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CONTENTS

INDIAN CHRONICLES: AN ANALYSIS OF THE CAUSES OF INDIAN ENMITY AND THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF HYBRID WARFARE

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Abstract

After years of research, European Disinformation Lab's disclosures about fake Indian news networks, targeting Pakistan worldwide is a fresh reminder of the never-ending Indian animosity, demonstrated blatantly off the actual battlefield, through the amalgamation of real and fake networks of propaganda warfare. Disinfo Lab's findings have highlighted the enduring prevalence and relevance of propaganda warfare as a means and method of indirect warfare. At the same time, these disclosures reiterated the vital part technological progression plays in the dissemination of information/disinformation and the evolution of conflicts and warfare. This paper is an attempt to analyse the causes of enduring Indian hostility towards Pakistan for which it extensively employed the tools of information warfare documented and exposed by the EU Disinfo Lab in 2019 and 2020. This paper contextualises the issue highlighted by the EU Disinfo Lab's report in light of the evolution of warfare into indirect means and identifies the causes of enduring Indian hostility towards Pakistan. This would help to understand the dynamics behind this Pakistan-centred international war of narratives and perception-building to serve the geopolitical interests of India.

Keywords: *Disinfo Lab, discourse development, media, networking, indirect warfare*

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Introduction

The traditional concept and practice of warfare, involving armed forces and battlefields have undergone a radical transformation. The Post-9/11 era witnessed states fighting against non-state actors and waging wars against an ideology under the rubric of 'War on Terrorism.' It involved diverse actors and factors, including disinformation, propaganda, construction of discourses, and employment of scholars, think tanks, and media to construct a desired image of the situation with little to no space for counter-arguments. Post-9/11 wars can fairly be described as media wars because media played a central role in the dissemination of unchallenged official narratives of the states and the construction of desired images and opinions reflecting official positions over the issues, hence, legitimising the use of force.

Historically, wars and conflicts are prevalent and indirect warfare has also remained an important tool of statecraft. "Subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill," is an oft-quoted dictum from *The Art of War* of the renowned Chinese general and strategist, Sun Tzu, written some two and a half millennia ago.[1] Around the same period, *Arthashastra* (4th century BC), written by an Indian philosopher and statesman, Chanakya (also known as Kautilya), is also widely regarded as a masterwork on politics, economy, diplomacy, and war.[2] His treatise also emphasised the importance of deception and disinformation not just in wartime but during peacetime as well. He identified three types of wars: open, concealed, and silent. The silent war he explained is a kind of warfare in which:

> The king and his ministers—and unknowingly, the people—all act publicly as if they were at peace with the opposing kingdom, but all the while secret agents and spies are assassinating important leaders in the other kingdom, creating divisions among key ministers and classes, and spreading propaganda and disinformation.[3]

Plato is also referred to as stating, "Those who tell the stories also rule societies."[4] These historic accounts reflect the importance of indirect means to warfare and also trace the history of discourse development and the significance of storytelling to politics and public opinion back to ancient times. It has been acknowledged widely that disinformation and rumours have always played an important role in the conduct of warfare to discredit the enemy, its forces, and people. World War I is generally identified as a decisive period of history when warring parties employed propaganda as an important weapon of war on an unprecedented scale to influence public opinion internationally. The purpose was to justify their actions and to build international support.[5] Since then, it continues to be an integral part of conflict and warfare.[6] The advent of social media in the last decade-and-a-half has only added to the critical role of storytelling and propaganda in the conduct of modern warfare.

This brief background sets the stage for subsequent discussion on *Indian Chronicles*, researched and disclosed by the Brussels-based NGO European Disinformation Lab's report in December 2019 and 2020. In the international system, states are engaged in power struggles, pursuing their national interests. This power confrontation is also a hallmark of South Asian politics that is generally defined in terms of Pakistan-India rivalry. Both states are involved in a perennial struggle of coexistence since their independence and both have relied on different means to balance each other's position and designs in the region.

The publication of *Indian Chronicles*, however, had a shocking impact on Pakistan. The sheer level of deceit and deception exposed by this report on the Indian part has been taken by Pakistani authorities as something unprecedented, especially in times of relative peace.[7] The severity of this disinformation campaign can also be gauged by the comments of the very investigators and authors of the

report who described it as something they had never encountered in their other investigations.[8]

Brief documentation of the concept of evolution of warfare in the last few decades described as 4th and 5th generations and hybrid warfare is presented below to contextualise the revelations of Disinfo Labs' findings regarding Indian propaganda warfare. It is to highlight the significance of narrative-building as a vital tool of hybrid warfare in today's evolved battlefield, which is extremely important in public opinion-making and is greatly associated with cyberspace in terms of instant dissemination of information or disinformation. Hence, discourse development is part and parcel of this evolved form of warfare carrying far-reaching political and military implications. With this background, the paper analyses the Indian leadership's and strategic community's viewpoint about Pakistan and the causes of this massive Indian disinformation campaign. The study briefly documents the highlights of the EU Disinfo Lab's report. In light of its findings, it discusses the state of human rights violations inside India to question the validity of the Indian position over human rights issues in Pakistan.

Evolution in Warfare

Fourth Generation Warfare (4GW)

Advancements in tactics and technology have always played a key role in the evolution of warfare. In recent years, evolution in warfare is generally explained in terms of generations and hybrid warfare. The terminologies of fourth- and fifth-generation warfare, along with hybrid war are now being used and explained by national and international scholars explaining the evolution of warfare. Writing in 2004, American author and military theorist, William S. Lind characterised the evolution of warfare into four generations.[9] Every generation of warfare is distinguished by the tactics and technological advancements of the time. The first three generations of war, starting from the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 to the World Wars of the twentieth century have at

least two common elements; opposing armed forces in uniform and their presence on the battlefield.

To Lind, the fourth generation marks the most radical change since the time of the Treaty of Westphalia due to its transformation into wars against non-state actors in the post-9/11 period.[10] In fourth-generation warfare, non-state actors have replaced regular armed forces wearing uniforms and as a consequence also distorted the differences between combatants and non-combatants on the one hand and between the war and peacetime on the other. At the same time, Lind reminded that the fourth generation is not quite innovative because this form of warfare had existed before the rise of the state, before the Treaty of Westphalia.[11]

He further explained fourth-generation war in terms of religious and cultural aspects (Islam vs Christianity) and in the context of the trend of non-Western immigration to the West. To him, "In Fourth Generation war, invasion by immigration can be at least as dangerous as invasion by a state army".[12] Hence, he viewed fourth generation warfare in a broader context of cultural conflict as well rather than just focusing on the centrality of non-state actors as a force to fight with.

