sudan will also join the Entebbe Agreement. This agreement allows all the riparian states to construct dams and other related projects which were restricted in the previous agreement. It also brought into force the Nile River Cooperative Framework (NRCF). Although Egypt and Sudan refused to sign on to the agreement and some other riparian states are yet to sign it, the agreement still represents a big change in the management procedure of the Nile River water.<sup>6</sup>

### **Cooperative Initiative for Basin Development**

Recently the initiative for Nile River basin development has been taken up by the basin states. The independence of South Sudan has added a new element to the Nile water management issue as it has changed the geographic balance. After independence, it joined the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) in 2012 which increased the NBI membership to 10. It means that all the basin states of the Nile have joined the NBI and the eleventh riparian state, Eritrea, was working as a working observer in the NBI. Egypt and Sudan suggested some changes to the NBI so that the Nile River resources could be developed with the support of all the riparian countries and could take such projects that are beneficial for all. Complications on the Nile River water were thickening when Ethiopia began to construct a hydroelectric dam on the Blue Nile. This dam is projected to be the world's eighth-largest dam. The \$5 billion Grand Ethiopia Renaissance Dam (GERD) was projected to have produced almost double the current electricity generation. Although Ethiopia says that this dam

would cause no harm to Egypt, Cairo believes that less water would end up flowing through Sudan and then into Egypt as a result of the project and will decrease the present yearly available volume of water from 55 bcm. While this was the situation, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Egypt's new President unexpectedly took a new turn and expressed his intention to reach an agreement with Ethiopia over the Nile River water.<sup>7</sup> As an important breakthrough, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan signed a collaboration contract on the project approving the principle to allocate the water and not injure each other's interest.<sup>8</sup> Egypt's decision to negotiate with Ethiopia perhaps is just because of its tension over the Nile water as it considers it a matter of life and death. That is why Egypt also proposed to include the World Bank as a neutral party. Egypt also assumes that Sudan's current stance with Ethiopia is probably because of the longstanding strained relationship between Egypt and Sudan over border disputes around a strip of bordering territory. Ethiopia's dam project will ultimately end the seasonal fluctuations of the river, regulate the river flow, and help increase production in Sudan. Unlike the previous single crop rotation, now there will be two or three.<sup>9</sup> As a downstream country, Egypt has no control over the upstream flows. Therefore, Egypt considers it better to enter into full dialogue with Ethiopia and Sudan and with the other countries of the Nile basin to develop the Nile resource in a coordinated way and ensure mutual benefit for all the co-riparian countries.<sup>10</sup>

### **The US-Mexico Dispute on the Colorado River**

The United States and Mexico have a long history of transboundary water conflict over the Colorado River. Increasing water stress and reduced water supply due to the drought turned the transboundary water challenges over the Colorado River into a bitter tussle between the US and Mexico. Moreover, the water-sharing disputes over the Colorado River were linked with another major river,

the Rio Grande, which made it more complex. The Colorado River runs through seven states of the United States: parts of Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, New Mexico, Arizona, and California covering 242,000 square miles in the US and 2,000 square miles of Mexico.<sup>11</sup> Around 97 per cent of its basin area lies in the United States.<sup>12</sup> The US-Mexico water dispute was mainly resolved by the bi-national 1944 water treaty. International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC) consisting of the US and Mexico was authorised to issue 'minutes' to resolve the conflict. Minutes are considered as the solutions for new issues formalised in amendments to the 1944 water treaty. Under this treaty, the new developments and water issues can be solved through agreed-upon interpretations of the treaty.<sup>13</sup>

The US-Mexico dispute on the Colorado River came to attention in 1920 with the creation of the Colorado River Compact (CRC), the construction of the Boulder Canyon Dam (BCD) in the upper basin of the Colorado River, and the All-American Canal (AAC). According to the 1904 Mexican concession, Mexico was allowed to distract 50 per cent water of the Imperial Canal on which the USA was reliant for water. Shifting river tracks, rising river beds, as well as the distraction of river water through Mexico scratched a large portion of land in the Imperial Valley which led the US to form the CRC, BCD, and AAC. Tension arose between the US and Mexico when the US rejected Mexico's proposal to connect with the CRC as a party because these projects were fully domestic. To balance the situation, the government of Mexico took irrigation development projects on the Mexican tributaries of the lower Rio Grande River to settle the landless Mexican peasants there. These projects carried almost 70 per cent water of the lower Rio Grande and frightened the Texan farmers along the Rio Grande River on the US side. Eventually, realising the complexities of the issue, the US and Mexico agreed to sit for negotiation on this issue.<sup>14</sup>

**Rio Grande: A Bargaining Chip for Mexico**

The negotiation process was not easy because the seven US basin states of the Colorado River objected to sharing river water with Mexico by denying the lawful and ethical rights of Mexico on the water of the Colorado River. They were even unwilling to share Colorado River water in exchange for the water of Rio Grande. While these seven basin states of the US presented their arguments based on the Hermon Doctrine, the Mexicans based their right to the Colorado River water based on the principles of the Commonwealth. They demanded 4.5 million feet of water (MAF). However, the refusal of the US to share the water of the Colorado River compelled Mexico to take a bold step of objecting to sharing the water of the Rio Grande and thus the negotiations failed.<sup>15</sup> However, later in the 1930s, the Government of Mexico undertook a massive irrigation project and expanded its cultivated land from 50,000 acres to 424,000 acres by 1935 in the Colorado Delta and started constructing the Retamal Canal, also with a plan to construct El Azucar Dam on the Rio Grande, which forced the US to return to the negotiating table with Mexico. Realising the complexities of both sides, once again, they tried to settle the issue. Mexico lowered its demand from 4.5 MAF to 2 MAF of the Colorado River water and, through negotiation, they settled on 1.5 MAF. On the other hand, the US got approximately 43 per cent of the lower Rio Grande's average annual flow. Eventually, the treaty was signed on 3 February 1944.<sup>16</sup> The 1944 treaty charged the IBWC with the power to settle all the issues and complications arising in the process of water sharing. In this case, doors were kept open to settle the issues through diplomatic channels, if needed.

**'Minutes': A Way to Solve New Challenges to the Colorado-Rio Grande Issue**

In the treaty of 1944, the IBWC was also given some flexibility regarding the water allocation without doing something harmful to other basin states. After the 1944 treaty, a series of agreements was

made between the US and Mexico on various issues. Those deals, known as minutes, are a way to solve the new challenges that arise in water-related issues between both sides. Minutes were adopted on a range of issues together with water transfer during droughts, construction of dams, water salinity problems, and many other issues.<sup>17</sup>

So far, a good number of deals have been signed between the US and Mexico on water quality. For instance, in 1960 and later on, salinity issues emerged as a major concern in water sharing. To resolve it, Minutes 218 and 242 were adopted which are still in force and the US continues to comply with their provisions.<sup>18</sup> Besides, minutes were adopted to resolve the complications which may arise during the water allocation as well. Minute 234 was adopted to sort out the complexities arising out of the failure to meet the minimum flow obligation of Mexico stipulated in the 1944 Water Treaty. Minute 318 was adopted to solve the complexities related to the quantity of allocated water for Mexico in the 1944 Treaty. This minute was brought into effect in the situations of water flow of the Colorado River to deliver more or less quantity of water. It also indicated cooperative measures to address the continued effects of the April 2010 earthquake in Mexico Valley, Baja California. In 2012, Minute 319 was signed between Mexico and the US to improve the understanding of water management options for the restoration of the ecosystem.<sup>19</sup> As Minute 319 was about to expire soon, a new deal known as Minute 323 came into attention focusing on maintaining a more steady flow of water to sustain the wetlands south of the border and encouraging teamwork between the US and Mexico. It also had the provision of involving nongovernmental organisations to secure water for environmental purposes.<sup>20</sup>

### **Dispute on the Mekong River**

The Mekong River dispute is significant in many senses. It is the first successful application of a wide-ranging approach to resolving a dispute over an international river as well as having an intensive plan to develop the Mekong River basin through collaborative efforts among the riparian states. The Mekong is also considered an exceptional river basin compared to the other basins for not being an exotic stream which is in another way helping to manage water conflicts. And this is the optimism that there is no sharp conflict between the water-affluent upstream nations and the water-poor downstream neighbours.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the Mekong River Basin also established the fact that the larger institutional capability can operate to avoid water tension and help enhance collaboration in international basins.

Mekong River Basin comprises six basin states, namely, Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. Originating from the Tanggula mountain range in Qinghai province in China, it runs 4,800 km through the six basin states and finally terminates in the South China Sea after draining over 795,000 km. Of all the basin states, Thailand and Laos share 23 and 25 per cent of the total basin area respectively which is the highest percentage while Vietnam shares the lowest 8 per cent of the basin area though it has the highest population density along the basin which is 236 persons per km.<sup>22</sup> Among the six basin states, China and Myanmar are the upper riparian states while Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam are the lower riparian countries. Around 90 million people of these six riparian states depend for their livelihood on this river. At present, they are working collectively to develop the Mekong River Basin for their common interest.<sup>23</sup> Mekong River Basin has great significance because of the increasing dependency of the basin states on its water, for which the basin states have taken initiatives to construct dams, and diversions to make the proper utilisation of the river water and to ensure economic

benefit. The need for water for irrigation to meet the increasing agricultural demand in China and Thailand, the necessity for electricity in the industrial sector in Thailand and Vietnam, and the necessity for poverty mitigation in Laos and Cambodia are some of the major reasons for reforms and physical alterations all over the basin.<sup>24</sup>

### **Extensive Dam-Building Projects and the Rise of Conflict on the Mekong River**

The Mekong River dispute arose mainly because of the rapid changes that occurred in the Mekong River Basin due to extensive dam-building projects undertaken by the basin states. More than 130 dams were designed in the basin which are likely to harm roughly 100 per cent of sediment transport and collision on migratory fish. It is predicted that the Mekong is going to be the second river on account of its adverse impact on biodiversity in the world after Amazon. Following the completion of the dam and diversion projects, the recurring fluctuations based on the monsoon flow are likely to be hindered, generate random fluctuations, wipe out forests, and alter precipitation and temperature together with an alarm to destroy local natural resource-based economies.<sup>25</sup> Building dams on the transboundary river is not a new practice. Recently, Thailand and Malaysia jointly announced the building of dams on the lower Mekong River while China also commissioned five storage dams on the Mekong in the last decade. These dams are likely to have substantive benefits for the country's economy. But it is also threatening to relocate communities in the surrounding area of the project.<sup>26</sup> In recent years, Chinese officials have accorded substantial attention to the potentiality of the Mekong River Basin. After the liberalisation of the Chinese economy, the population growth, the increasing need for agricultural produce, the rising demand for water for household and other uses, and the need for electricity led China to redirect its focus towards the development of the upper Mekong River basin. Chinese proposal to build 15 dams on the Mekong River would have a



probability for larger implications for the downstream. China is already done with the two major dams on the Lancang-Mekong mainstream of the Chinese part. Besides, the proposal of several other dams in this area is formulating a legal framework and technical guidelines so that the potentiality of conflict can turn into beneficial opportunities for all.<sup>27</sup>

### **Collaborative Efforts of the Lower Riparian Countries and Establishment of the Mekong River Commission**

Aiming to develop Southeast Asia, the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) was formed in 1947 to work towards cooperation between Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam, the four lower riparian countries of the Mekong River Basin. According to the study report of 1957, ECAFE emphasised the necessity for closer cooperation among the co-riparian countries for comprehensive development of the basin and drafted a charter for the coordination committee. After comprehensive discussions among the lower riparian basin states of Mekong themselves, they established the Committee for Coordination and Investigation of Lower Mekong and signed the statute on 17 September 1957. Since the establishment of the Committee, it has been operational for the promotion, management, development, exploration, and oversight of water resource development in the lower Mekong River basin.<sup>28</sup> Although the Committee became the interim Committee in 1978 due to the absence of a representative government in Cambodia, in 1991, it rejoined the Committee as a full member and requested the reactivation of the Mekong Committee which ultimately resulted in a new agreement, signed on April 1995. Finally, the Mekong Committee turned out as the Mekong Commission. Despite the absence of the two uppermost riparian states of the Mekong River, China, and Myanmar in the agreement of 1995 focusing on sustainable development, the Mekong River Commission has implemented many plans so far and numerous agendas are underway. Two major dam-

building projects (Pak Moon Dam in Thailand and Theun-Hin Boun Dam in Laos) have also been implemented under the Mekong River Commission.<sup>29</sup> During the construction of the Xayaburi Dam in Laos, the dam proposal was discussed by four downstream countries and the principles of the 1995 agreement are functional to discuss and resolve the transboundary dispute.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the promising activities of the Mekong River Commission, lower riparian countries, particularly Cambodia and Vietnam, are anxious about the impact of the Chinese plans. However, the optimistic sign is that the Chinese government has realised the common benefits of the development projects of Mekong. They want to ensure a balanced development of water resources for sustainable economic development and environmental safety.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, even though China did not express its interest in joining the Mekong River Commission, it has articulated its willingness to the Asian Development Bank's Greater Mekong Subregion Program and ASEAN's Mekong Basin Development Program and eagerly contributes to it.<sup>32</sup> It may also brighten the hope of the Mekong River Basin Development through the basin states in a cooperative manner.

### **Comparative Discussion Between Ganges Water Dispute and Historical Experiences**

After taking a closer look at the historical disputes over the Nile, Colorado, and Mekong Rivers discussed above, some similarities and dissimilarities are found concerning the Bangladesh-India water dispute. The disputes over these rivers relate to the conserved basin states because of the high level of water anxiety and extreme water-related contention. But as these river basins are different from each other, located in four different geographic areas, the complications that arose in these basin areas are also different in many respects. These differences led to several dissimilarities which do not align completely with the Bangladesh-India water dispute. Yet, Bangladesh and India can take some lessons from these historical experiences and

apply them to resolve their long-lasting tension over the sharing of the common rivers running through these two countries.