Writing in 2005, Thomas X. Hammes further elaborated fourth-generation warfare as the most serious challenge to international security due to the nature of its diverse networking with political, economic, social, and military spheres.[13] He explained that the prime theme of fourth-generation warfare is that "superior political will, when properly employed, can defeat greater economic and military power."[14] Fourth-generation warfare does not aim to win militarily, but it plans to directly attack the enemy's political will with a combination of various strategies including guerrilla tactics, civil disobedience, soft networking of social, cultural, and economic ties, disinformation campaigns, and innovative political activity.[15] He categorised wars in Vietnam, Somalia, Lebanon, Afghanistan, and Chechnya as instances of fourth-generation warfare that defeated superpowers for the last fifty years. Each of these

wars explains that through their protracted campaigns, the insurgents defeated the will of the enemy rather than his military. He also identified that "4GW [fourth generation warfare] is conducted simultaneously in population centres, rural areas, and virtual networks. It moves constantly to avoid detection and to target its enemy's vulnerabilities."[16]

Fifth Generation Warfare

Since tactics and technology define evolution in warfare, fifth-generation warfare is also identified as another way to conduct the war by other means. It is explained that, "the very secrecy of 5GW [fifth generation warfare] makes it the hardest generation of war to study," and that "the most successful 5GWs are those that are never identified."[17] Fifth-generation warfare is also studied in the context of the evolution of technology and analysed as a battle of perception.[18] It is categorised as moral and cultural warfare that is fought "through manipulating perceptions and altering the context by which the world is perceived."[19] Former US serviceman and Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence, Dr Steven Bucci defines fifth generation warfare as follows:

> We no longer have the luxury of a linear, series-type engagement. We now require an integrated simultaneous approach that has soldiers who can do development and intelligence gathering, who know the psycho-social dynamics of the people among whom they live and move. It requires information operations that range from paper leaflets to the most sophisticated cyber campaigns, and it must be completely immersed in the overall policy thrusts of the nation's leaders. This new integrated concept is called Fifth Generation Warfare (5GW).[20]

Another observer explained fifth generation warfare as the secret deliberative manipulation of actors, networks, institutions, states, or any forces to achieve a goal or set of goals across a combination of socioeconomic and political domains while attempting to avoid or

minimise the retaliatory offensive or defensive actions/reactions of actors, networks, institutions, and/or states.[21]

These analyses of fifth-generation warfare reflect the ancient understandings of Sun Tzu and Kautilya cited above. In this form of warfare, information and disinformation are used as weapons of war while various social networks, media, and social media act as a medium of communication. Both, information and disinformation coupled with propaganda tactics aim to construct desired images, perceptions, and narratives of the target audience and common people alike. Being secretive and being a battle of perceptions, designed to manipulate not just public opinion but states and institutions as well, fifth-generation warfare is extensively associated with the use of cyberspace. This advancement in communication technology almost coincided with the events of 9/11 and further advanced in the subsequent years, hence being studied by scholars since at least 2010.

Hybrid Warfare

In the evolution of warfare, another important characterisation is that of 'hybrid warfare'. Security analyst, Joshua Ball, explained hybrid warfare as a strategy that employs conventional military force supported by irregular and cyber warfare tactics.[22] To him, it is a nonlinear war, fought by a state through the use of conventional and irregular military forces in conjunction with psychological, economic, political, and cyber assaults. As a result, "confusion and disorder ensue when weaponised information exacerbates the perception of insecurity in the populace as political, social, and cultural identities are pitted against one another."[23]

Hybrid warfare involves the coordinated use of multiple instruments of power, designed to target the specific vulnerabilities of an enemy across the full range of societal functions to achieve greater effects through concentrated combined efforts.[24] Synchronisation is identified as a key feature of hybrid warfare that means the simultaneous and effective use of various instruments of power and

their coordination to produce the desired results. It employs coordinated military, political, economic, civilian, and informational (MPECI) instruments of power that extend far beyond the military realm.[25] It is further explained as asymmetric warfare that "uses multiple instruments of power along a horizontal and vertical axis, and to varying degrees shares an increased emphasis on creativity, ambiguity, and the cognitive elements of war."[26]

The ability to synchronise both military and non-military means simultaneously within the same battlespace is considered a fundamental characteristic of a hybrid warfare actor.[27] Hence, the key aspect of hybrid warfare is the employment of the diverse instruments of power in multiple dimensions and on multiple levels, simultaneously in a coordinated manner. This multipronged strategy is explicitly crafted to aim at the perceived vulnerabilities of the target state[28] and it is greatly fed on internal fissures and faultlines of the target state and society.

The abovementioned documentation explains the gigantic evolution in the field of warfare that has taken place at least in the last two decades reflecting on the persistent importance of indirect warfare through indirect means.

The abovementioned details about the evolution of warfare and the characteristics of each distinguished generation of warfare can be observed and analysed in the context of diverse traditional and non-traditional security challenges Pakistan has faced since the post-9/11 era. Simultaneous engagement of Pakistani forces with irregular warfare in the border region with Afghanistan, a massive campaign of terrorism across the country, and an international demonising media campaign targeting Pakistani image, intentions, and war efforts, all correspond to the various distinguishing features of different generations of warfare documented above. All that massive disinformation campaign was not without a planned strategy of

regional and international players and this is what was finally exposed by the EU Disinfo Lab's report in 2019 and 2020.

India's employment of evolved warfare strategies against Pakistan has been documented by the Pakistani authorities and by international organisations as well. The details have been documented and exposed to national and international audiences as well as international organisations in the form of dossiers containing proofs of Indian involvement in terror activities inside Pakistan. Responding to the exposure of Disinfo Lab's findings, Pakistan's National Security Adviser to Prime Minister Imran Khan, Dr Moeed Yusuf, and Pakistani Foreign Minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi gave a detailed briefing to the press on 11 December 2020.[29] Based on official information, the foreign minister had categorically stated that India was involved in hybrid warfare against Pakistan. It is pertinent to briefly recap the highlights of the Disinfo Lab's finding to contextualise the abovementioned evolution of warfare into the realm of information and propaganda warfare followed by the identification of the causes of Indian sources of enmity towards Pakistan.

Findings of EU Disinformation Lab's Report

The first report published by the EU Disinfo Lab in December 2019 revealed a network of over 265 revived media outlets in more than 65 countries, traced back to the New Delhi-based Srivastava Group. The purpose of these diverse deceptive strategies was explained by the authors of the report to influence the international institutions and elected representatives with coverage of specific events and demonstrations and to provide NGOs with useful press material to reinforce their content's credibility. Repeated republishing and quotation by various hooked networks was to make it difficult for the reader to trace the manipulation, to construct an image of international support to the Indian narrative, and to influence public perceptions on Pakistan by multiplying republications of the same content available on search engines.[30]

The second report was published in December 2020.[31] This report further investigated the Indian deception network targeting Pakistan and to an extent China and disclosed the extension of this disinformation operation to over 116 countries with the help of more than 750 fake news media outlets. The report termed this as the 'largest network' of disinformation they had ever exposed.[32]

This fake campaign involved identity theft through the resurrection of dead people, media, and organisations, imitation of European Union's institutions, and direct control of more than 10 UN-recognised NGOs affiliated with the UN Human Rights Council.[33] The objectives of this operation identified by the investigators of the report were as follows:[34]

- To discredit the nations in conflict with India in Asia, particularly Pakistan and to a lesser extent China.
- Reinforce pro-Indian and anti-Pakistan (and anti-Chinese) feelings inside India.
- To improve the international perception of India.
- To damage the standing of other countries and ultimately benefit from more support from international institutions such as the EU and the UN.

Means and Methods used for 15 years campaign included subjective interviews with selected individuals, anti-Pakistan demonstrations in Geneva, display of poster campaign reflecting on Pakistan's internal issues concerning Balochistan, women rights, and minority rights, organisation of various events inside EU Parliament targeting Pakistan, the creation of groups of support within the European Parliament to influence the European and international policy-making circles, and arrangement of private trips for the Members of the European Parliament to Bangladesh, Maldives, and Kashmir and branding them as state visits to promote Indian perspective on regional issues.[35]

These diverse activities targeted international centres of power intending to influence their perceptions and decision-making towards Pakistan by projecting it as a threatening other not corresponding to the international values of human rights and oppressive to its minorities. This massive Indian activity endorsed its stated policy (publicly announced in 2016) to isolate Pakistan internationally.[36] While writing in 2002, a renowned British journalist, Owen Bennett Jones, conversed upon this Indian policy and had noted that for a long time, Indian strategists had made every effort to undermine Pakistan's search for friends in the international community. To attain their objective Indians had represented "Pakistan as a rogue state filled with Islamic extremists" and an exporter of terrorism.[37] He had further deliberated upon it by stating that this Indian message resonated well with anti-Islamic prejudices of the West while he identified such a depiction of Pakistan as an unfair practice.[38] Hence, what is stated by the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was not something new and being practised as a cornerstone of the Indian foreign policy for a long time.

Causes of Indian Enmity

With this background in place, the causes of such overwhelming Indian hostility towards Pakistan need to be explored and analysed. Indian enmity towards Pakistan can be examined on at least two accounts: historic and strategic. The first account is rooted in history and further strengthened by the great partition and the events that accompanied the partition. This is something that could have and should have been reduced through the years and decades after the partition. This is what was witnessed in post-WWII Europe (EU), especially in the context of France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. This pattern of conciliation in the EU is what did not follow in the subcontinent and India being a far larger country both in men and material can fairly be regarded as the main protagonist in this regard.

Continuous resentment towards Pakistan remained the cornerstone of Indian foreign policy throughout the post-independence

period. Revelations of the EU Disinfo Lab's report have further added to this particular account. Various historic accounts reflect upon the open desire of the top Indian leadership since the beginning to undo Pakistan and to take it back into the Indian fold.[39] In his broadcast of 3 June 1947, former Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru professed that maybe through partition "we shall reach that united India sooner than otherwise."[40] It is also reported that he further deliberated upon this issue of Pakistan's reintegration into India with the then United Nations representative Joseph Korbel.[41]

Pakistani political scientist, Khalid bin Sayeed had documented that even after India's humiliating defeat in the border war with China in 1962, Nehru declared in an interview that Indo-Pakistani "confederation remains our ultimate end."[42] The most important statement concerning the burden of history was given by the former Indian Prime Minister Indra Gandhi on the role India played in the dismemberment of Pakistan in 1971. Addressing the Indian parliament on 16 December 1971, she declared, "India had avenged several centuries of Hindu humiliation at the hands of Muslim emperors and sultans."[43] This statement alone is the reflection of the deep-seated historic animosity of the top Indian leadership towards Pakistan that goes far beyond the partition of India. These open intentions and expression of enmity naturally caused security anxieties in Pakistan and a cycle of never-ending distrust and hostilities began in the region which continues to this day.

Another historic reference of ambition is the concept of *Akhand Bharat*. On the idea of *Akhand Bharat* (unified India including Pakistan and Bangladesh), the national-level politician of Indian ruling party Ram Madhav had categorically stated in an interview to *Aljazeera* that Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)[44] believed in the concept of *Akhand Bharat*. He elaborated the concept by stating that one day India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, would again, through popular goodwill, come together and *Akhand Bharat* would be created which for historical

reasons separated only 60 years ago.[45] Such expression by a senior ruling party member is something serious and reflects the level of recklessness that exists in the ruling party's political culture.

The second account of continuous Indian hostility is the strategic desires of India in the region and beyond.[46] An Indian South Asian security expert, Raja Mohan, explains that India's grand strategy divides the world into three concentric circles. The first includes the immediate neighbourhood in which India pursued supremacy without the interference of outside powers. The second comprises the extended neighbourhood of India, stretching across Asia and the Indian Ocean coastal areas in which India has sought the balance of power policy preventing other powers from undermining its interests. The third includes the entire global stage where India has tried to take its place as one of the great powers, determining matters of international peace and security.[47]

This Indian ambition to attain not just a regional hegemonic position but a global power status as well is what explains the second source of its enmity for Pakistan for which it considers the latter the only obstacle in the region.[48]

Indian political scientists, Manjeet Pardesi and Sumit Ganguly, have documented that in South Asia India, through its economic and strategic dominance, desires the status of regional hegemon, a great power of Asia, and eventually aims the global power status.[49] Pardesi explained that "India wished to be treated as *primus inter pares* ('first among equals') in the strategic affairs of South Asia/Indian Ocean Region."[50] He further enlightened that in its pursuit to attain hegemonic status, India tended to work with the smaller South Asian countries along with the extra-regional powers, only if they recognised that India was the "first in order, importance, or authority in regional affairs."[51] It is also argued that as an emerging power, India "has a seat at the global table, projecting confidence to shape events on a large canvas should be the hallmark of India's foreign policy."[52]

Since Pakistan is identified as the only state hindering Indian aspirations of regional hegemony and global power status, Stephen P. Cohen and Sumit Ganguly have noted that one country in South Asia, where some Indians might welcome political disintegration is Pakistan since it institutes the only military opposition to India in the region.[53] In one of his papers, Cohen had also cited his conversation with the Indian strategists, explaining:

> Not a few Indian generals and strategists have told me that if only America would strip Pakistan of its nuclear weapons then the Indian army could destroy the Pakistan army and the whole thing would be over.[54]

This documentation presents the historic and strategic account of Indian grievances to contextualise the decade-and-a-half-long extensive fake media campaign against Pakistan disclosed by the EU Disinfo Lab's report. Indian attempts at undermining Pakistani position and its interests is logical in the context of its historic grievances and ambitious strategic desires. It further highlights that in pursuance of its objectives India would remain restless and regional stability would remain at stake.

Indian Record on Human Rights

Another important issue to be addressed is the issue of minorities in Pakistan magnified by the Indian-sponsored propaganda machinery to demonise the country internationally. It needs to be examined how far Indian allegations and campaigns are reflective of the reality in light of its own record on human rights.

India is a state and society divided along caste lines where the vast majority of people are classified as lower castes and untouchables. The Hindu caste system is traced to an ancient Sanskrit text called the 'Manusmriti' (the laws of Manu). These laws classify people into four varnas or castes. At the top of the social hierarchy are the Brahmins (priests), followed by Kshatriyas (soldiers/administrators) and Vaishyas (merchants), with Shudras (servants/labourers) at the bottom. There are

some 200 million Dalits in India out of a population of 1.3 billion and they are beyond the scope of this caste system, which characterises them as 'untouchables'.[55]

Hence, birth into a certain caste determines the social and economic status in the wider Indian society. By this fact alone, the human rights record of India by any means can never be considered corresponding to international human rights standards. It is just beyond understanding that with this major foundational flaw in their social system, Indian strategists look for human rights 'violations' in other countries, especially in Pakistan to be exploited. Most recent studies further endorse this structural constituent of Indian social order and violent cultural practices. In addition to their caste system, non-Hindu Indian minorities also fall under the same category of being untouchables and lesser human beings.

Human Rights Watch's (HRW) 2021 report highlighted the severity of this caste-based structural violence in India, directed against the lower-caste Dalit community. Based on government data collected in 2019, the report stated that crimes against Dalits further increased by 7 per cent.[56] Dalit rights activists explain this spike in terms of a reaction by members of dominant castes against any efforts toward Dalit's upward mobility and they perceive it as a challenge to caste hierarchy. The HRW report documented many caste-based violent acts against Dalits over petty issues like one in Odisha where 40 Dalit families were socially boycotted when a 15-year-old girl plucked flowers from the backyard of a dominant caste family. A Dalit man was stripped and beaten along with his family members in Karnataka for allegedly touching the motorcycle of a dominant caste man. In Tamil Nadu, a Dalit man was beaten to death by the members of the dominant caste for defecating in their field and a Dalit lawyer was also killed over his social media posts criticising Brahminism.[57]