### **Resemblances and Differences with the Historical Experiences**

Some dissimilarities are found between the Nile River dispute and the Ganges water dispute. The major dissimilarity is that to resolve the Nile River dispute both the core agreements of 1929 and 1959 were imposed based on the colonial legal system. After the independence of these basin states, questions were raised on the binding force of the treaty and its legality. Moreover, recently some basin states have moved towards a comprehensive framework through an agreement which is yet to get any legal structure and not all the basin states have joined the framework.<sup>33</sup> The basin states of the Nile River are coming together and creating a comprehensive framework because of their belief that the 1929 and 1959 treaties over the Nile were partial to one basin state rather than ensuring equitable benefit for all the basin states. However, in the case of the Ganges water-sharing dispute, both states are bound by the 1996 Ganges Treaty. Although Dhaka believes that the treaty needs some revision, it still agrees with the principles of this treaty. When the Ganges water-sharing dispute is compared with the Colorado River dispute, it is noticed that in both cases of the disputes, demarcation of the boundary sowed the seeds of conflict and made it difficult to find a peaceful solution without sacrificing the rightful share of water. Both the disputes were influenced by domestic politics. Yet, there is a big difference between the two cases. Bangladesh's strategic position is much weaker than that of Mexico. Bangladesh has no bargaining chip like Mexico which had control over the 70 per cent of river flow of the Rio Grande to use it as a leverage against the US. Bangladesh has nothing like this and it fully depends on India for the transboundary water which makes its position much more vulnerable than Mexico. In addition, Bangladesh and India have one more issue, disagreement on

the proposal to augment the dry season water flow of the Ganges which is creating complications in the Indo-Bangladesh water-sharing relations. On the contrary, the US and Mexico were not facing any complications regarding augmentation at all.<sup>34</sup>

Like the Nile and Colorado River disputes, when a comparative analysis was done on the Ganges River dispute with the Mekong River dispute, a different regional political environment was noticed. Water politics creates additional room for wider political interaction among the countries that share rivers in a region. So, the position of any of the countries is affected by the surroundings of that area. In comparison to South Asia, conflicts in Southeast Asia are not so complicated because of a high degree of cooperation at the multilateral level which makes the solution of problems through negotiation easier. But the picture is quite different in South Asia where distrust and security dilemmas make the issues more complex for negotiation.<sup>35</sup> In the context of domestic politics, a significant similarity has been found between the role of China as an upper riparian state in the Mekong basin and India as an upper riparian country in the Ganges basin. China's cooperation with other basin states as member states of the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) is motivated by the hydropower requirements of Yunnan and other provinces. Yunnan is a potential hydropower site in China and an important contributor to meet the energy requirements of other provinces, mainly, the coastal areas. The infrastructural development of Yunnan province is an integral part of the GMS. Things are similar in the case of Ganges also. For the success of the negotiation over the Ganges dispute, the Indian state of West Bengal, particularly the former chief minister of the state Jyoti Basu, played a major role in finalising the treaty. As West Bengal's interest is very much integrated with the Farakka barrage, its involvement meant a lot in finalising the treaty.<sup>36</sup> In both cases, domestic issues played a vital role in the cooperation and negotiation.

### **What Can Bangladesh Learn?**

From the above comparison of the disputes over the Nile, Colorado, and Mekong Rivers, it is noticed that in cases of the Nile and Mekong River disputes most of the basin states moved toward a comprehensive approach to ensure equitable benefit for all. In the case of the Mekong River, for the first time, basin states took the successful initiative for a comprehensive approach towards the development of the Mekong River Basin intensively in a collaborative way. This is a noteworthy step for dispute resolution. The biggest success of the Mekong River agreement is the reorganisation of the Mekong River Commission under which the basin states have agreed to cooperate for the development of the basin. Although China has not joined the Mekong River Commission (MRC) as a full member, it participates in the MRC only as a dialogue partner like Myanmar. Yet, the significance of the MRC is huge. It raised optimism. So far it has taken many cooperative efforts for basin-wide development which is noteworthy.<sup>37</sup> China is not a part of the 1995 Mekong Agreement on the Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin. Despite that, it is playing a positive role in multilateral cooperation. It initiated the Mekong Forum involving all the riparian states on the Lancang-Mekong River Dialogue and Cooperation. Assessing the mechanisms taken by the basin states in both the Mekong River dispute and the Ganges River dispute it seems that the lack of multilateral cooperation on the disputes suggests a lower level of cooperation among the co-riparian states on the Ganges issue. Even today, Bangladesh and India are stuck with bilateral negotiations to deal with the issues.<sup>38</sup> It is high time for Bangladesh and India to move beyond bilateralism and move ahead with multilateral cooperation to ensure equitable benefits for the basin states.

In the case of the Mekong River, MRC, as an essential part of basin development, is helping the basin states for utilisation, management, and protection of the water and water-related resources

of the Mekong basin. It also coordinates the new projects, assesses the impacts on the basin states, and administers the procedure of notification and consultation. Although the coordinating function of MRC is not strong enough because it failed to mitigate the disagreements in the cases of hydropower projects, several steps of MRC still proved to be fruitful in improving water security. It is particularly working as an important platform for basin-wide dialogue, introducing an environment for stakeholders to raise their voices for water resource management in this region. Besides, MRC is working to mitigate the impacts of climate change which is also noteworthy.<sup>39</sup> This initiative is a significant step for the Ganges River dispute resolution. By following the MRC model, the basin states of the Ganges River can also think about the formation of the Ganges River Commission or something like that to initiate extensive cooperation among the basin states. It will make the resolution of the dispute over Ganges water allocation easier and may help find a long-lasting way to augment the dry season water flow of the Ganges.

In the case of the Mekong River, the MRC proved to be a significant concept and structure in establishing the necessary management framework. It also helps ease the conflict situation much ahead of the rise of a sense of urgency.<sup>40</sup> Observing the water disputes in the Nile, Colorado, and Mekong rivers, it is seen that often a single action of a basin state of a transboundary river turned the water relation critical and led to a conflict situation. But quite remarkably, in the case of the Mekong River dispute, an institutional framework was established jointly for dispute resolution before the emergence of any possible dispute. Besides, the Mekong River Commission (MRC) has also played a significant role in water management among the riparian states despite the presence of extreme political disputes.<sup>41</sup> In addition, in the case of the Mekong River, special attention was given to a pre-emptive approach. According to the Mekong agreement, if any country claims that the activities of other basin states are harmful to

the interest of that basin state and if there is sufficient and valid evidence of substantial damage against that state, the alleged basin state(s) will be asked to cease the alleged cause of harm immediately. This provision seems consistent with the UN convention and, to some extent, goes beyond that.<sup>42</sup> Increasing water stress in Bangladesh and India also has the potential to hamper the negotiation process in future over transboundary water issues. Water experts think that it is necessary to form a strong management framework to handle disputes with efficiency before the issues turn into emergencies. Moreover, the thirty-year water treaty of 1996 on the Ganges River water sharing is coming to an end soon. Making stronger the provision of protection from the harmful activities taken by the other basin states can also be an effective initiative to avert further contention.

## **Conclusion**

It is evident from the Bangladesh-India water conflict that both Bangladesh and India are water-dependent and water-stressed countries. So, the conflict of interest between the two countries is very acute and at the same time, a source of concern for both countries. Realising the importance of peaceful co-existence and cooperation, both countries are looking for peaceful resolution of the disputes. In this respect, following the international water law as guidance, they are trying to take innovative steps to solve the transboundary disputes. But, it is also true that the growing demand for water and attempts to satisfy this demand compelled these countries to harness the transboundary river water in many ways, which often appears as a matter of confrontation between the co-riparian countries. As water is a key to development for a country, upstream India's several proposed plans, and water projects, to some extent, seem contrary to the principles of transboundary water laws. So far, following the international water law as guidance, Bangladesh and India have tried to resolve the Ganges water dispute. But, considering the comparative

discussion on the international dimensions and historical experiences with the Ganges water dispute, it seems both sides need to apply international dimensions and historical experiences together to resolve the dispute properly. Bangladesh and India must acknowledge the fact that they should come to an understanding with each other to develop a smooth working relationship. As the transnational river flow is not limited within the territorial boundary of any of these two countries, they need to think more broadly, go beyond bilateralism, and shift to the multilateral approach, to ensure the rights of all basin states. Historical experiences reveal that forming an institutional framework for basin-wide development with all other basin states on a cooperative basis could be an optimistic step for dispute resolution. Bangladesh and India together framed the Joint Rivers Commission (JRC) back in 1972. Although JRC was not established for any individual river basin development and conflict resolution, its role has long been questionable because of its lack of timely meetings and failure to find a mutually acceptable augmentation plan. Both sides also signed the Ganges water sharing treaty a long time ago in 1996 but due to lack of proper implementation of the provisions of the 1996 Ganges water sharing treaty, the Ganges water issue has remained a matter of contention between Bangladesh and India. Considering these flaws, the establishment of an institutional body free from the limitations and responsibilities of basin states towards its rules will create an effective environment for dialogues among the co-riparian states. After all, successful resolution always depends on the proper implementation of the principles as well as procedures.



## Notes and References

- <sup>1</sup> Shavkat Kasymov, "Disputes over Water Resources: A History of Conflict and Cooperation in Drainage Basin," *Peace and Conflict Studies* 18, no. 2 (November 2011): 293.
- <sup>2</sup> Valerle Knobelsdorf, "The Nile Water Agreements: Imposition and Impacts of a Trans-boundary Legal System," *Columbia Journal of Transnational Law* 44, no. 2 (January 2006): 622.
- <sup>3</sup> Knobelsdorf, "The Nile Water Agreements," 626.
- <sup>4</sup> Knobelsdorf, "The Nile Water Agreements," 629.
- <sup>5</sup> Knobelsdorf, "The Nile Water Agreements," 631-632.
- <sup>6</sup> Jack Di. Nunzio, "Conflict on the Nile: The Future of Trans-boundary Water Disputes over the World's Longest River," *Future Directions International Pty Ltd*, 25 November 2013, <http://www.futuredirection.org.all/publication/conflict-on-the-nile-the-future-of-transboundary-water-disputes-over-the-world's-longest-river/Nov25,2013>.
- <sup>7</sup> Fred Pearce, "On the River Nile, a Move to Avert a Conflict Over Water", *Yale environment 360*, Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies, 12 March 2015, [https://e360.yale.edu/features/on\\_the\\_river\\_nile\\_a\\_move\\_to\\_avert\\_a\\_conflict\\_over\\_water](https://e360.yale.edu/features/on_the_river_nile_a_move_to_avert_a_conflict_over_water)
- <sup>8</sup> "Hydro-economics: Egypt, Ethiopia and the Nile," *Aljazeera*, October 22, 2017.
- <sup>9</sup> "Egypt and Ethiopia Clash over Huge River Nile Dam," *Financial Times*, 26 December 2017.
- <sup>10</sup> "Hydro-economics."
- <sup>11</sup> Norris Hundley, "The Colorado Waters: Dispute" *Mexico Natural Resources*, (April 1964), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/mexico/1964-04-01/colorado-waters-dispute>.
- <sup>12</sup> Nichole T Carter, Stephen P Mulligan, Clare Ribando Seelke, "US-Mexican Water Sharing: Background and Recent Developments," CRS Report, *Congressional Research Service* (March 2017): 9.
- <sup>13</sup> Carter *et al.*, "US-Mexican Water Sharing," 6.
- <sup>14</sup> B. M. Monoar Kabir, "INDO-BD Water Dispute: A Comparative Study," *Regional Studies* IX, no. 1(Winter 1990-91): 68.
- <sup>15</sup> Kabir, "INDO-BD Water Dispute," 68.

- <sup>16</sup> Kabir, "INDO-BD Water Dispute," 68.
- <sup>17</sup> Carter *et al.*, "US-Mexican Water Sharing," 8.
- <sup>18</sup> Carter *et al.*, "US-Mexican Water Sharing," 11.
- <sup>19</sup> Carter *et al.*, "US-Mexican Water Sharing," 13.
- <sup>20</sup> Ian James, "U.S and Mexico Finalizing Colorado River Deal," *The Desert Sun*, 11 August 2017.
- <sup>21</sup> Aaron T. Wolf and Joshua T. Newton, "Case Study Trans-boundary Dispute Solution: The Mekong Committee," 3, <https://transboundarywaters.science.oregonstate.edu/.../transboundarywaters.../casestud>.
- <sup>22</sup> Patric R. MacQuarrie, Vitoon Viriyasakultorn and Aron T. Wolf, "Promising Cooperation in the Mekong Region through Water Conflict Management, Regional Collaboration and Capacity Building," *GMSARN International Journal*, 2 (2008):175.
- <sup>23</sup> Daenec McKinney, "Trans-boundary Water Challenges: Case Studies," (June 2011):112, <https://www.caee.utexas.edu/prof/mckinney/ce397/.../Transboundary Water Issues.pdf>.
- <sup>24</sup> Jennifer C Veilleux and Elizabeth P. Anderson, "2015 Snapshot of Water Security in the Nile, Mekong, and Amazon River Basins," *Limnology and Oceanography Bulletin*, Oslo Association for the Science of Limnology and Oceanography, (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1002/lob.10085>.
- <sup>25</sup> Veilleux and Anderson, "2015 Snapshot."
- <sup>26</sup> Veilleux and Anderson, "2015 Snapshot."
- <sup>27</sup> Wolf and Newton, "Case Study Trans-boundary Dispute Solution," 4.
- <sup>28</sup> Wolf and Newton, "Case Study Trans-boundary Dispute Solution," 4.
- <sup>29</sup> Wolf and Newton, "Case Study Trans-boundary Dispute Solution," 5-7.
- <sup>30</sup> W. Douven, M. L. Mul, B. Fernandez Alvarez, S. Lam Hung, N. Bakken, G. Radosevich, and P. Vander Zaag, "Enhancing Capabilities of Riparian Professionals to Address and Resolve Trans-boundary Issues in International River Basins: Experiences from the Lower Mekong River Basin," *Hydrology and Earth System Sciences*, 16 (2012): 3184.