Similarly, Hindu-Muslim rivalry is rooted in history and has further intensified since the partition of India. The current Modi

government has taken this trend to new heights. According to the HRW's report for the year 2021, attacks continued in India against minorities, especially Muslims, and authorities failed to act against BJP leaders who vilified Muslims and BJP supporters who engaged in violence. The report documented that in Uttar Pradesh, state authorities continued to use allegations of cow slaughter to target the Muslim population. By August 2020, the Uttar Pradesh government had arrested 4,000 people over allegations of cow slaughter under the law preventing it and also used the draconian National Security Act (NSA) against 76 people accused of cow slaughter. In such cases, the NSA permits the imprisonment of suspects for up to a year without filing charges.[58] What is more alarming is the fact documented by a researched report that some 35 per cent of Indian police personnel feel that it is natural for a mob to punish the culprit in case of cow slaughter.[59]

Concerning the drastic increase in violence against all minorities in India, The US Commission on International Religious Freedom has twice recommended to the US government that India should be designated as a 'country of particular concern'.[60]

Drastic spike of violence against all minorities, especially against Christians in India, has recently compelled the 17 human rights and interfaith organisations in the United States to request and secure a Congressional briefing over the subject and sensitise the US lawmakers about the plight of minorities in India and to stress the US government to take stern action in this regard.[61]

The Congressional briefing of July 2021 highlighted that attacks against the Christian minority, who constitute the 30 million of the Indian population, have increased at an alarming rate and include the form of physical violence, disruptions of church services, restrictions on access to food and water, and false accusations of forced conversions. Furthermore, desecration of churches and beatings of the clergy, violence against Christian women, and forced denouncement of

their faith is also part of the violent campaign initiated by the Hindu nationalists of the ruling party.

One participant of the briefing Sydney Kochan emphasised the significance of recognising India's severe human rights violations at a government level. To him, "Yes, it is true that India is the largest democracy in the world, and that it is one of the United States' primary strategic partners; however, this should not serve as a justification for overlooking the accelerating persecution of India's religious minorities…."[62]

As reported in the Status of Policing in India Report 2018, disadvantaged sections such as Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Muslims are disproportionately imprisoned in Indian jails. Similarly, the likelihood of the award of capital punishment to these segments of society is also much higher.[63]

Hindu mob's attack on Muslim localities of the capital New Delhi in February 2020 was one of the most heinous crimes against humanity. It took place at a time when US President Donald Trump was visiting India. This was a blatant demonstration of mob violence against the Muslim community in which at least 53 people were killed, some burned alive, and according to Indian government sources, over 500 sustained injuries during the carnage, while security forces performed the role of a bystander.[64] Based on its research, Amnesty International of India found Delhi Police "complicit and an active participant" in the religious violence.[65] Delhi Minorities Commission, in its July 2020, report also characterised the Delhi violence as "planned and targeted," and found that the police were filing cases against Muslim victims of violence instead of action against the BJP leaders who incited violence.[66]

Furthermore, according to the HRW, the BJP government increasingly harassed, arrested, and prosecuted rights defenders, activists, journalists, students, academics, and others critical of the government or its policies.[67]

Human rights issues are universal. They are common in the developing world and need a lot of consideration and effort to improve the livelihood of all the citizens within state boundaries, including Pakistan. However, with the above-mentioned documentation of structural and systematic violations of human rights and with the bleakest track record, India is least expected to launch a hateful campaign against Pakistan on the issues of human rights that matter little value to the current Indian government and high caste Brahmin society. Indian campaign against Pakistan on the issues of human rights can only be termed as self-deceiving.

Conclusion

Indian foreign policy is very much guided by its sense of superiority, domination, and ambition to attain a regional and global power status. It has been identified and discussed by numerous regional and international scholars. For this purpose, subduing smaller neighbours is identified as a policy objective without which this position cannot be achieved. This is the cornerstone of Indian strategic policy and in the region, Pakistan, being the only obstacle to Indian aspirations has suffered the most.

In search of its power status, post-Partition India could have selected the road to peace and conciliation with its much smaller neighbour, Pakistan. It could, thus, have moved towards its much-desired position as a major power of the region and beyond. Getting itself embroiled in a revenge-seeking policy, it not only compromised its own future prosperity but also of the region. Both historic and strategic enmities are lethal as both have evolved hand in hand. One yield into the other and continuation of the status quo in the volatile region of South Asia is intensifying Indian forms of aggression and its reliance on diverse indirect means of warfare.

There is an evident evolution in the realm of warfare and media has indeed proven to be a powerful weapon of modern combat. EU Disinfo Lab's report has exposed how skilfully Indian strategists have

capitalised on the tools of modern warfare to demonise Pakistan internationally and to further their interests. For sure, these weapons of today's indirect warfare can subdue the enemy's will to fight or resist, but despite the two-decades-long extensive war, terrorism, and maligning international campaign, Pakistan proved to be persistent and resilient in fighting back and not to be subdued. Hence, exclusive reliance on hate-mongering and subduing the enemy without fighting does not bring prosperity to the nations feeding on hate-mongering. To claim the global status of power requires much more than illicit means.

India, after seventy-four years of enmity, needs to acknowledge that its broader objectives demand a broader vision as well. India can excel without conditioning its global aspirations with the desire of a weak Pakistan. Only a peaceful political and strategic environment can bring economic and strategic prosperity to India and its neighbours. By keeping the Indian state entangled in the spiral of hate and violence against Pakistan, India would not achieve what it desires. Exclusive reliance on deception and threat of force is only misleading India and its long-term interests.

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AFGHANISTAN'S POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND MILITARY SCENARIOS AFTER THE TALIBAN TAKEOVER IN 2021

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Abstract

Since the Taliban's ascension to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 numerous scholars, academics, and policy makers have predicted scenarios that will define the country's future outlook. The literature on Afghanistan however, is limited to military, political, and economic scenarios prior to the 2021 Kabul takeover, which necessitates an in-depth analysis of developments and trends following the formation of the new government. This paper explores the unfolding post-September 2021 military, economic, and political scenarios in the country through the collation of data and employing a mixed-method research design to reach conclusions. It contends that Afghanistan's stability in the post-Taliban era is inextricably linked with external factors, the actions of the Taliban, and its ability to curb extremism internally which will define its future positive or negative outlook.

Keywords: *Afghanistan, Taliban, takeover, governance, post Taliban takeover*

Introduction

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan ended the 20-year war waged against Al-Qaeda and its affiliates in August 2021 and resulted in the Taliban assuming power yet again after their government was

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previously ousted in 2001 at the time of the surrender of Kandahar.[1] Their return to power in September 2021 resulted in the expulsion of the government of President Ashraf Ghani and their capture of Kabul surprised many intelligence officials, as the group decimated the Afghanistan National Army within a month.[2] The policies that the Taliban would adopt and the potential impact that their governance would have on the future of Afghanistan necessitates further scholarly inquiry about the economic, military, and political scenarios that may unfold under their rule.

Methodology

Much of the literature regarding Afghanistan's future scenarios has two major loopholes. Firstly, the analysis presented by the vast majority of academics and scholars such as Antonio Giustozzi and Neamatollah Nojumi take into account policies adopted by the Taliban during their rule from 1996-2001 which were characterised by launching insurgencies against an occupying force, exercising a monopoly over Afghanistan's opium trade, and committing egregious human rights violations such as extrajudicial killings.[3] There is, hence, a need to address the literature gap by reflecting on whether the post-September 2021 Taliban government would continue, improve, or implement their policies of the late 1990s which had a significant impact on Afghanistan's political and economic landscape.

Secondly, speculation and superficial research must pave the way for definitive conclusions on whether Afghanistan will witness economic prosperity, be able to tackle internal and external security challenges or whether the government in Kabul will resort towards secularism, inclusivity, and religious tolerance. This requires a firm grasp of the trends, facts and scenarios which have unfolded after the takeover in 2021. For this purpose, this research employs the *mixed method design* which combines quantitative analysis with qualitative research to reach conclusions.