- <sup>31</sup> Evelyn Goh, "China in the Mekong River Basin: The Regional Security Implications of Resource Development on the Lancang Jiang," *Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies*, no. 69, (Singapore 2004): 10-11.
- <sup>32</sup> Goh, "China in the Mekong River Basin," 10-11.
- <sup>33</sup> Knobelsdorf, "The Nile Waters Agreement," 622.
- <sup>34</sup> Kabir, "INDO-BD Water Dispute," 81-83.
- <sup>35</sup> Selina Ho, "Why do Hydro- Hegemons Cooperate? China's and India's Trans-boundary Policies," *Global Water Forum*, 27 February 2017.
- <sup>36</sup> Ho, "Hydro- Hegemons."
- <sup>37</sup> Daenec McKinney, "Trans-boundary Water Challenges: Case Studies," (2011):117, [https://www.caee.utexas.edu/prof/mckinney/ce397/.../Transboundary Water Issues.pdf](https://www.caee.utexas.edu/prof/mckinney/ce397/.../Transboundary%20Water%20Issues.pdf).
- <sup>38</sup> Ho, "Hydro- Hegemons."
- <sup>39</sup> "Water Security Threats Demand New Collaboration: Lessons from the Mekong River Basin," *The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited*, 2017.
- <sup>40</sup> Wolf and Newton "Case Study Trans-boundary Dispute Solution," 7.
- <sup>41</sup> Aaron T. Wolf, "International Water Conflict Resolution: Lessons from Comparative Analysis," *Water Resources Development*, 13, no. 3 (1997): 349.
- <sup>42</sup> Daenec McKinney, "Trans-boundary Water Challenges," 117.

# CLIMATE CHANGE-INDUCED URBAN MIGRATION AND ITS IMPACTS ON CITIES: A CASE STUDY OF BANGLADESH

NADIA ZAHEER\*

## Abstract

*Academics and practitioners have recognised the rapidly expanding field of research on human migration, vulnerability, and climate change. To investigate the relationship between climate change-induced human migration and its effects on urban areas, Bangladesh has been taken as a case study. This paper reviews current developments in climate change and urbanisation research in Bangladesh. Notably, the climate-induced migration literature is somewhat stagnated in theorising the concepts of 'migration as adaptation' and investigating the causes, drivers, factors, and dynamics of decision-making about migration or displacements. The urban effects of massive migration in countries like Bangladesh have received no or little attention. Reviewing available literature, this paper claims that Bangladesh needs a systematic transformative territorial/spatial planning approach to identify the weaknesses and strengths of particular regions as well as cities to deal with the impacts of climate-induced migration. It indicates that making resilient cities would be impossible without sufficient and simultaneous considerations of rural resilience.*

**Keywords:** *climate change, climate migrants, Bangladesh, slums, governance*

---

\* Dr Nadia Zaheer is an Assistant Professor in the Department of International Relations at the Lahore College for Women University (LCWU).

E-mail: nadia.zaheer@lcwu.edu.pk

*Regional Studies*, 42:2, Winter 2024, pp.74-97

## Introduction

Centuries-long natural processes have been accelerated by climate change resulting in new patterns of human relocation, increased vulnerability, and an explosive rise in chaotic and fast urbanisation.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it is imperative to recognise a rapidly expanding body of research on human migration, vulnerability, and climate change. Human migration was formerly thought to be a means of fleeing the environmental dangers and vulnerabilities of one's place of origin to find favourable economic prospects in a new location. As a case study in the research in hand, every year, hundreds of thousands of climate migrants are forced to leave Bangladesh due to natural calamities. Most of them are brought on by abruptly occurring natural calamities like landslides, floods, cyclones, and river erosion. New displacements are also brought about by slow-onset disasters like salinisation and sea level rise. According to some estimates, by 2050, over 35 million residents of Bangladesh's coastal regions could be at risk of being forced to migrate.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, a variety of different viewpoints have evolved in the discussion around adaptation to climate change and its effects. The focus on displacements caused by climatic effects began in the 1980s. It was the scientists and environmentalists, who started looking at displacements from a climate change perspective. Based on their studies and a wider approach, they predicted a climate change-induced human migration in the ensuing decades. Besides developing a theoretical base for climate change-induced human migration, they also wanted to divert attention towards practical measures in the form of migrants' adaptation strategies. Decades on, climate change-induced migration took a serious shape in several countries. Environmentalists were also of the view that climate change-induced migration is another catastrophe that the world is going to witness in the coming decades. The literature indicates that Bangladesh is witnessing a notable number of human displacements due to a variety

of circumstances, such as natural catastrophes, with a significant portion of these relocations occurring in metropolitan areas. They primarily target large cities, like the capital Dhaka, Chattogram, Khulna, and Rajshahi. Malliek contends that non-migration decisions are linked to property ownership, social connectivity, and household economic strength. Numerous studies also concentrate on the variables and motivations behind decisions to migrate or not.<sup>3</sup>

There is a research gap on climate change-induced migration and its impacts on the cities. The effects of climate change-induced migration on cities have not been focused upon as a research area. Although numerous studies have looked at the social and economic effects of migration brought on by climate change, less focus has been placed on the urban effects of internal migration in developing nations' cities, like Bangladesh.<sup>4</sup>

This paper broadly focuses on the research on urbanisation, migration, and climate change in Bangladesh. The paper seeks to illustrate the causes and patterns of rural-urban movement as well as how this poses challenges for Bangladesh's cities. Four sections make up the framework of the paper. Section One includes the introduction part. The conceptual framework and the paper's arguments are given in Section Two. Section Three presents the current patterns of rural-to-urban migration in Bangladesh and analyses the effects on cities based on the available literature. In the fourth section, the literature is thoroughly discussed in the conclusion, along with some policy implications and recommendations for future study areas.

### **A Conceptual Look at Climate Change and Climate Migrants**

It is commonly acknowledged that anthropogenic and natural environmental change, especially climate change, can affect human behaviour and patterns of movement. Researchers from a wide range of disciplines have focused a great deal of emphasis on the connections and consequences between human migration and

climate change over the last few decades. Arguably, the forerunners of migration studies regard environmental change as one of the major drivers of human mobility. However, as environmental change gained international attention in the 1980s, issues like environment-induced migration were once again brought up for discussion. This kind of 'strange disappearance and sudden reappearance' is how the author characterises the theme of environment and migration's presence and absence.<sup>5</sup>

However, it was also evident in the literature that there was a disagreement over how to define climate migrants and refugees. For example, one may argue that, although not covered by the UN Refugee Convention, climate migrants should be more vulnerable than refugees as defined by the UN. The phrase 'environmental refugees' is also emphasised in contrast to the traditional UN definitions of refugees, which include 'internally displaced persons' and 'displaced by development projects'. Lester Brown's original classification of environmental refugees was based on three subcategories: temporary displacement as a result of transient environmental stress; permanent displacement as a result of ongoing environmental change; and temporary or permanent displacement as a result of increasing resource-base degradation. The phrase has been popularised since by using examples of human mobility or displacement due to environmental change, such as the 'environmental exodus' and 'desertification-induced displacement', which are examples of waves of environmental refugees from the Czech Republic, Poland, and Southeast Germany.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, there exist scholarly works that scrutinise the notion of 'climate migrants' as a potential danger to global security. Regarding this, Bettini offers a valuable typology of discussions on migration caused by climate change, classifying maximalist and minimalist viewpoints. The possibility that the large influx of climate migrants could spark violent conflict worries maximalists greatly.

However, the concepts of 'human security' and 'migration as adaptation' are frequently used by minimalists to refute this deterministic viewpoint. For instance, the term 'environmental refugee' is imprecise and inconsistent, and studies on this topic are unable to explain why people keep relocating to China's notoriously polluted cities of Chongqing and Mexico City.<sup>7</sup>

### **Climate Change-Induced Migration and its Urban Impacts**

Migration has been framed in recent studies as a formal policy action that gives advantages and reduces negative impacts in response to climate change, as well as an adaptive approach. The Global Compact for Migration and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), both adopted the idea of 'migration as adaptation,' which was first introduced by the International Organisation for Migration. The idea to investigate the background, causes, and effects of migration brought on by climate change is also accepted by individual scholars. For instance, there is literature on various human migrations in the twentieth century due to various natural reasons. Like the displacement of a massive population due to crop failure in eastern Oklahoma. It has also been observed that severe flooding and droughts also compelled people to leave their homes and move to safe and secure places. And this was one of the adaptive methods that the migrants adopted for centuries. Similarly, the literature also discovered that while migration rates decrease in impoverished countries, they rise in middle-class economies and lead to greater migration to cities and other countries.<sup>8</sup> Jacobson discovered recently that the char dwellers of Bangladesh's Padma, Jamuna, and Meghna floodplains migrate periodically as a means of adaptability to the nearby places to lower risks and uncertainties related to the erosion threat. In addition to socioeconomic status, education level, and kinds of livelihood, there is a connection between



short-distance migration and changes in Burkina Faso's climate, specifically in terms of rainfall.

The phenomenon of climate change-induced migration came under rigorous research when it was observed that migrants move to the same types of places as an adaptive strategy. Different trends and patterns were observed by researchers after studying various cases. Jacobson *et al* observe that climate migrants do not necessarily find a good liveable place. Climate migrants face severe hardships, which lead them to more vulnerabilities. Migrants face maximum hardships in terms of economic opportunities and basic livelihood. Moving from rural to urban areas frequently forces the migrants to become even poorer. Using the Bhola Slum in Dhaka as an example, this work analyses how, in unstable urban environments devoid of basic human necessities, one set of hazards associated with being a rural immigrant is frequently substituted by another. To see the possibility of migration as transformative adaptation, this paper calls for redefining the concept of adaptation as a sociopolitical process that involves fights over authority, knowledge, and subjectivities.<sup>9</sup> Further on, Fabrice *et. al.*, observe that for a researcher three types of perspectives and contexts are very important in properly managing research on climate change-induced migrants. The three perspectives are to bring under consideration the indigenous origin of the migrants, the community lineage of the migrants and where they started their livelihood when they migrated. A conceptual schema of climatic migration outcomes offered by the author divides migration into three categories: adaptive migration, maladaptive migration, and survival migration. Three categories of migrants were also identified in the literature using a 'decision framework' based on environmental causes of migration, i.e., environmental emergency migrants (EEM), who must flee their homes due to catastrophic events like a cyclone, flood, tsunami, or earthquake; environmentally forced migrants (EFM), who must leave their homes to avoid a specific environmental hazard like soil erosion;

and environmentally motivated migrants (EMM), who may leave their homes in anticipation of a declining environmental condition like land degradation. Additionally, the author uses a framework of relationships between the environment, economy, and society to highlight the influence of the environment in the decision-making process related to migration.<sup>10</sup>

Similar research has also looked at the socio-economic and environmental effects of migration. Various researchers have examined the social ramifications of disaster-induced migration in Bangladesh and discovered that a household's susceptibility is contingent upon its ability to generate revenue. Their research focuses primarily on the sociological repercussions at the point of origin of migration, excluding the effects that arise once migrants are relocated to a new location, like a metropolis.<sup>11</sup>

Nonetheless, current research offers a deeper comprehension of the motivations behind migration while focusing less on the effects of migration on the urban target population. Hence, the strategy adopted by the climate migrants to live in urban areas or major cities has severe negative impacts on the home population in many ways. This research primarily targets the area of urban-to-rural migration patterns and their ramifications. It takes the case study of Bangladesh because of the subject and case relevancy. The future of urban planning and development is critical to addressing climate migration for three reasons. Bangladesh is extremely vulnerable to climatic effects because of its unfavourable terrain and coastal areas. People living in the coastal areas have a dual problem, in the first place they are vulnerable to climatic impacts and on the other hand, they have meagre living resources. For instance, due to its unique location between the Himalayas to the north and the Bay of Bengal to the south, it frequently experiences landslides, hailstorms, droughts, cyclones, floods, and storm surges. It is also acknowledged that the current state of climate change has a significant impact on

Bangladesh's propensity for natural disasters. This type of physical environment disrupts the long-term goals of the government and the long-term Sustainable Development Goals. Human migration at a large scale poses major hindrances to sustainable development in Bangladesh as it diverts priorities to drastic events posed by climate change.<sup>12</sup>

Secondly, cities serve as the hubs for economic growth. These are the conglomerations of wealth, commercial activity, and opportunity brought about by contemporary technological innovation. The best places to establish a living are cities. For this reason, Bangladesh is likewise experiencing an overwhelming trend of poor urbanisation, similar to other emerging countries. It appears that poverty in rural areas is moving to metropolitan areas. Furthermore, the prospect of building resilient cities may be further complicated by the presence of additional climate-vulnerable villages.