Independent and Dependent Variables

This paper focuses on how the political, economic, and military policies pursued by the Taliban may have a trickle-down effect on the Afghan population, the region at large, and also the international community. The policies of the Taliban government and the international community's response towards their rule are *independent variables* underpinning this research. Whereas, after-effects such as possible financial breakdowns and humanitarian crises or positive developments such as a decline in terrorist activity in Afghanistan are *dependent variables* for this study.

Research Questions

Furthermore, there is a need to map out future scenarios unfolding in Afghanistan with available data which is critical for policy makers to devise strategies and formulate policies that will have an impact on the Afghan population. Scenarios built up by accommodating information after the August 2021 Taliban takeover also provides a context through which contingency planning on the part of the stakeholders in countries such as Pakistan, Iran, China, Russia, the United States, and the Taliban themselves can take place. Given the above, this paper seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What is the Taliban's political dispensation in the post-September 2021 scenario? Do the policies adopted by their government bear the potential to impact political stability or the Taliban's international standing?

2. What will be the state of the Afghan economy under Taliban rule in light of pressing realities such as sanctions being imposed, freezing of Afghan national assets, and a failing banking sector?

3. What primary security threats would Afghanistan face under the Taliban rule? Can Afghanistan and the international community cope with emerging threats from non-state actors and terrorist organisations if the Taliban fail to curb terrorist threats?

Political Scenarios and Political Stability
in Afghanistan After the Taliban Takeover

The definition of political stability deals with clarifying concepts such as *politics* and *political structure*.[4] Political behaviour on the other hand is any act by a member of society that has an impact on the distribution of power. Undermining the power structure by political entities such as governments must be averted by adopting measures to maintain the distribution of power.[5] For instance, good governance, provision of excellent public service, and adoption of people-centric policies hinge on a social contract between the population and the ruling government. Recent history is replete with examples where the violation of the social contract between the governed and the government resulted in upheavals and resistance in the form of popular agitation aimed at regime change, for instance, during the Arab Spring of 2011.[6] Similarly, right-wing populist protests in Europe, rebelling against the status quo by denouncing policies on immigration such as during the 2015 European Migrant Crisis is an example of discontentment of the population against the ruling government which ended up posing challenges for EU member states, including France and Germany.[7] In Asia, protests in Hong Kong against Chinese interference deals can be characterised as popular agitation to preserve economic and political freedoms through rejection of Communist Party rule over the Special Administrative Region of China.[8] The aforementioned examples illustrate the breaking down of the social contract between the governed and the government. The social contract theory which originated in the age of enlightenment in the 18th century hinges on the principle of individuals consenting to surrender some of their liberties in favour of submitting to a higher authority that governs and maintains the social order.[9] The absence of *general will* as mentioned by the theorist Jean Jacques Rousseau can usher in chaos in societies, as citizens withdraw support to central authorities.[10] 21st-century examples of the absence of general will include calling for or

disputing elections to replace existing governments, launching armed resistance movements, and employing civil disobedience against regimes.

Afghanistan and the Social Contract Theory

The swift takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban in 2021 was done in the absence of popular sovereignty which renders the definition and applicability of the social contract theory redundant. The Taliban government was not elected by popular sovereignty as mentioned by Jean Jacques Rousseau as a prerequisite for legitimacy but through opportunities presented by the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Doha Peace Deal of 2020, which stipulated that an intra-Afghan dialogue would take place.[11] The Taliban's ascension to power, hence, cannot be attributed to popular mandate and was met with little resistance which challenged their rule with the exception of sporadic protests, which quelled in certain cities.[12] The protests were also directed at securing political freedoms instead of regime change with the majority of the Afghan population agitating for an inclusive government, rolling back policies that mistreat women, and the practice of forced incarcerations and evictions.[13] The fact that such agitation continued till December 2021 demonstrates that the Taliban have not been able to uphold the aspirations of the Afghan people that it sought to govern.[14] The resistance to their rule has been unarmed and consisted of Islamic democrats, feminists, and secularists which poses no threat to their political standing. When intra-Afghan peace talks stalled in 2021, 44 per cent of Afghans believed that peace could be achieved in the next few years, whereas in 2019, a year before the Doha Peace Agreement of 2020, 13.4 per cent of Afghans had sympathy for the Taliban.[15] The sympathy from the population stems from the predominantly Pashtun population in Afghanistan. With limited public support and a government that was formed by using force in the absence of a popular mandate, it can be concluded that the Taliban lack legitimacy.

Their ability to seize control of Kabul can be attributed to the signing of the Doha Peace Deal in 2020 with the Donald Trump administration. The agreement laid out a framework for US troop withdrawals with guarantees from the Taliban that they would not kill or hurt American soldiers in return. The joint declaration also included commitments from the Taliban to not let Afghanistan's territory be used for transnational terrorism with the group expected to conduct military operations against terrorist organisations such as the Islamic State in the Khorasan Province (ISKP).[16] Furthermore, the United States agreed to facilitate conditions for all warring parties to reach a peaceful political settlement, yet the agreement did not stipulate conditions such as the Taliban coming into power through popular mandate only.[17] Additionally and contrary to the Doha Peace Deal of 2020, no intra-Afghan dialogue took place after the US withdrawal in 2021 with the Taliban securing power in the absence of dialogue with the Ashraf Ghani government which was not a party to the Doha Peace Deal of 2020. This resulted in the Taliban declaring their regime in Kabul as the *de facto* sovereign government of the country through the use of force. With peace talks stalled, the use of force employed and the opposition decimated and overwhelmed, Afghanistan under Taliban rule lacks legitimacy internationally and continues to confront questions over whether constitutionality, guaranteeing protection of women's rights under the Islamic Emirate, securing freedom of expression, and respecting human rights will be upheld under the new political dispensation or not.[18] As a result, political stability in Afghanistan cannot exist in the absence of both international recognition and popular will.

The failure to hold an intra-Afghan dialogue has resulted in pessimism over the brand of Taliban's governance after September 2021, especially if it mirrors what was witnessed in 1996-2001.[19] This includes strict enforcement of punishments such as extrajudicial killings which were condemned worldwide. Additionally, the refugee exodus

with throngs of Afghans leaving the country for Europe and countries in close proximity, such as Pakistan, marks a stark contrast to the initial optimism expressed over sustainable peace in the country prior to the Taliban takeover.[20] Internationally, the Taliban have actively sought legitimacy yet have confronted American sanctions and freezing of assets from the European Union over fundamental human rights guarantees such as abandoning controversial practices such as extrajudicial killings.[21] While pernicious sanctions, lack of legitimacy, and the absence of public will have an inevitable impact on Afghanistan's political stability under the Taliban, it is also dependent on domestic political cohesion within the new government which necessitates further examination.

The Taliban's Political Orientation and Cabinet

The Taliban have remained a predominantly Pashtun political dispensation after assuming power in 2021 with the composition of an interim cabinet, comprising all male figures and including just one member of the Shia Hazara community as Deputy Minister of the country.[22] As a result, repeated calls from the international community to ensure that an all-inclusive government representative of various ethnic groups has not materialised. A representative government must reflect the multi-ethnic population of the country with gender parity that includes members of the Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara, Turkmen, and Baloch population, as a determinant of political stability. [23]

Ethnic discrimination at the political level can prove to be a catalyst for popular agitation and political instability. Afghanistan's challenge to ensure inclusivity and the probability of anti-religious sentiment against the Taliban depends on the government providing adequate representation between diverse religious and ethnic groups in government ministries, the educational sector, the economy, and the military which includes, accommodating the Shia Hazara population that has historically been marginalised and persecuted by groups such as the Taliban themselves.[24] The ability of the Taliban to include Hazara

representatives in the cabinet, relevant ministries also need to ensure adequate minority representation, alongside groups such as Tajiks and Uzbeks, that can prove to be a critical variable in determining the Taliban's standing, both domestically and internationally.