Thirdly, these climate migrants, who view migration as their last and best option want to reside in cities but the municipal authorities in Bangladesh are unable to offer them enough support (housing and other environmental services). As a result, with each natural disaster, there is a rising number of urban slums in the major urban cities. Urban authorities are under tremendous strain as a result of the growing and seemingly inevitable scale of the informal economy in cities.<sup>13</sup>

There is a research gap concerning climate migrants and their impacts on urban cities in the context of Bangladesh. Bangladesh is a developing country and is one of the most vulnerable countries to climatic effects in the world. Therefore, it is crucial to address the issues of how this human mobility process affects (host) cities, as well as the reasons for and volume of climate migrants' migration to the cities and how they adjust to their new surroundings to build resilient and sustainable cities.

### **Climate Change and Patterns of Coastal/Rural to Urban Migration in Bangladesh**

Every year, hundreds of thousands of climate migrants are forced to leave Bangladesh due to natural calamities. Most of them are brought on by abruptly occurring natural calamities like landslides, floods, cyclones, and river erosion. New displacements are also brought about by slow-onset disasters like salinisation and sea level rise. According to some estimates, by 2050, over 35 million residents of Bangladesh's coastal regions could be at risk of being forced to migrate. There are 19 coastal districts with the highest risk of disaster, along with those along the major river banks (Padma, Meghna, and Jamuna). Over 4 million additional climate migrants fled their homes in 2019 as a result of natural catastrophes, including the destructive cyclones Fani and Bulbul. Notably, forecasts indicate that soon the average fresh migration could reach 1,214,715 people. However, in 2009, 2013, and 2019, Bangladesh had the greatest number of displaced people. It is also evident that the country must deal with a sizeable number of new displacements brought on by disasters every year.<sup>14</sup>

According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), it was challenging to determine the precise migration category as a result of climate extreme occurrences, but urban migration in Bangladesh reveals the categories and patterns of general internal migration in Bangladesh. The migrant population is divided into two destinations: rural and urban, as evidenced by the literature. It is noteworthy that in contrast to other categories of movements, a significant percentage of migrants relocate from rural to urban areas. For instance, in 1991, rural-urban migrants made up over half of all migrants. Even though this percentage dropped significantly between 2004 and 2011, it still has the greatest number of migrants. Prior research has also shown that over two-thirds of the increase in the

urban population since 1971 can be attributed to migration from rural to urban areas.<sup>15</sup>

In the case of climate change-induced urban migration, the target urban centres for the migrants remained different. The migrants' patterns are not always the same for their destinations because of a variety of reasons related to basic livelihood and economic opportunities. Nearly two-thirds of the migrants relocate to the districts of Chattogram and Dhaka. 42 per cent of in-migrants have lived in Dhaka alone. The total distribution of in-migrants by district also shows that more people migrate to Bangladesh's east than its west. The eastern region is home to the megacity Dhaka and the second-largest city, Chittagong, which outweighs the cities of the western region. Furthermore, the proportion of in- and out-migration varies across districts. For example, Dhaka has a high net migration rate because the district has relatively little out-migration compared to in-migration. This also applies to the nearby Dhaka districts of Munshiganj, Gazipur, and Narayanganj, where there is a significant inflow of immigrants. Conversely, some districts: Barisal, Bhola, Patuakhali, Chandpur, Faridpur, Sherpur, Mymensingh, and Rangpur have noticeably greater rates of out-migration than in-migration.<sup>16</sup>

Nonetheless, the literature indicates that Bangladesh is seeing a notable number of human displacements due to a variety of circumstances, such as natural catastrophes, with a significant portion of these relocations occurring in metropolitan areas. They primarily target large cities, like the capital Dhaka, Chattogram, Khulna, and Rajshahi, to improve living conditions and provide chances for earning a living. As a result, migration brought on by the environment could affect the cities. People who migrate from rural to urban areas due to natural disasters or climate change suffer greatly on an ecological, social, and political level. This is so because human movement brought on by disasters disrupts children's education, ruins people's regular means of subsistence, and raises the danger of ailments

including infectious and water-borne diseases. The effects of migration on society, the economy, politics, and the environment are further covered in the section that follows, with a special emphasis on what is occurring in Bangladesh's cities.<sup>17</sup>

### **Climate Change-Induced Migration: Impacts on Cities**

Most of the negative effects of migration brought on by climate change are seen in cities of developing countries, placing enormous strains on the governance, sustainability, and availability of social and environmental services as well as infrastructure. The impacts of climate change-induced migration on cities in Bangladesh can be broadly classified into four areas based on the available literature. The four categories are: the spread and establishment of slums in the cities; the ramifications on the urban sectors and service delivery; the growth of black unregistered and black economy; and the increase in poverty.

### **Growth of Urban Slums and Urbanisation of Poverty**

The word "slum" is a name that captures the suffering of the impoverished who must fight against poverty to survive in this world. It is a collection of unplanned residential houses on either privately or publicly held vacant land. These homes typically have straw leaves, gunny sacks, polythene paper, bamboo, etc. for their walls and roofing. If it is located in an area that is considered to be a slum, then they live in a tin shed. These homes are significantly less hygienic and physically, improperly-maintained than typical metropolitan residential areas. This group of people is typically impoverished and compelled to live in unsanitary conditions because of financial constraints.

Bangladesh is ranked sixth globally in terms of the number of people living in slums, at 30.4 million. Bangladesh has 13,938 slums, according to the Census of Slum Areas and Floating Population 2014

released by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). This sum was only 2991 in 1997. The distribution of slums across Bangladesh's administrative divisions is displayed in Table 1. Among the divisions, Dhaka has the highest percentage of slum dwellers with 46.56 per cent. Although the Chittagong Division still contains half of the Dhaka Division, it also has a large number of slum areas.<sup>18</sup>

**Table 1****Distribution of Slums in Bangladesh**

<b>Division</b>	<b>Total Number of Slums</b>	<b>Percentage of Slums</b>
Barisal	205	1.47
Chattogram	3,305	23.71
Dhaka	6,489	46.56
Khulna	1,684	12.08
Rajshahi	421	3.03
Rangpur	422	3.04
Sylhet	1,412	10.13
Total	13,938	100

Source; Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics.

There is a wide range of literature that addresses the expansion of slums in Dhaka. The said literature argues that this uncontrollable process of rural poverty's urbanisation mostly affects Dhaka city. Dhaka is described by Abdul Mohit as a city of 'slums and climate change'. He also referred to Dhaka as a 'city of poverty'. Remarkably, one-third of Bangladesh's urban population already resides in the city. Dhaka is among the megacities that are expanding the quickest in the globe, with between 300,000 and 400,000 new immigrants arriving per year. According to a 2006 survey conducted by CUS, NIPORT, and MEASURE Evaluation, roughly 37 per cent of Dhaka's urban population dwells in slums. The Slum Areas and Floating Population 2014 census, shows that Dhaka city is home to 24.39 per cent of Bangladesh's 13,934 urban slums. Despite having a

relatively huge population, the city's slums only make up 5.1 per cent of the total land area. For example, Dhaka's gross population density is less than 121 people per acre, while the slums have a population density of 891 people per acre, over seven times greater than the average for the city.<sup>19</sup>

Table 2 illustrates that in 1991, 275,000 people were living in Dhaka's slums, making up 13 per cent of the city's overall population. In 1996, a different survey revealed that 718,143 people were living in the city's 2,156 slums. According to a 2005 assessment conducted by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), 1.5 million people were living in 3,007 slums throughout the city (i.e., 20 per cent of the total population). With 3.4 million people living in the Dhaka Metropolitan Area (DMA), there were 4,966 slums, according to a 2014 survey conducted by CUS, NIPORT, and MEASURE Evaluation. This indicates that between 1996 and 2014, the number of clusters increased by 70 per cent, and the population in slums multiplied twofold. 643,735 people were living in 3,399 slums spread throughout two municipal corporations in Dhaka, according to the 2014 Census of Slum Areas and Floating Population. The World Bank also predicted that in the ensuing ten years, there will be eight million people living in Dhaka's slum areas. Over the past three decades, the distribution of slums has stayed mostly unchanged, with the majority of the increase occurring on the outskirts of the city.<sup>20</sup>

**Table 2**

**Growth of Slums in Dhaka**

<b>Year</b>	<b>No. of Slums</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1991	3,456	275,000	13
1996	2,156	718,143	10
2005	3,007	1.5 million	20
2014	4,966	3.4 million	37



### **Impacts on Urban Infrastructure and Service Delivery**

The demands placed on municipal infrastructure and services are impacted by the growing influx of climate migrants. This is because slums appear out of nowhere in the backyards of high-rise buildings, beside train tracks, above flooded floodplains, in environmentally dangerous areas, and on the borders of construction sites. Empirical studies reveal that Dhaka's impoverished population faces limited availability of healthcare and educational resources. In Dhaka, barely 33 per cent of female migrant workers and 52 per cent of male migrant workers (aged 15 and above) are literate, according to a World Bank survey. Only 12 per cent of the young migrants had the chance to continue their education to the graduation level. Another study also revealed that 50 per cent of them had completed secondary or higher-secondary education. Less than 54 per cent of families in Dhaka have access to healthcare facilities; the percentage would be even lower for the impoverished.<sup>21</sup>

Beyond these social services, there is very limited access to other critical infrastructure in the slums. Research indicates that those living in urban slums are not provided with enough municipal services, such as clean water, sanitary facilities, and shelter. Kraemer discovered that migrants from rural to urban areas reside in subpar homes constructed of subpar materials. Additionally, the literature revealed that the water quality was extremely low and that the supply was still wildly inconsistent. Moreover, the World Bank study discovered that 70 per cent of Dhaka slum households lack access to piped water and live below the poverty line, which is defined as having an income of less than \$2.50 per day. There were also apparent private water vending systems in several Dhaka city slums. Nonetheless, the impoverished had to pay prices that were several times more than those of official, legal water. However, several case studies carried out between 1975 and 2002 provide an overview of the water sources used by Dhaka's urban poor. Although the categories of water sources

differ, there has been a noticeable rise in the proportion of water consumers, with tap usage rising from 1 per cent in 1975 to almost 40 per cent in 2015. This clearly shows that the urban poor are receiving better water services. Even so, the vast majority of them continue to rely on unofficial water sources, such as hand tube wells (pump), dug wells, lakes, and rivers.<sup>22</sup>

Only 20 per cent of urban poor have access to sanitary latrines and most of them continue to utilise other unhygienic latrines. According to a 1993 survey by the Centre for Urban Studies, 67 per cent of Dhaka's urban poor utilise electricity, while 33 per cent still do not have access to it. According to the report, just 22 per cent of urban poor people have access to gas facilities, and 72 per cent of them cook with traditional fuel. Since the town lacks a waste collection system, over 60 per cent of the impoverished simply throw their trash on the road or in public areas.<sup>23</sup>

### **Informal Economic Growth and Hurdles of Governance**

Climate change-induced migration creates major hurdles in smooth governance and developing informal economy networks. Access to social and environmental services and the expansion of the informal (illegal) sector provide the biggest challenges to Bangladesh's municipal authorities. Numerous studies have examined the rise in poverty, urban vulnerability, the rise of the informal economy, and the obstacles and difficulties facing urban governance because of the very large number of informal communities (slums) in Bangladesh's cities.

Awais Paracha and Masud Parves Rana investigated the water supply system in a Dhaka informal neighbourhood and discovered that the public utility service is politically motivated by the positions and personal interests of system participants, and it lacks regulatory rules for decision-making by any statutory organisations. According to the authors, urban informality is the deliberate behaviour of opportunists who use the public interest to justify their exhibition of a

distorted reality on the front end in exchange for their own political and financial gain at the expense of state institutions that are already in a precarious position. In assessing how well the water delivery system in Dhaka serves the urban poor. They also assert that institutional, social, and political variables play a significant role in Bangladesh's environment. It is also observed that the urban poor in Rajshahi city receive water supplies that vary according to their precise location and that not every slum has equal access to all aspects of the supply system. The authors noted a few more impediments in addition to the expense, including decisions made at the centre, apprehension when contacting the authorities, and a lack of understanding regarding how to obtain environmental services.<sup>24</sup>

According to Parves Rana and Irina, several studies highlight and assess the problems slum communities face while also making ideas for remedies. They viewed that on Dhaka's informal housing, certain literature advocates an inter-sectoral approach to development as well as a reduction and redirection of the migrant flow from Dhaka to other regions of the country as a means of addressing housing scarcity. Other literature also highlights the potential and constraints facing Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in their efforts to solve issues of informal housing, as well as the implications of slum evacuation for human rights. The authors suggest that the Bangladeshi government recognise the human rights of the destitute and permit the development of slums in their current location by combining NGOs and providing security of land tenure. The literature has also looked at the role that NGOs and the government have in the growth of slums. Parves Rana and Irina also examine social exclusion as a concern and its connection to the unofficial housing market in Dhaka. They investigated the effects of eviction fear on the lives of urban poor people who are not recognised as members of society by examining an eviction case from a Dhaka slum.<sup>25</sup>

The partnership approach's ability to provide hygienic amenities for Bangladesh's urban poor was assessed through research. The authors expressed optimism that the system could still work with proper community management in place when discussing the difficulties experienced by a community-based water supply system in a Dhaka slum. In a different study, the bureaucratic and socio-political barriers to local participatory water governance have been highlighted. Furthermore, they discovered that the efficient operation of community-based water delivery for the urban poor is hampered by unbalanced representations of actors in participation and a lack of decentralisation.<sup>26</sup>

On the other hand, this section offers substantial proof of the negative effects of Bangladesh's rural-to-urban migration induced by climate change. The literature that is now available describes in detail the hardships that migrants face in urban areas, especially regarding housing scarcity, water supply, and sanitation. Most significantly, the migration of people from rural to urban areas brought on by climate change has become an external burden for local government and is posing serious obstacles to good governance.