Inclusive politics alone will not holistically determine the Taliban's international standing or domestic stability in Afghanistan. Granting legitimacy, relief from sanctions, and unfreezing of assets by the international community are equally important. The profiles of the Taliban cabinet, however, demonstrate that the members have terrorist and criminal records which make them liable to prosecution by international courts. Since the 2021 takeover, the thirty-three members of the cabinet include founding member, Mohammad Hassan Akhund, who is the Prime Minister and is also on the UN sanctions list in accordance with paragraph 20 of UNSCR 2160 (which came out in 2014).[25] Similarly the Interior Minister, Sirajuddin Haqqani has a US bounty of $ 5 million on his head and is wanted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) for his role in the January 2008 attack on a hotel in Kabul which resulted in six casualties including an American citizen.[26] Sirajuddin Haqqani is also a primary accused in cross-border attacks against the United States and coalition forces in Afghanistan.[27] Other members of the Taliban cabinet are also under the UN sanctions list as per UNSCR 1267 adopted in 1999 as a response to the Taliban's sheltering of terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda.[28] The United Nations Security Council has not nullified the language of its resolutions in the year 2021, with all cabinet members with criminal records or being retained on the UN sanctions list being liable to prosecution. This compromises the Taliban's international legal standing.

Political Legitimacy and International Standing of the Taliban Government

The fact that no sovereign country has recognised the Taliban government makes it clear that political stability in Afghanistan will remain absent notwithstanding the economic policies adopted by the

government. Additionally, the Taliban's capacity to govern is linked with the provision of international aid, the absence of which will result in a tenuous and unpredictable situation in the form of financial meltdowns and humanitarian disasters. Both the international sanctions regime and the Kabul government have shown little flexibility in meeting each other's demands with the government's cabinet and political orientation under sanctions. The government's ability to stave off economic stagnation while securing political legitimacy poses a challenge to the government's political standing. Other variables in this regard include policies aimed at inclusivity, respect for human rights, and addressing challenges to internal cohesion, which are simultaneously ethnic, religious, and sectarian.

Economic Scenarios in the post-US Withdrawal Era

Throughout its history, Afghanistan has remained an impoverished and least developed country (LDC), according to World Bank classifications, with heavy reliance on international aid for sustaining its economy.[29] Its status as an LDC has remained constant throughout the 20-year US-led war on terror with a perpetual state of conflict resulting in widespread insurgencies, lawlessness, and terrorism which has hampered investments in the country. Afghanistan, however, has benefited from UN and US assistance throughout its history. But a trickle-down effect on the local population which results in a higher standard of living for the average Afghan citizen has remained elusive of it. This gap can be attributed to the US government's failure to develop a coherent strategy or understanding regarding the long-term impact of its assistance programmes.[30]

Additionally, the lack of skilled workers, the absence of a robust manufacturing base, and reliance on remittances to fuel economic growth have resulted in an underdeveloped market sector. Even prior to the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, there were daunting economic and developmental challenges due to a precarious security

situation with widespread terrorism perpetrated by terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda contributing to the lack of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). The Kabul Airport attack in 2021 in the immediate aftermath of the takeover demonstrated that terrorism remains a significant challenge for Afghanistan in the post-withdrawal era with economic revival that is subject to an improvement in the security environment, recognition of the Taliban government, as well as investments in key sectors of the economy such as agriculture, in addition to unfreezing of assets and a waiver of sanctions.[31]

Afghanistan's Flailing Agricultural Sector

Afghanistan is also an agrarian economy with an underdeveloped secondary and tertiary sector. After the US withdrawal and the takeover of the Taliban in 2021, poverty levels in the country worsened. According to the United Nations Food Programme (UNFP) and the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) October 2021 assessments, 45 per cent of the Afghan population were facing starvation.[32] Secondly, natural disasters such as prolonged drought in late 2021 which was the second in four years, resulted in nearly 7 million citizens harvesting crops 15 per cent below the global average with a detrimental impact on the economic activity.[33] This agricultural stagnation, in addition to the sanctions imposed on the Taliban internationally, provides a bleak outlook for the future of agriculture in Afghanistan. Due to US sanctions on the Taliban as well as the freezing of $9.5 billion worth of Central Bank assets, Afghan farmers have confronted dwindling financial support due to lack of subsidisation of the flailing sector, resulting in higher probabilities of rural displacement.[34] While humanitarian assistance from the European Union and the United States is directed at addressing issues of famine and hunger after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the persistent decay of the agricultural sector requires necessary investments and programmes which enhance productivity such as foreign subsidisation.[35] This is despite the fact that Afghanistan was on its way

towards achieving self-sufficiency in national wheat production by the year 2020.[36] Much of these achievements are at a risk due to a lack of investments in wheat and grain production as well as other agricultural produce in the aftermath of the US withdrawal from the country in August 2021.

Impact of a Precarious Security Situation on Afghanistan's Agricultural Sector

Dwindling financial assistance and a cash-strapped government alone do not explain the overall decline of the agricultural sector in Afghanistan. The country's history is replete with terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in the Khorasan Province (ISKP) employing explosive violence and undermining food security by deploying landmines, resulting in civilian casualties and the destruction of arable land.[37] The deployment of landmines by terrorist organisations has resulted in unwanted vegetation and a decline in nutrient levels in arable soil which has compromised agricultural productivity as well. In 2020, anti-personnel mines constituted 98 per cent of all casualties in Afghanistan with 72 per cent of them being children. In 2021, despite significant efforts by the Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan, 3,939 hazards threatened 1,529 communities and posed a challenge to arable soil and the livelihoods of Afghan farmers.[38]

The Taliban government had declared landmines as an *un-Islamic* weapon in 1998, while 81.3 per cent or approximately 3,300 square kilometres of Afghan land had been cleared of these weapons in the year 2020.[39] The absence of landmines could have otherwise resulted in an 88 to 200 per cent increase in agricultural productivity in the country in 2003 and with the Taliban confronting the threat of terrorism internally, successful military operations to uproot threats from terrorist groups such as the ISKP will continue to have an impact on the future of the agricultural sector in the year 2020 and beyond.[40] Afghanistan also acceded to the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use of Stockpiling, Production, and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines

and on their Destruction in the year 2002, committing to destroying all anti-personnel landmines by the year 2013 as per Article 5 of the Convention.[41]

GDP Growth Prospects and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) under the Taliban Rule

Other aspects of the Afghan national economy are equally important and are confronted with significant challenges since the Taliban takeover. Some of the country's key economic indicators such as its Gross Domestic Product (GDP), unemployment figures, and the price of crude oil have nosedived since October 2021. Before the takeover, Afghanistan's GDP increased significantly during 2002-2020 and a year after the US-led war on terror to $19.8 billion.[42] This growth, however, was tied to foreign assistance which was often squandered by the political elite and resulted in no impact on the material well-being of the Afghans. According to Nazif Shahrani, Professor of Anthropology, Middle Eastern, and Central Asian Studies at Indiana University, the country's 2004 constitution gave the Afghan president unbridled powers and paved the way for cronyism, nepotism, and corruption to flourish within the country.[43] This includes how the dissemination of international funds for development resulted in many local representatives being excluded from the budgeting process.[44] Additionally, the suspension of foreign aid from the United States, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and Germany which equates to $9.5 billion, $440 million in special drawing rights (SDR) and $300 million, respectively, amounts to over 40 per cent of Afghanistan's GDP.[45] Stunted GDP growth is inextricably linked with the suspension of international aid to the country which the Taliban can only avail of if they abide by international requirements such as respecting human rights and upholding the rule of law.

Another indicator of the health of the national economy is investor confidence which has historically thrived in the absence of turmoil and terrorism within a sovereign country. History is replete with

examples where war-torn countries have witnessed dramatic declines in FDI with rising unemployment and soaring inflation rates as a direct result of war.[46] Afghanistan's economic outlook mirrors those of conflict zones such as Syria, Iraq, and Libya where the absence of political stability resulted in lower foreign investor confidence. The responsibility to govern, provision of adequate public services, and generation of commercial activity can only take place in the absence of damaging terrorist attacks, civil wars, and violence. An analysis of the FDI for the years leading up to the year 2020, demonstrates a notable increase of 131.76 per cent in 2017 which sharply declined from 2018 onwards in Afghanistan.[47] Further isolation of Afghanistan due to the Taliban's lack of legitimacy can worsen declining trends of investments as mentioned by Abdul Qayum Shafaq who contends that globalisation and integration into the international economy has a positive impact on the FDI in countries.[48] Banning the usage of foreign currencies to boost the local Afghani is also critical for promoting and increasing the flow of FDI into the country.[49]

Inflation and Income Inequality in Afghanistan 2021-22

Inflation in Afghanistan leading up to the US withdrawal spiked gradually which had an impact on energy prices raising them by 12 per cent during the period.[50] Energy shortages which are the backbone of industrial productivity have also worsened the economic outlook as Afghanistan relies on 80 per cent imported electricity.[51] The energy crisis has had an impact on the budget execution rates which predate the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan where the rates in 2020 were 32.1 per cent as compared to 28.4 per cent in July 2021.[52] This figure is projected to decrease in 2022 as sanctions have impacted budget execution rates and unfettered access to international aid has had a debilitating effect on the Taliban's ability to finance its massive trade deficit amounting to 28 per cent of its GDP in the year 2020.[53] With such trends persisting, shortages of fuel alongside the depreciation of the

national currency and a gross humanitarian crisis in the post-conflict era will materialise.[54]

Income inequality and pervasive poverty are other indicators underlining the health of the national economy and as a result of the aforementioned trends regarding fuel shortages, poverty rates have increased. The UNDP report in October 2021 claimed that by the year 2022, 98 per cent of the Afghan population would have plunged into severe poverty.[55] Ten million Afghans are also expected to plunge into poverty in the year 2021 alone with income levels falling below the poverty line which is defined as a segment of the population living below $US 0.94 per day in a country.[56]

The United States government under its USAID programme announced nearly $64 million in humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan in the immediate aftermath of the Taliban takeover in August 2021.[57] The Taliban's ability to address budgeting issues, however, continue to rest on the recognition of the Kabul government and not humanitarian aid. The senior leadership of the Taliban acknowledged that freezing of assets is tantamount to non- payment of salaries to government officials which has an impact on public service delivery.[58] The decision to retain asset freezes would also have an impact on the Taliban government's ability to pursue investor-friendly policies. Lastly, the draining of resources in the overall service and construction sectors of the Afghan economy which accounted for 58 per cent of the GDP in 2020 will also be negatively impacted due to the financial drain.[59]

International Efforts to Address Afghanistan's Economic Decline

Alongside American assistance, the G20 Summit held in Italy in 2021 resulted in the European Union announcing 1 billion Euros as humanitarian aid for Afghanistan. [60] However, the provision of aid is solely to alleviate the humanitarian suffering of the Afghan people in the absence of recognising the Taliban and does not translate into long-

term economic stability with investments in primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors of the economy. 80 per cent of Afghanistan's electricity supplies which have an impact on the smooth functioning of industries is also imported and faltering budget executions and limited allocations for development projects hamper long-term economic growth prospects after 2021 which cannot be addressed by humanitarian aid alone.[61] Economic growth is also predicated upon a skilled labour force and high productivity. The vacuum left from the US withdrawal from Afghanistan has resulted in a severe brain drain due to a massive exodus of citizens leaving the country. Shortages in qualified doctors, engineers, economists, investors, and policy advisors dampen long-term growth prospects which can only be addressed if a conducive environment incentivising rehabilitation of existing professionals is provided by the Taliban. Lack of professional staff to run government institutions poses managerial problems and prevents oversight of growth-oriented, investor-friendly economic policies which can have a positive impact on GDP growth. In September 2021, Afghan coffers were empty with uncertainty prevailing over the government's policies, hurting the overall health of the economy.[62]

Given that the health of the national economy is linked with the provision of international aid, much depends on the US, the Taliban, and the EU negotiations in releasing the $9 billion worth of Afghan Central Bank assets or waivers of EU sanctions despite the latter committing $1.15 billion as humanitarian aid. In retrospect, Afghanistan had already been receiving close to $600 to $700 million per month before the Taliban takeover in 2021, which did not have a positive impact on key economic indicators such as per capita GDP.[63] International donor agencies would, thus, need to weigh the costs of collaborating with the Taliban to deliver aid or have the country face a humanitarian crisis of significant proportions. Countries in close geographical proximity to Afghanistan have shown an interest in providing unfettered assistance to the country yet have been hesitant

in according the Taliban government legitimacy. The Moscow Format of 2021, for example, which was established in 2017 and consists of Central Asian States, India, Pakistan, Russia, and China released a joint statement in October 2021 calling for the convening of a UN Donor Conference which would provide Kabul with unconditional access to humanitarian aid.[64]

Countries such as China which was a co-signatory to the joint statement issued at the Moscow Format pledged assistance for reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan targeting critical infrastructure.[65] Prospects of extending the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects such as the $46 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan have gained renewed interest after the end of the 20-year war. While this has not practically materialised, Afghanistan's entry into the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank has made it eligible to benefit from financing for sustainable development such as technical and financial facilities for solar energy and railway connectivity.[66] Furthermore, CPEC's extension into Afghanistan as part of the BRI in the post-war scenario is predicated upon unconditional assistance to the Taliban regime and infrastructural development providing an industrial base to manufacture goods to be exported to markets in Pakistan. Investments in the flailing energy sector through building electricity plants and irrigation systems as part of regional corridors can also provide relief to the otherwise cash-strapped, impoverished, and damaged economy.

Afghanistan's Military Scenarios under the Taliban Rule

Afghanistan has been embroiled in military conflicts for decades even before the 9/11 attacks on the United States by Al-Qaeda. The 1979 Soviet-Afghan war involving the Mujahideen and smaller Maoist groups against the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan and the Soviet Army is an integral part of its history.[67] Analysing Afghanistan's military scenarios in the post-US withdrawal scenario must account for

internal, transnational, and terrorism-related threats that have plagued the country and conclusions must be drawn as to whether the Islamic Emirate Army of the Taliban government can ward off palpable threats.