## **Conclusion**

Conclusively, there is a certain stagnation in the literature on climate migration when it comes to theorising migration as adaptation and investigating the motivations, variables, and dynamics of decision-making concerning migration or displacements. In the context of climate migration, little research has been done on the effects of migration on cities in Bangladesh. It is evident from specific cases of rural-to-urban migration how dangerously it is impeding the implementation of good governance in the cities. The evidence evaluation indicates that urban migration poses significant problems to urban policies in their attempts to address this externality, in addition to providing opportunities for temporary or alternative

solutions for livelihoods and resettlements. Like many developing countries, Bangladesh has several difficulties, such as the extreme urbanisation of poverty (in large cities), a lack of social and environmental services, and the growth of the informal economy and its effects on the implementation of good governance. The effects of rural-to-urban migration seem to be entirely unanticipated, and the authorities are unprepared for them, even disputing that there are migrants in the cities.

To achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, the government of Bangladesh has notably started short-, mid-, and long-term development planning strategies. These strategies include Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100, Vision 2041, Second Perspective Plan, and Five-Year Plans. These plans are implemented in conjunction with UN Agenda 2030. Regretfully, these plans primarily concentrate on hotspot-specific, thematic, and sectoral strategies, policies, and programs while neglecting regional imbalances, population size differences, resource distribution, natural disaster frequency, and the creation of climate and environmental migrants. However, as this analysis shows, Bangladesh has geographical disparities concerning the growing trend of climate migrants, the urbanisation of poverty, and the extreme suffering of the urban poor. It contends that Bangladesh, like many developing countries, needs a methodical transformative territorial/spatial planning strategy to determine the advantages and disadvantages of specific places at the divisional (macro), district (meso), and upazila (micro) levels.

The study's inability to pinpoint the precise number of environmental refugees or climate migrants moving to Bangladesh's cities was one of its limitations, primarily rooted in the unavailability of a document that details the precise number of migrants across various categories in Bangladesh (especially related to migration caused by the environment or climate change). While it was not possible to offer cause-specific accounts of migrants and their suffering in the cities, the

assessment still provides a starting point for debating and evaluating the significance of migration's effects on urban destinations, with a special emphasis on urban landscape planning that acknowledges the coexistence of informal environmental migrants and mainstream urban residents. This conclusion ends by arguing for responsible administration of both rural and urban migration brought on by climate change. It is believed that creating resilient cities will be challenging if rural resilience is not given enough thought. Furthermore, in prosperous, well-run cities, the vulnerability of low-income inhabitants to climate-related dangers is dramatically decreased.

### **Recommendations**

Firstly, to comprehend the dynamics, causes, and drivers of migration and displacements, it is imperative to address how climate change affects migration. To enhance comprehension of migratory categories and urban policy measures, for instance, spatial and temporal information about permanent migration, temporary displacements, and immobility results after a disaster occurrence is essential.

Secondly, rethinking the relocation plans for climate refugees inside and between cities may be a significant area of study in migration studies. Since a large portion of climate migrants are known to relocate temporarily or permanently from their places of origin to cities due to economic motivations, a forward-thinking plan is therefore required to relocate them to appropriate locations, such as the closest place of origin or to secondary/small cities that are less affected by migration. It is best to dissuade migrants from travelling to migratory hotspots like Dhaka and Chattagram. As a result, Bangladesh's urban strategies will need to place more emphasis on secondary cities to fairly distribute or balance the vulnerabilities brought on by migration. Furthermore, a comprehensive planning

strategy is necessary to take into account a variety of issues at the regional and national levels in addition to the difficulties faced by these vulnerable populations at the individual and neighbourhood levels. Consequently, a multi-scalar framework is needed to analyse the issues of migration brought on by climate change and to offer answers.

It would be essential to create low-income housing programs in the cities to protect the human rights of climate migrants. Bangladesh is one of the many emerging nations without any policies in this area. To create and organise urban housing landscapes that provide adequate social and environmental services for low-income urban dwellers - the majority of whom are maladaptive climate migrants - this may be the third area of research focus. Applying the concept of the entitlement approach in this context may help to explain why climate migrants are frequently disregarded and socio-politically distinct in urban areas.<sup>27</sup>

Fourthly, a major obstacle facing urban stakeholders is creating an appropriate institutional and legal framework for regulating land development and minimising the unauthorised or informal possession of urban land. Given that the climate migrants lack legal rights to the land they have taken over, a fully transformative approach to land management could be beneficial in resolving this issue. Further research is necessary in the area of transformative land management for urban poor, which challenges the current adaptive or earlier top-down approach to decision-making.

Finally, it is suggested that giving rural resilience adequate consideration and building resilient cities is imperative in this regard. Furthermore, low-income populations' exposure to climate-related risks is significantly reduced in successful, well-governed cities, it is not and may even be greatly increased in unsuccessful, poorly governed cities. Power struggles inherent in daily adaptation practices among households, communities, and nations do not occur in a vacuum. At all

intervention levels, adaptation becomes an integral part of ongoing efforts to assert knowledge about matters crucial to survival, frame understandings, assert authority or reaffirm it, and claim access to opportunities and resources that are contested. Additionally, research suggests that, with the right regulations in place, migration could be a useful detour to reach the objectives. As a result, it endorses the need for an integrated approach to governance to address vulnerabilities brought on by climate change in both rural and urban areas.<sup>28</sup>



## Notes and References

- <sup>1</sup> Siri H. Eriksen, Andrea J. Nightingale, & Hallie Eakin, "Reframing adaptation: The political nature of climate change adaptation," *Global Environmental Change* 35, (November 2015): 523-533.
- <sup>2</sup> Andrew Baldwin, Chris Methmann, and Delf Rothe, "Securitizing "climate refugees": the futurology of climate-induced migration," *Critical Studies on Security* 2, (2024): 121-130.
- <sup>3</sup> Bishawjit Mallick, Kimberly G. Rogers and Zakia Sultana, "In harm's way: Non-migration decisions of people at risk of slow-onset coastal hazards in Bangladesh," *A Journal of Environment and Society* 51, (2021): 114-134.
- <sup>4</sup> Bishawjit Mallick and Joachim Vogt, "Population displacement after cyclone and its consequences: empirical evidence from coastal Bangladesh," *Journal of Natural Hazards* 73, (2014): 191-212.
- <sup>5</sup> Md. Moniruzzaman, Alison Cottrell, David King & Md. Nazrul Islam, "Environmental Migrants in Bangladesh: A Case Study on the Climatic Hazards in the Southern Coastal Area," *Springer Link*, (2019): 99-117.
- <sup>6</sup> Carol Farbotko, "Wishful Sinking: Disappearing Islands, Climate Refugees and Cosmopolitan Experimentation," *Journal of Asia Pacific View Point* 51, (2010): 47-60.
- <sup>7</sup> Giovanni Bettini, "Climate Migration as an Adaptation Strategy: De-securitizing Climate-Induced migration or making the Unruly Governable," *Critical Studies on Security* 2, (2014): 180-195.
- <sup>8</sup> Hafiza Khatun, Md. Humayun Kabir and Lutfun Nahar, "Out Migration as a Survival Strategy for Char Dwellers," *Springer Link*, (2021): 307-322.
- <sup>9</sup> Chris Jacobson, Stacy Crevello, Chanthan Chea and Ben Jarihani, "When is Migration is a Mal-productive Response to Climate Change," *Springer Link* 19, (2019): 107-122.
- <sup>10</sup> Fabrice G. Renaud, Olivia Dun, Koko Warner and Janos Bogardi, "A Decision Framework for Environmentally Induced Migration," *International Migration* 49, (2011): 5-29.
- <sup>11</sup> Bishawjit Mallick and Joachim Vogt, "Population displacement after cyclone and its consequences: empirical evidence from coastal Bangladesh," *Journal of Natural Hazards* 73 (2014): 191-211.

- <sup>12</sup> Md. Moniruzzaman, Alison Cottrell, David King and Md. Nazrul Islam, "Environmental Migrants in Bangladesh: A Case Study on the Climatic Hazards in the Southern Coastal Area," *Springer Link*, (2019): 105-118.
- <sup>13</sup> Karen E McNamara, Lura L Olson, and Md. Ashiq Ur Rahman, "Insecure Hope: The Challenges Faced by urban Slum Dwellers in Bhola Slum, Bangladesh," *Mitigation and Development* 5, (2016): 1-15.
- <sup>14</sup> Hafiza Khatun, Md. Humayun Kabir and Lutfun Nahar, "Out Migration as a Survival Strategy for Char Dwellers," *Springer Link*, (2021): 311-326.
- <sup>15</sup> United Nation Population Fund, "Taking Stock: Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Climate Commitments," <https://www.google.com/search?q=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.unfpa.org+2020+Bangladesh+internal+climate+induced+migration&oq=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.unfpa.org+2020+Bangladesh+internal+climate+induced+migration&aqs=chrome.69i57j69i58.32290j1j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>.
- <sup>16</sup> Bishawjit Mallick and Joachim Vogt, "Population displacement after cyclone and its consequences: empirical evidence from coastal Bangladesh," *Journal of Natural Hazards* 73, (2014): 192-197.
- <sup>17</sup> Gavin Jones, Mahbub, and Md. Izaz Ul Haq, "Urbanization and Migration in Bangladesh," *UNFPA*, <https://bangladesh.unfpa.org/en/publications/urbanization-and-migration-bangladesh>.
- <sup>18</sup> "Causes of Slum Areas and Floating Population," *Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics*, <https://dataspace.princeton.edu/handle/88435/dsp01wm117r42q>.
- <sup>19</sup> Muhammad Abdul Mohit, "Bastee Settlement of Dhaka City, Bangladesh: A Review of Policy Approaches and Challenges Ahead," *Journal of Social and Behavioral Sciences* 36, (2012): 612-616.
- <sup>20</sup> "Causes of Slum Areas and Floating Population," *Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics*, <https://dataspace.princeton.edu/handle/88435/dsp01wm117r42q>.
- <sup>21</sup> Tim McDonnell, "Climate Change Creates New Migration Crisis for Bangladesh," *National Geographic*, 2019, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/climate>

-change-drives-migration-crisis-in-bangladesh-from-dhaka-sundabans.

- <sup>22</sup> Md. Masud Parves Rana and Awais Piracha, "Supplying Water to the Poor: Government's Role and Challenges of Participatory Governance," *The International Journal of Urban Policy and Planning* 106, (2020).
- <sup>23</sup> Md. Shahadat Hossain, "Urban poverty and adaptations of the poor to urban life in Dhaka City, Bangladesh," (PhD Dissertation, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, 2006).
- <sup>24</sup> Md Masud Parves Rana and Awais Piracha, "Supplying Water to the Poor: Government's Role and Challenges of Participatory Governance," *The International Journal of Urban Policy and Planning* 106, (2020).
- <sup>25</sup> Md Masud Parves Rana and Irina N. Ilina, "Climate Change and Migration Impacts on Cities; Lessons from Bangladesh," *Journal of Environmental Challenges* 5, (2021).
- <sup>26</sup> Halima Begum and Golam Moizudin, "Spatial Dimension of Social Exclusion. An Imperial Investigation into The Relationship of Housing and Social Exclusion in The Slums of Dhaka City," *Research Centre in Public Administration and Public Services* 2, no.3 (2010): 314-322.
- <sup>27</sup> Chup Priovashini and Bishawjit Mallick, "A Bibliometric review on the drivers of environmental migration," *Springer Link* 51, (2021): 241-252.
- <sup>28</sup> Karen E McNamara, Lura L Olson, and Md. Ashiq Ur Rahman, "Insecure Hope: The Challenges Faced by urban Slum Dwellers in Bhola Slum, Bangladesh," *Mitigation and Development* 5, (2016): 1-15.

# PAKISTAN-IRAN CONVERGING AND CONFLICTING INTERESTS IN AFGHANISTAN

FAIZA BASHIR,\* NOREEN NASEER,\*\*  
TABASSUM MAJEED\*\*\*

## Abstract

*Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan are three geographically contiguous Muslim countries. They share strong sociocultural and ethnolinguistic similarities as well as a common history. Given the volatile nature of the region and the recent establishment of the Taliban government in Afghanistan, both Pakistan and Iran are apprehensive due to potential threats to their internal security. This paper seeks to examine the points of agreement and disagreement between Pakistan and Iran in light of the evolving situation in Afghanistan. The study finds that despite having friendly relations and shared goals in Afghanistan, conflicting geopolitical interests and alignment led to tensions between the two powers. The strengthening of Iran's contacts with India and Pakistan's relations with Saudi Arabia have caused disturbances in their overall relationship. Following the collapse of the Republic of Afghanistan, Afghanistan has become a crucial element in the national security strategies of both Pakistan and Iran.*

---

\* Dr Faiza Bashir is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at Islamia College, Peshawar. Corresponding Author: Dr Faiza Bashir.

E-mail: faiza@icp.edu.pk

\*\* Dr Noreen Naseer is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Peshawar.

\*\*\* Ms Tabassum Majeed is a Lecturer in the Department of Political Science at Islamia College, Peshawar.

**Keywords:** *interests, convergence, divergence, security, stability, Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan*

## Introduction

Both Pakistan and Iran have primarily focused on security and shared strategic goals in their relationship. The security paradigm has consistently influenced the political and economic engagement between the two states. Both states have expressed concerns about the security situation in Afghanistan due to their long shared borders with Afghanistan and their pursuit of security and geopolitical objectives. Moreover, the three states exhibit numerous similarities that extend beyond their geographical proximity. Hence, it solidifies the fraternal connection among Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan—the three longstanding allies and neighbouring Islamic countries—who are connected by profound sociocultural and ethnolinguistic similarities, as well as geographical closeness and a common heritage.

The relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan has consistently been fraught with issues. Despite Afghanistan's early opposition, Pakistan managed to secure United Nations membership upon its creation as a sovereign state, and this situation has remained unchanged ever since. The disputed Durand Line, originally demarcated by the British colonial authority, is a subject of dispute, with Pakistan asserting it as its official international border and Afghanistan refusing to recognise it. Continuous political turbulence in recent decades has consistently posed challenges to the relationship between the two countries.<sup>1</sup>

Conversely, Pakistan has consistently accused Afghanistan of colluding with India to undermine its interests and to provide a haven for anti-Pakistan militants within the Afghan territory. Recurring disagreements consistently hinder bilateral relations between the two countries, despite their numerous similarities. The Durand Line, which symbolises both a shared territory and animosity between Pakistan and Afghanistan, epitomises the legacy of colonial dominance. Given

the common historical, cultural, and family connections among the Pashtuns living on both sides of the border, which imbued the boundary with a sense of inheritance, it faced significant opposition. At this point, both commonality and enmity seemingly originate from the same source.

Due to the close relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan, as well as their different societies, it is peculiar that, up until now, only official dialogues between the two governments have occurred. While Afghan pundits have mostly emphasised the involvement of Pakistan in Afghanistan, Pakistani experts, including government officials, media outlets, think tanks, and researchers, have predominantly focused on the Afghan government and its real or potential association with India. While Pakistan typically disregards the subtle distinctions and complexities inside Afghan society, Afghanistan generally fails to acknowledge the difference between Pakistani state and society.<sup>2</sup>

The relationship between Afghanistan and Iran has consistently played a vital role in Iran's foreign policy since the Islamic Revolution. Tehran highly regards Afghanistan in various aspects. One important component that contributes to this significance is the mutual historical and cultural background of the two countries. The two countries have a unique bond due to their interconnectedness in terms of geography, history, culture, and populace. Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* is a remarkable and influential piece of Persian literature that eloquently demonstrates this connection.<sup>3</sup> Despite different governments implementing racist policies, Afghanistan's Shia community is spread throughout the country. The Hazara people are predominantly located in the central part of the country, which is referred to as Hazarajat. Based on multiple evaluations, Afghanistan is a country with a total population of 42.6 million, of which Shiites comprise approximately 9 to 20 per cent.<sup>4</sup>

Tehran possesses a distinct perspective on Afghanistan and is actively pursuing its national interests by engaging with various political and social forces within the country. It is crucial to emphasise that Iran's national interests in Afghanistan are not always beneficial. One may argue that negative aspects play a more substantial role in Iran's security and national interest framework. The current study assesses their common values and positions on several local and global issues. The study primarily focuses on the subject of Pak-Iran interests in Afghanistan and aims to identify the points of conflict and convergence between these interests.

### **Theoretical Explanation of the Triangular Relations**

Putnam's theoretical approach of *two-level games* facilitates the comprehension of how the two countries perceive one another. States' foreign policy is shaped by a range of domestic variables as well as systemic elements that impact how they perceive one another, usually from a neo-realist standpoint. The elements encompassed in this context are local politics, the impact of social groups, consensus *gentium*, civil society, a state's political structure, and the discernment of decision-makers.<sup>5</sup>

The development of foreign policy by both Pakistan and Iran is mostly influenced by a broad or regional political aspect. The trajectory of bilateral relations is shaped by decision-making at this level, which prioritises security and is impacted by divergent strategic goals. The diplomatic and security policies of any state are still determined by the demands of its *Regional Security Complex (RSC)*. The influence has led to a greater interconnection of the security contexts between the two countries. This has had a detrimental impact on previously friendly bilateral relations and has posed challenges for the leadership on both sides in managing the relationship.<sup>6</sup>

Pakistan's focus on Indian security and Iran's ongoing rivalry with Saudi Arabia shape their security perspectives, enabling them to

interpret systemic signals from other regional governments and respond accordingly. When examining Pakistan's foreign and security policy towards Iran, it is crucial to consider the influence of India. Similarly, when analysing Iran's relations with Pakistan, it is important to include the influence of Saudi Arabia. The Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), proposed by Buzan and Waever, seems to provide a more suitable framework for understanding how the converging and divergent regional interests between Pakistan and Iran have evolved.<sup>7</sup> RSCT remains advantageous for analysing the Indian and Saudi factors and the systemic assumptions that shape bilateral interactions. Buzan and Waever have attempted to diminish the focus on the state and instead provide a comprehensive understanding of many units, which include regional non-state actors, international ideological and cultural forces, and monetary ties. However, their conceptual model still exhibits a bias towards a state-oriented approach.<sup>8</sup>

The influence of national political, social, and religious factors on influencing relationship choices highlights the limitations of the RSCT in incorporating these variables. Using solely an RSCT-based theoretical framework is insufficient to properly encompass the roles played by domestic political players and political institutions in both states. As a result, Putnam's technique is better suited to explain the dynamics of inter-regional security interactions and the impact of domestic issues on their relationships. At the domestic level, Pakistan and Iran have power structures that differ from Western democracies. Civilian leaders of the government firmly control the state's security apparatus in Western democracies. Consequently, both Iran and Pakistan exhibit a distinctive amalgamation of administration styles, characterised by the involvement of the state's security apparatus,<sup>9</sup> where both the religious sector and the civilian leadership either govern or jointly hold authority.<sup>10</sup> This regime jointure poses a challenge to Putnam's theory, which posits that the outcome is a



consensus between two levels: political competition and negotiation between countries on one level, and domestic competition among domestic actors on the other level. Both states' domestic circles perceive the exclusive control of security services over foreign policymaking as almost obligatory, resulting in policy decisions that are characterised by neo-realist principles and priorities enhancing security. The ongoing conflict between the civil and military elites hindered the attainment of a political breakthrough between Iran and Pakistan, thus, impeding progress.

### **Pak-Iran Interests in Afghanistan**

Iran and Pakistan exert significant influence over the internal affairs of Afghanistan due to their long borders with the country and deep-rooted traditional, ethnic, and cultural connections. Neither the three landlocked neighbouring countries in Central Asia nor China possess an equivalent level of influence in Afghanistan. China is seeking to exert influence over Afghanistan while the Taliban is in power by leveraging its relationships with Iran and Pakistan. The Gulf nations depend on Pakistan to protect and promote their interests in Afghanistan. Iran and Pakistan will have a significant role in determining Afghanistan's destiny under the Taliban's leadership following the withdrawal of the United States.<sup>11</sup> The prolonged period of significant international involvement in Afghanistan has resulted in the emergence of a substantial political vacuum. Iran and Pakistan, despite their varied characteristics, share a common objective of achieving peace and stability in a conflict-ridden nation. Although their interests have sometimes clashed or deviated in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan will now be obligated to cooperate in unprecedented ways.<sup>12</sup>

## **Converging Interests**

### **Economic Interests in Afghanistan**

In the current rapidly evolving global landscape characterised by a shift from geopolitics to geo-economics, the importance of regional economic integration and connectivity has become crucial. Afghanistan and Pakistan have a unique connection since their economies complement each other through transit and bilateral trade. The value of Afghan exports to Pakistan has witnessed a surge, rising from \$550 million to \$700 million since August 2021, indicating a notable increase in trade engagement between the two countries. Several factors have contributed to the rise, including bilateral collaboration, trade concessions granted by Pakistan, an increase in Pakistan's import of Afghan coal, and the establishment of an operational Integrated Transit Trade Management System (ITTMS) at Torkham. While Pakistan's exports to Afghanistan have declined, its shipments to Central Asian nations through Afghanistan have witnessed an increase. Several factors, including the ongoing US sanctions, the lack of a banking infrastructure, the paucity of currency in Afghanistan, and a decrease in consumer demand for some Pakistani products, contributed to the reduction in exports from Pakistan. Although the market now faces obstacles and imbalances, engaging in bilateral and transit commerce can enhance the prospects for trade between the two parties.<sup>13</sup>

One notable advancement of Iran's national interests in Afghanistan is the expansion of its economic and trade connections. The focus of its bilateral economic ties seems to be on trade. Iran has been at the forefront of fostering economic relations with Afghanistan throughout the period spanning from 2017 to 2021.<sup>14</sup> The economic exchanges between entrepreneurs and the private sector of the two countries have remained mostly steady, despite US sanctions and the hurdles posed by anti-Iranian sentiments in the state. Deep links between these parties play a significant role in maintaining this

stability. The reconstruction of Afghanistan provided a favourable setting for the creation of Iranian enterprises and contractors in the country. The recent US-imposed sanctions on Iran have created obstacles, limiting the involvement of Iranian companies in Afghanistan to a few minor projects. However, their work has significantly contributed to the development of Afghanistan's infrastructure.

The two countries have extensive and widespread commercial links. Pakistan is Afghanistan's primary trading partner. Based on data from Afghanistan's FY 2018 (22 December 2017–21 December 2018) Central Statistics Organisation (CSO), Ministry of Finance, the bilateral trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan was the highest, amounting to \$1,437 million. This was followed by trade between Afghanistan and Iran, which amounted to \$1,284 million, and trade with China, which amounted to \$1,098 million. According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS), Pakistan's exports to Afghanistan increased by 18.33 per cent during July and June of 2017 and 2016–17, reaching a total of \$1,476 million.<sup>15</sup>

Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan have the opportunity to investigate the possibilities of regional economic integration and commercial connections. Initiatives like the Iran-Pakistan Gas Pipeline (the Peace Pipeline), the Chabahar Port, and several transportation and energy corridors have the potential to enhance regional economic cooperation. Afghanistan plays a significant role in facilitating Iran's and Pakistan's access to Central Asia for commercial routes and energy resources. Afghanistan eagerly engages in China's efforts to connect the region through the huge infrastructure project, the Belt and Road Initiative. Similarly, Iran anticipates that it will facilitate the Chinese efforts to expand the BRI into Iran. Iran and Pakistan share common interests in stabilising Afghanistan, recognising that achieving this goal shortly is highly unlikely. Nevertheless, the attainment of stability

can be realised through the collaborative efforts of Pakistan and Iran, while refraining from engaging in competition within Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Problem of Refugees**

Afghanistan has been frequently associated with some of the most extreme humanitarian catastrophes of the last five decades. Obtaining accurate statistics in a war-torn country like Afghanistan, which is both underdeveloped and notoriously difficult to access, is challenging. However, it is anticipated that over one-third of the Afghan population has experienced displacement from their place of origin at some stage in their lives. While some argue that the resilience of Afghans in such conditions is primarily inherent, it is evident that the role of upbringing is as significant as genetics.<sup>17</sup> Pakistan is currently hosting a vast number of Afghan refugees, amounting to millions. In 1979, after the Saur Revolution and the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan, a substantial number of Afghans began seeking asylum. Pakistan has not signed both, the Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees of January 31, 1967, and the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (the Geneva Convention). In August 2021, following the departure of the US and NATO soldiers and the subsequent Taliban rule, a substantial influx of Afghan refugees reached Pakistani territory. UNHCR data indicates that 35,289 people migrated from Afghanistan to Pakistan during the period from January 2021 to February 2022.

In recent years, Pakistan has altered its policy towards Afghan refugees. The state erected fences along more than 90 per cent of its border with Afghanistan in early 2017 and January 2022, making it extremely difficult for both authorised and unauthorised cross-border transit. Unauthorised entry persists due to the porous nature of the border.<sup>18</sup>

As a result of the volatility and uncertainty in Afghanistan, a vast number of Afghans have been forced to leave their homes, with the majority seeking refuge in the Islamic Republic of Iran. This latest

and notable occurrence is, once again, a consequence of the volatility and uncertainty in Afghanistan. Iranian officials believe that the present population of Afghans residing in various Iranian cities exceeds six million. Iran undoubtedly has a daunting, arduous, and costly task in managing the affairs of its vast population, which surpasses the populations of most European states. For decades, Pakistan and Iran have hosted millions of Afghan refugees. The prolonged presence of refugees is causing a depletion of their economies and resources. Hence, there is a shared apprehension about not only advocating for the voluntary, secure, and morally upright repatriation of Afghan refugees but also aiding them in their reintegration process in Afghanistan. Pakistan and Iran collaborate regularly with global allies to address the refugee issue stemming from their mutual apprehension.

### **Drug Trafficking**

Akbar Durrani, federal secretary of Pakistan's Ministry of Narcotics Control, has stated that the volatile situation in Afghanistan has the potential to exacerbate drug trafficking and further compound Pakistan's existing drug problems. Pakistan has historically served as a terminus for drugs cultivated in Afghanistan. However, the ongoing war has significantly increased both the cultivation and illicit trafficking of drugs, resulting in substantial expansion of Afghanistan's drug economy as compared to two decades ago, when the United States first engaged and remained in the region. Considering the present security conditions, it is highly likely that it will continue to grow even more extensively. The pandemic has exacerbated the conducive circumstances for drug traffickers, who thrive amid chaos and a destabilised economy.<sup>19</sup>

Customs authorities allegedly seized a significant quantity of narcotics at Torkham, a border crossing between Afghanistan and Pakistan, during the latter part of 2021 and the beginning of 2022. They confiscated a record-breaking 130 kilograms of heroin. In

October, a substantial anti-drug operation was conducted in Peshawar. A significant influx of drugs into the coastal regions of Balochistan and Karachi in November served as evidence that the incidence of trafficking has significantly increased since the Taliban took power.

Pakistan's proximity to Afghanistan renders it an optimal location for narcotics smuggling. Afghanistan, a leading global supplier of opium, has utilised Pakistan as a conduit for illicit drug trafficking to international markets and for procuring precursor chemicals necessary for drug manufacturing. Although Pakistan has implemented measures to combat the illicit drug trade, the prevalence of substance usage and abuse among Pakistanis is increasing on a daily basis.<sup>20</sup>

The political and security upheaval in Afghanistan has led to the emergence and expansion of drug production, processing, and trafficking industries in the state. The illicit trade of drugs has yielded significant financial gains throughout time, which have been utilised to support the military apparatus and have caused widespread devastation in Afghanistan. The international reports from 2018 that show Afghanistan is in charge of cultivating over 86 per cent of the world's opium production have proven this. Furthermore, the examination of the report substantiates the correlation between terrorism and drug trafficking. The manufacturing, processing, and trafficking of narcotics in Afghanistan yields an annual revenue ranging from \$1.8 billion to \$2.7 billion.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, Afghanistan's drug problem is a major security concern.<sup>22</sup> Regional cooperation in the fight against drugs is the need of the hour, and this is the issue where Iran, its neighbours, the United States, and its allies in Europe's interests converge.<sup>23</sup> Iran and Pakistan have been closely coordinating and working together to carry out mutually agreed-upon technical cooperation. This includes regular exchange of information and simultaneous efforts to combat drug trafficking operations. This

collaboration has been ongoing for several years. The Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan are geographically positioned as neighbouring countries to Afghanistan, which is the primary global producer of opium. This geographical proximity is of utmost importance. To enhance the effectiveness of addressing the issue of the trafficking of opiates in Afghanistan, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) facilitated the establishment of the Triangular Initiative (TI) in June 2007. This initiative involves collaboration between drug control authorities and counter-narcotics authorities in Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan. The TI umbrella of regional cooperation, which is backed by the UNODC, aims to get all three countries involved in finding real ways to stop the illegal trafficking of Afghan opiates and the diversion and smuggling of chemicals that are used to make them.<sup>24</sup>

### **Stability in Afghanistan**

Iran and Pakistan are depending on the Taliban to establish a government that can maintain security and control the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan (ISIL-K). Iran aims to prevent the escalation of Islamist influence along its eastern border, following the successful containment of the ISIL threat in Iraq's western region. Pakistan is concerned about the potential impact of ISIL-K activities in Afghanistan on domestic terrorist organisations within its borders.<sup>25</sup> Despite attaining military dominance in Afghanistan, the Taliban is far from establishing a functional national government or a prosperous economy due to its lack of international recognition. Under these circumstances, ISIL could potentially advance. The militant group and other global Islamist movements will benefit from the Taliban's endeavour to balance the pragmatism necessary for government with their unwavering adherence to their basic philosophy. The Taliban may lose many of their supporters to more extremist organisations if they adopt a more temperate stance.

Currently, Iran and Pakistan are experiencing domestic turmoil, while the Taliban have regained control of Afghanistan. Pakistan is currently facing its most severe economic crisis since gaining independence. The country is grappling with rapidly increasing inflation, and the government is making efforts to negotiate another loan agreement with the IMF. Unprecedented tensions between the military establishment and civilian leaders have further exacerbated this situation. Similarly, Iran is also undergoing a transitional period where, after four decades, the country's moderate leadership is shifting towards a hard-line dictatorship. It is unclear who will succeed the weakened supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Iran is experiencing significant economic difficulties as a result of international sanctions. The situation in both states will become distressing if Afghanistan starts to export chaos, refugees, and extremism.<sup>26</sup>

Iran and Pakistan recognise the necessity of collaborating to address the security situation in Afghanistan. The establishment of an interim Taliban rule suggests a pragmatic collaboration between Iran and Pakistan. However, the majority of the Taliban's initial cabinet included terrorists with close ties to Pakistan. After a few days and after engaging in discussions during the SCO summit in Dushanbe in September 2021, Iranian and Pakistani delegations appointed leaders from smaller parties with strong connections to Iran to significant positions.<sup>27</sup> The rationale behind assigning significant ministries to members of these minority groups is twofold. Firstly, at the domestic level, the Taliban administration aims to convince marginalised groups that they will be adequately represented in both the interim administration and the forthcoming national government. Secondly, the ruling Islamist movement also seeks to demonstrate its willingness to establish an inclusive government for the international community.



## **Divergence of Interests**

### **Regional Powers Contest**

The political turmoil in Afghanistan following the emergence of the Taliban regime and the involvement of several regional players, each with its own strategic goals and concerns, as well as shared security concerns, have influenced the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East and South Asia.<sup>28</sup> While these negotiated cabinet decisions are indeed vital, Pakistan and Iran are employing other means as well to effectively handle the highly volatile situation in Afghanistan. In mid-October, Major-General Mohammad Hossein Bagheri, the Iranian Joint Chief of Staff, headed a delegation to Islamabad. Bagheri and the other Iranian generals engaged in detailed discussions with their Pakistani counterparts over the strategic management of security concerns related to the Taliban regime.

Iran and Pakistan remain mutually sceptical, despite their ongoing efforts to collaborate. Tehran is concerned about the strong ties between Islamabad, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states. There is concern that the Saudis and the Emiratis may exploit their connections to create complications for Iran. The political discourse between Saudi Arabia and Iran, initiated in the late 1990s and culminating in their subsequent political reconciliation, represents a significant opportunity.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, their diverse proxy factions were actively pursuing each other on Pakistani territory. The Gulf governments may seek to exploit Iranian activity in the Arab world by instigating turmoil in Afghanistan and Pakistan against Iran.

In the Afghan landscape, Pakistan and Iran also experienced conflicts as they supported different factions with diverse sectarian views.<sup>30</sup> The visit of President Khatami of Iran to India contributed to the intricacy of regional affairs. The visit held great significance as both states acknowledged the compatibility of their respective strategic landscapes and the necessity to enhance them through robust defence and economic alliances.<sup>31</sup> The proximity between India and

Iran was rooted in their same strategic outlook on Afghanistan. India has consistently been cautious about Pakistani influence in Kabul and has cultivated strong relationships with members of the Northern Alliance that are also aligned with Iran.<sup>32</sup>(Ramana 2012)

Given the fundamental differences between Pakistan and Iran concerning Afghanistan, India needed to establish a strategic foothold in Iran. Initiatives were undertaken in the energy and infrastructural domains, encompassing the construction of the Chabahar Port in Iran, the Zaranj-Delaram Road linking Afghanistan and Iran, and a gas pipeline interconnecting Iran, Pakistan, and India.<sup>33</sup> The formal incorporation of the Indian element into Pakistani-Iranian relationships exacerbated suspicion and further weakened their bilateral relations. As a result of past conflicts between Pakistan and Iran over their interests in Afghanistan, both countries now have more chances to form alliances with other regional actors who have similar strategic outlooks. This elucidates the dual factors of Pakistan's geographical proximity to Saudi Arabia and the enduring collaboration between India and Iran in Afghanistan. Additionally, another aspect that contributes to the cooperation between India and Iran is the indisputable reality that Iran remains the sole practical means for Indian communication with Central Asia and trade with Afghanistan.<sup>34</sup>

Pakistan is still extremely anxious about its bitter enemy India allying with Iran. The historical alignment of Iranian and Indian interests in Afghanistan has consistently coincided, particularly in their mutual objective to hinder the activities of Sunni Islamists, who pose a threat to both Tehran and New Delhi. In the 1990s, Iran and India collaborated extensively with Russia to advance the Northern Alliance, a coalition opposed to the Taliban. In November 2021, Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani, the head of Iran's national security, participated in a regional conference on Afghanistan organised by India's National Security Adviser, Ajit Doval. Representatives from Russia and the Central Asian republics were present at the conference. Notably, China

and Pakistan chose not to attend. Nevertheless, the United States' departure from Afghanistan and the subsequent downfall of the internationally backed Afghan government have posed a substantial strategic dilemma for India. With the Taliban assuming control in Kabul, New Delhi has lost its influence in Afghanistan. However, India has the potential to establish an additional gateway into the country by collaborating with Iran.<sup>35</sup>

### **Ethnic Connections**

Afghanistan has experienced a hundred-year-old rivalry between administrations that originated in the Persian highlands to its west and those located in the Punjabi plains to its east. The latest entities to become involved in this complex situation are the modern sovereign governments of Iran and Pakistan. Pakistan holds a competitive edge over Iran in this competition because of geographical and cultural factors. Pakistan's border with Afghanistan is significantly longer than Iran's, giving Pakistan an advantage in influencing the course of events in the landlocked state. Afghanistan is home to various minority communities, including the Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara, Turkmen, Aimak, and Baluch. Iran has established enduring connections with these minority groups. In addition, Tehran benefits from the fact that Dari, an Afghan variant of the Persian language, is the official language of Afghanistan. This enables Tehran to establish strong connections not only with Pashtuns but also with various minority groups.<sup>36</sup> Conversely, Islamabad has mostly exerted its influence on its western neighbours through the Pashtuns, who are the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan and make up to 45 per cent of the country's population. Pashtuns constitute the fifth-largest ethnic group in the whole population of Pakistan.

Pakistan's support for the Taliban, a predominantly Pashtun group, in the 1990s served as evidence of the strength of this relationship. After Islamist cliques ousted the communist state in Kabul in 1992, the Taliban emerged as the dominant group in the Afghan

struggle. They achieved this status four years later and received support from Pakistan. Pakistani support in 1996 was important in establishing the Taliban's initial regime. Islamabad continued to support the Taliban even after their overthrow by the United States in 2001.<sup>37</sup>

Historical evidence suggests that the new leaders of Kabul would align themselves with Islamabad and distance themselves from Tehran. Nevertheless, the geopolitical landscape of the country has experienced a substantial change in the two decades following the US-led overthrow of the Taliban's initial rule in Afghanistan in 2001. Pakistan's ability to exert effective control over the Taliban has diminished compared to the 1990s. The Taliban's expansion beyond the Pashtun community and their infiltration into ethnic minority groups played a significant role in facilitating their rapid takeover of northern regions in Afghanistan in early August 2021. Iran has developed alliances with certain Taliban insurgents over the past 15 years, recognising that these militants possess significant influence and force that cannot be ignored.<sup>38</sup>

### **Analysing the Associations**

Iran has made significant progress since 2001, when it actively collaborated with the United States in supporting intelligence operations to remove the Taliban, working alongside its friends in the Northern Alliance. Subsequently, Iran's pursuit of nuclear enrichment and the United States' military intervention in Iraq deteriorated their relationship. In around 2005, the Iranians started fostering relationships with the Taliban. Tehran collaborated with Taliban leaders, including Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour, who was killed in a targeted US drone strike in 2016, shortly after his car entered Pakistan from Iran.<sup>39</sup> Iran further bolstered its backing of minority factions and the US-backed regime in Kabul by providing them with a sum of over \$1 million.

Conversely, Pakistan also endeavoured to build connections with other Afghan forces. Roughly 15 years ago, it established its first communication with the Kabul administration and factions opposing the Taliban. The Taliban's strong opponents maintained a profound distrust of Islamabad; as a result, these initiatives were not always warmly embraced. Pakistan's assistance to the American war effort resulted in the loss of its exclusive ability to control the Taliban.<sup>40</sup> During the latter half of the 2010s, the Taliban established a connection with Iran, engaged in negotiations with the United States, established a political base in Qatar, and sought alliances with various states such as China, Russia, Turkey, European countries, and others. Nevertheless, Islamabad continued to maintain significant connections with the Afghan insurgency, particularly with the Haqqani organisation based in eastern Afghanistan and the Quetta Shura, which represents the Taliban's original heartland in the southern region of the country.

### **The US Factor**

The connection between the US and Iran, as well as the Afghan issue, had a significant impact on the relationship between Pakistan and Iran. The Islamic Revolution strained relations between Iran and the US. The US had sided against Iran in the Iran-Iraq war together with Saudi Arabia and other Arab nations. In contrast to its policy of nonalignment in Middle Eastern affairs, Pakistan discreetly supported Iran, although their conflicting alliances damaged their relationship in Afghanistan. Following the events of September 11, 2001, Pakistan emerged as a staunch ally of the United States in opposing the Taliban. This condition led Iran and the US to reach a mutual understanding. However, during that period, President George W. Bush classified Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as 'the axis of evil'.<sup>41</sup> Consequently, the US factor that had brought these two neighbouring countries together is now widening the divide between them.

Following the 9/11 tragedy, the United States positioned Pakistan at the forefront of its counterterrorism efforts in Afghanistan, which significantly altered Pakistan's perception of the Taliban. The longstanding Afghan dispute, which had caused division between them, could perhaps be resolved now that Iran and Pakistan have reached a consensus. Nevertheless, Iran's disruptive behaviour, characterised by the hostage crisis, the Iranian government's uncompromising stance towards the US, and its explicit threat to Israel's existence—a crucial ally of the US in the Middle East—has prevented any possibility of restoring relations between the two countries.<sup>42</sup> Despite Iran's unambiguous condemnation of the 9/11 atrocities, friction continued to exist in the US camp. Throughout President Khatami's tenure, efforts were undertaken to reconcile the diplomatic relations between the United States and Iran. Nevertheless, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's assumption of the presidency resulted in significant hardship. His unwavering anti-American position effectively shattered any possibility of a diplomatic reconciliation between Tehran and Washington.<sup>43</sup> Consequently, it caused a big blow to Iran and Pakistan's relations.

Iran and Pakistan were working together to find a solution to the Afghan crisis, but once again, the influence of the United States took centre stage. Additionally, it effectively isolated Iran from all regional forums and initiatives aimed at promoting peace in Afghanistan. Pakistan has long faced a dilemma due to its significant reliance on assistance from the United States. The country chose to rely on external powers instead of utilising its resources and implementing programs for national growth, both politically, economically, and militarily. In such circumstances, the only option was to acquiesce to the demands imposed by the United States.<sup>44</sup> Given Pakistan's primary focus on meeting US demands within its territory and in Afghanistan, it neglected its relations with Iran while engaging in a violent fight against terrorism, resulting in significant

loss of life and the utilisation of limited resources. In response to enduring opposition and animosity from the United States, Iran deemed it fitting to strengthen its alliances with Russia and India. The United States eventually encountered significant domestic pressure to cease its engagement in Afghanistan following years of allocating public funds to the effort and sacrificing invaluable lives in the conflict with the Taliban for territorial dominance.

Upon the revelation of multiple reports and surveys indicating that the Taliban maintained control over a significant chunk of Afghanistan's territory, doubts arose over the likelihood of a serious withdrawal by the United States. The US also assumes that Pakistan did not adequately help its partners' efforts to combat the Taliban and that its pursuit of maintaining influence in the region contributed to the strain in the relationship between these two countries.<sup>45</sup> The United States conveyed to Pakistan that it was no longer considered an ally in Afghanistan and encouraged India to assume a greater role in the region, particularly following the unveiling of the Trump administration's new Afghan strategy. The persistent instability in Afghanistan has consistently raised concerns among neighbouring states, such as China, Russia, and Iran. Consequently, the antagonistic attitude of the United States towards Pakistan in Afghanistan has once again facilitated a conducive atmosphere for Iran and Pakistan to engage in cooperation with other neighbouring countries.

Pakistan has once again aided in facilitating the US-Taliban negotiation that took place in the UAE in December 2018, since there are several regional peace-making initiatives underway.<sup>46</sup> Iran was excluded from participation again, and it has additionally declared that it is presently engaged in negotiations with the Taliban, with the approval of the Afghan government.<sup>47</sup> Once more, there was a missed opportunity to enlist Iran as a crucial collaborator, possibly as a result of US pressure or irrational comfort. Once again, Afghanistan acts as a dividing factor in the relationship between Iran and Pakistan. The

discreetly monitored peace efforts in Afghanistan would only worsen the already tense conflicts in the region and negatively impact bilateral relations between Iran and Pakistan.

## **Conclusion**

Over many decades, Afghanistan served as a communal strategic courtyard for Iran and Pakistan. Pakistan has been looking for a friendly administration on its western border for a long time to concentrate on India, its key geopolitical competitor. Afghanistan has traditionally primarily acted as a supporting stage for Iranian operations towards Arab countries. However, Afghanistan now plays a substantially larger role in the national security plans of both countries as a result of the terrible collapse of the globally sponsored Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

Regardless of the circumstances in Afghanistan under Taliban rule, Iran and Pakistan will exert the most influence. To prevent the instability in Afghanistan from disturbing their strategic plans for Central and South Asia, big powers like China and Russia will rely on their bilateral connections with Tehran and Islamabad. Both Iran and Pakistan will leverage their influence to promote their economic interests in Afghanistan and the neighbouring region, contingent upon the country attaining a certain level of stability in due course. However, in the future, both parties will strive to safeguard their countries' national security from being jeopardised by the tumultuous area that lies between them.

Despite their defeat in 2001, the Taliban persisted as the dominant political force in the country, striving to regain control over their region. Iran, however, misjudged the situation in Afghanistan. During the 1990s, it provided support to a coalition of smaller, less influential groups that opposed the Taliban. These organisations were predominantly composed of ethnic groups, like Tajiks and Shiite Hazaras, who were predisposed to provide support to Tehran. The anti-Taliban movement has remained fragmented based on ethnic



divisions and has failed to evolve into a leading political force capable of confronting the Taliban.

During the Taliban uprising, Iran and Pakistan actively maintained channels of communication and support with both the national authority and the terrorists. However, with the Taliban assuming control and the opposing troops nearly eradicated, Tehran and Islamabad find themselves confronted with a situation that they likely were not adequately prepared for. How do they guarantee that those they assisted in waging an insurrection will now rule in a way that does not exacerbate existing wobbly and jeopardise their general interests?

## Notes and References

- <sup>1</sup> Muhammad Ali and Malik Safdar, "Pakistan Afghan Relations: History Conflicts & Challenges," *Pakistan Journal of International Affairs* 3, no. 2 (2020): 400-417.
- <sup>2</sup> Huma Baqai and Nausheen Wasi (eds.), *Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations: Pitfalls and the Way Forward* (FES: Islamabad, September 2021), <https://ir.iba.edu.pk/faculty-research-books/5>.
- <sup>3</sup> Mojtaba Maghsoudi and Monireh Arab, "Shahnameh: Field of Cultural-Identity Interaction between Iran and Persian-Speaking Countries," *Quarterly Journal of Political Studies* 04, no. 14 (2010), <https://ipis.ir/files/mfaipisen/PDF/Iran.pdf>.
- <sup>4</sup> "Afghanistan," *World Population Review*, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/>.
- <sup>5</sup> R. D. Putnam, "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games," *International Organization* 42, no.3(1988), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300027697>.
- <sup>6</sup> J. Calabrese, "The Struggle for Security: New and Familiar Patterns in Iran-Pakistan Relations," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 21, no.1 (1997): 61-80.
- <sup>7</sup> Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> Hassan Askari Rizvi, "Civil-Military Relations in Contemporary Pakistan," *Survival: Global Politics and Society* 40, no. 2 (1998): 96-113, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.1998.10107840>.
- <sup>10</sup> Abdol P. Muhammadi, and G. Cama, "Iran as a Peculiar Hybrid Regime: Structure and Dynamics of the Islamic Republic," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no. 4 (2015): 558-78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2015.1037246>.
- <sup>11</sup> Kamran Bokhari, "The Search for Stability in Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs*, 11 January 2022, [https://www.foreignaffairs.com/afghanistan/search-stability-afghanistan?check\\_logged\\_in=1](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/afghanistan/search-stability-afghanistan?check_logged_in=1).
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> "Press Release -Webinar on Pak Afghan Economic Ties: Opening New Vistas," *Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad*, November 14, 2022, <https://issi.org.pk/34809-2/>.

- <sup>14</sup> Mohsen Roohiseft, "Prospects of Economic Relations between Iran and Afghanistan," *Strategic Council on Foreign Relations*, 14 September 2021, <https://www.scfr.ir/en/economy/136151/prospects-of-economic-relations-between-iran-and-afghanistan/>.
- <sup>15</sup> "Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, <https://mofa.gov.pk/testing-language/>.
- <sup>16</sup> Kamran Bokhari, "The Search for Stability in Afghanistan."
- <sup>17</sup> Daniel A. Kronenfeld, "Afghan Refugees in Pakistan: Not All Refugees, Not Always in Pakistan, Not Necessarily Afghan?," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21, no. 1(2008), <https://doi.org/doi:10.1093/jrs/fem048>.
- <sup>18</sup> "Report on Afghan Refugees in Pakistan," *European Union Agency for Asylum*, 20 May 2022, <https://euaa.europa.eu/news-events/euaa-publishes-report-afghan-refugees-pakistan>.
- <sup>19</sup> Rupert Stone, "Pakistan Fears Afghan Chaos Will Exacerbate Narcotics Problem," *Nikkei Asia*, 10 July 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Pakistan-fears-Afghan-chaos-will-exacerbate-narcotics-problem>.
- <sup>20</sup> Rooha Javed, "Trafficking of Drugs: The Implications of a Porous Border between Afghanistan and Pakistan," *Paradigm Shift*, 19 March 2022, <https://www.paradigmshift.com.pk/trafficking-of-drugs/>.
- <sup>21</sup> "Organized Crime Module 16 Key Issues: Terrorism and Drug Trafficking," 2020, <http://www.unodc.org>.
- <sup>22</sup> Venda Felbab Brown, "Drugs, Security, and Counternarcotics Policies in Afghanistan," *Brookings Institution*, 29 October 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/drugs-security-and-counternarcotics-policies-in-afghanistan/>.
- <sup>23</sup> Fatemeh Aman and Barbara Slavin, "Resolving Regional Sources of Instability," *Atlantic Council*, 8 November 2013, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/iran-afghanistan-and-south-asia-resolving-regional-sources-of-instability/>.
- <sup>24</sup> "Iran and Pakistan Forge Stronger Regional Cooperation in Fight Against Drug Trafficking with UNODC," *United Nations in Islamic Republic of Iran*, 6 July 2023, <https://iran.un.org/en/239691-iran-and-pakistan-forge-stronger-regional-cooperation-fight-against-drug-trafficking-unodc>, <https://iran.un.org/en/239691-iran-and-pakistan-forge-stronger-regional-cooperation-fight-against-drug-trafficking-unodc>.

pakistan-forge-stronger-regional-cooperation-fight-against-drug-trafficking-unodc.

- <sup>25</sup> Muhammad Salami, "Iran-Pakistan Relations: Hopes and Fears," *Gulf International Forum*, 28 July 2022, <https://gulfif.org/iran-pakistan-relations-hopes-and-fears/>.
- <sup>26</sup> Kamran Bokhari, "The Search for Stability in Afghanistan."
- <sup>27</sup> "Experts React: 2021 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit in Tajikistan," *Atlantic Council*, 22 September 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/southasiasource/experts-react-2021-shanghai-cooperation-organisation-sco-summit-in-tajikistan/>.
- <sup>28</sup> Christine Fair, "Securing Indian Interests in Afghanistan beyond 2014," *Asia Policy* 17, (2014): 27-32, <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2014.0016>.
- <sup>29</sup> A. Altaorafi, *Understanding the Role of State Identity in Foreign Policy Decision Making: The Rise And Demise Of Saudi-Iranian Rapprochement (1997–2009)*, (UK: London School of Economics and Political Science, 2012)
- <sup>30</sup> Z. S. Ahmed and S. Akbarzadeh, "Pakistan Caught between Iran and Saudi Arabia," *Contemporary South Asia* 28, no.3 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2020.1779181>.
- <sup>31</sup> S. Alam, "Iran–Pakistan Relations: Political and Strategic Dimensions," *Strategic Analysis* 28, no. 4 (2004), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700160408450157>.
- <sup>32</sup> S. Ramana, "The Pakistan Factor in the India–Iran Relationship," *Strategic Analysis* 36, no.6 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2012.728863>.
- <sup>33</sup> Janne Bjerre Christensen, *Strained Alliances: Iran's Troubled Relations to Afghanistan and Pakistan*, (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2011).
- <sup>34</sup> Christine Fair, "Securing Indian Interests in Afghanistan beyond 2014."
- <sup>35</sup> Kamran Bokhari, "The Search for Stability in Afghanistan."
- <sup>36</sup> Ellen Laipson, *Engaging Iran on Afghanistan*, (Washington: Stimson Centre, 2011), chrome-extension://efaidnbmninnibpcapjpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.stimson.org/wp-content/files/file-attachments/Engaging\_Iran\_on\_Afghanistan\_1.pdf.

- <sup>37</sup> Ijaz Ahmad Khan, "Understanding Pakistan's Pro-Taliban Afghans Policy," *Pakistan Horizon*, no. 02 (April 2007): 60.
- <sup>38</sup> Kamran Bokhari, "The Search for Stability in Afghanistan."
- <sup>39</sup> Nic Robertson and Jamie Crawford, "Obama: Mansour Death Marks Milestone," *CNN*, 23 May 2016, <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/05/21/politics/u-s-conducted-airstrike-against-taliban-leader-mullah-mansour/index.html>.
- <sup>40</sup> Tughrul Yamin, "Examining Pakistan's Strategic Decision to Support the US War on Terror," *Strategic Studies* 35, no. 2 (2015).
- <sup>41</sup> Daniel Heradstveit and Bonham G. Matthew, "What the Axis of Evil Metaphor Did to Iran," *Middle East Journal* 61, no. 3 (2007).
- <sup>42</sup> "What Comes Next in the Standoff Between the U.S. and Iran?," *World Politics Review* 18 July 2023, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/tense-u-s-iran-relations-have-put-the-middle-east-on-the-brink/>.
- <sup>43</sup> Gretchen Frazee, "A Timeline of U.S.-Iran Relations," *PBS NewsHour*, 13 January 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/a-timeline-of-u-s-iran-relations>.
- <sup>44</sup> K. Alan Kronstadt, "Pakistan and U.S.-Pakistan Relations," *Congressional Research Service Report*, 22 May 2023, <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R47565.html>.
- <sup>45</sup> Muhammad Hashim Zafar, Shafei Moiz Hali and Adnan Jamil, "US Failure in Afghanistan: Half Baked Planning or Pakistan?," *Margalla Papers* 23, no.2 (2019).
- <sup>46</sup> Sayed Salahuddin, "U.S. Diplomats Hold Talks with Taliban on Ending Afghanistan War," *Washington Post*, 17 December 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/us-diplomats-hold-talks-with-taliban-on-ending-afghan-war/2018/12/17/c25be5d0-01f3-11e9-912-82e98f91ee6f\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/us-diplomats-hold-talks-with-taliban-on-ending-afghan-war/2018/12/17/c25be5d0-01f3-11e9-912-82e98f91ee6f_story.html).
- <sup>47</sup> "Afghan Taliban Were in Iran for Peace Talks: Foreign Ministry," *France 24*, 31 December 2018, <https://www.france24.com/en/20181231-afghan-taliban-were-iran-peace-talks-foreign-ministry>.