As far as the Taliban's military takeover is concerned, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mike Milley, while testifying before a US Senate panel in September 2021 said that he did not give President Joe Biden a unanimous recommendation to leave Afghanistan immediately after the Taliban takeover of the country, given the potential of security quagmires that could emerge.[68] Milley's assessments, however, did not account for the Taliban's swift takeover of Afghanistan, the capitulation of the Ghani administration, or the absence of political dialogue in the aftermath of the US withdrawal. The inability of the Afghan forces to ward off the Taliban offensive demonstrated that the previous Afghan National Army (ANA) lacked the logistical training needed to quell a Taliban offensive which led to its immediate capitulation.[69]

Factors Resulting in the Disintegration of the Afghan National Army

Despite $83 billion spent on equipping, developing, and training the ANA since the 2001 intervention in Afghanistan under the George Bush administration, the ANA capitulated in front of a Taliban offensive despite the latter carrying light ammunition.[70] A contributing factor to the Taliban's victory was widespread corruption in Afghanistan's defence and interior ministries with documented evidence of ammunition, funds, and rations disappearing and hampering the ANA's ability to carry out land operations.[71] Furthermore, ammunition previously directed at defending against Taliban advances by the ANA were sold in the black market and eventually ended up with the Taliban in August 2021.[72] Fund requests sent by senior commanders for ghost soldiers' salaries were also rejected and resulted in the Afghan forces remaining significantly underpaid which had a psychological and operational impact on their

ability to defend Afghanistan against Taliban advances.[73] Demoralisation stemming from financial embezzlement after the US withdrawal resulted in many former soldiers serving under the Ghani government accepting the Taliban's amnesty schemes which were publicly announced as official pardons from the government.[74]

The combination of corruption and embezzlement in Afghanistan's ministries contributed to the ANA's disintegration. The army also has a history replete with one of the highest casualty and desertion rates in the world.[75] Politically motivated appointments under the Ghani administration also affected the military's functional ability with a prime example of President Ashraf Ghani replacing the former Afghan Army Chief Lieutenant General Wali Mohammed Ahmadzai with Special Operations Commander Major General Haibatullah Alizai alongside twice replacing the interior ministers and reshuffling of six core commanders.[76] The lack of continuity as a prerequisite for the smooth functioning of the army as an institution greatly hampered the ANAs defensive capabilities which predate the US withdrawal from the country. Given the centrality of the Chief of Staff of any sovereign military in issuing directives and preparing doctrines for military operations, the constant transfers and changes in the central command by the Ghani administration also influenced the army's ability to conduct counterinsurgency operations against the Taliban.

The collapse and dysfunctional nature of the ANA meant that the Ashraf Ghani government had to resort to mergers with Islamist parties and militias under the command of Atta Muhammad Noor, Abdul Rashid Dostum, and Haji Muhammad Muhaqqiq who are leaders of the Hezb-e-Junbish, the Jamiat-e-Islami and the Hezb- e-Wahdat Islami to ward off the Taliban insurgency.[77] The Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek Islamist parties were expected to tackle the Pashtun dominated Sunni Taliban, yet the resistance was thwarted after the fall of Mazar-i-Sharif, prompting all Islamist parties to flee the country.[78] The subsequent seizure of Kabul coincided with the complete centralisation of power by

the Taliban with blanket control over military activities which isolated the role of Islamist parties in resisting the group's advances.

The Taliban have relied on guerrilla warfare to conduct their operations against the Western-backed Afghan government and their supporters through actions including ambushes and sabotage and hit and run tactics that decimated rival political parties and resistance movements.[79] Their ability to monopolise power through military force is based on a multifaceted strategy such as employing improvised explosive devices (IEDs) as part of rural ambushes with the experience of 80,000 fighters who have resisted American occupation for 20 years.[80]

The ISKP Threat in Afghanistan under the Taliban Rule

After consolidating power in 2021, the Taliban's Islamic Emirate army became the sole armed force of the country, tasked with preventing existential threats to the country's internal security. The primary terrorist threat to Afghanistan emanates from the ISKP which claimed responsibility for the Kabul Airport attack just days after the Taliban took over the capital.[81] The attack which left 183 civilians dead during evacuation efforts resulted in a tit-for-tat response from the United States in the form of two drone strikes, with the second strike killing ten Afghan civilians in August 2021 which included seven children.[82] The ability of the Taliban to counter the ISKP threat will determine how the future security landscape of Afghanistan will develop.

Operationally, the Islamic Emirate Army includes military units that will be reorganised such as the Army Corps in Kandahar which is called *Al-Badr*.[83] However, eliminating the presence of ISKP goes beyond operational arrangements and deals with tactics employed on the battlefield. The tactics employed in 2021 by the Taliban to counter ISKP, for example, have been similar to those employed by previous Afghan governments which includes unlawful detentions, extrajudicial killings, and justifying violence against certain groups by labelling entities and

citizens as ISKP, Al-Qaeda or defectors without providing substantial evidence.[84] Persistence with this strategy can result in squandering potential benefits of crackdowns as has been witnessed in the Nangarhar province where 80 fighters were detained as per Taliban claims. According to author and journalist Wesley Morgan, who has reported extensively on the Afghanistan conflict, the Taliban leadership must act decisively against the ISKP through military operations.[85]

Afghanistan's ability to counter IKSP also has a regional and international dimension to it with the spill-over effects of terrorism within the country inadvertently influencing regional countries in close geographical proximity. ISKP has a transnational, apocalyptic goal of ensuring universal submission to its self-proclaimed Islamic Caliphate with its area of operations transcending Afghanistan's boundaries to countries such as Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and India.[86] The Taliban have stated that the ISKP remains an existential threat and have categorised them as a terrorist group while the senior leadership blames the United States for the Kabul Airport attack which took place in an area where US forces are responsible for ensuring security.[87] The challenges of dealing with ISKP, however, are manifold given their numerous chapters in regional countries, a flourishing global network, and their ability to disseminate propaganda as a tool of promoting their ideology.

Another issue that could complicate potential military operations launched by the Taliban against the ISKP is defections. There is a historical precedent to such concerns given that, in 2014, Mullah Abdul Rauf Khadem of the Taliban became one of the first leaders of the ISKP in the Helmand and Farah provinces as a defector.[88] Khadem had previously served in the Taliban government in the 1990s as well as resisted the US occupation forces. Similarly, members of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which is an Islamist armed group along the Pakistan/Afghanistan border has also pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in the year 2015, six years before the US withdrawal from the

country.[89] The ability to unify the Taliban under the central command of Haibatullah Akhundzada will prove to be a challenge to arrest probable defections to the ISKP. Yet, as per Wesley Morgan, the decision to take down ISKP could potentially usher in greater unity in the Taliban as compared to targeting the residual presence of Al-Qaeda operatives in Afghanistan.[90]

On the regional front, Afghanistan is not embroiled in military conflicts with any neighbouring state with the Taliban assuring neighbouring countries such as Pakistan that their soil will not be used as a launching pad for heinous terrorist attacks by the ISKP. There is, however, a direct linkage between ISKP attacks and intensified counter-terrorism operations from regional countries and from the United States and its NATO allies in Afghanistan, which involves active military presence in the country. Transnational and domestic attacks akin to the Kabul Airport attack can translate into greater military engagement from the United States involving troop deployments by the Biden administration which will be resisted by the Taliban. This is dependent upon policy making from the US Congress on how to deal with the terrorism threat if it spirals beyond control and poses significant international and regional challenges.

Conclusion

An appraisal of the political, economic, and military situation in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover in 2021 demonstrates that the situation in the post-US withdrawal era is fluid, tenuous, and prone to social breakdowns. Persistence with sanctions, inability to promote inclusion, and respect for basic human rights by the Taliban and escalating terrorist violence across the country could have major internal, regional, and global implications. The following conclusions have been extracted from this study:

1. The Taliban's legitimacy and sanctions imposed on its leadership are directly linked with Afghanistan's economic survival. International recognition of the Taliban government is

subject to the initiation of key reforms, such as securing equal access to education for women, establishing a broad-based coalition government accommodating different ethnic groups, and preventing torture, mass incarcerations, and summary executions.

2. Afghanistan's economic outlook beyond September 2021 is bleak with a declining agriculture sector beset by supply-side shocks and a cash-strapped government. Persistent security issues which include the presence of the ISKP threaten infrastructural projects from materialising, which is a significant challenge for an agrarian economy.

3. $9 billion worth of assets being retained by the US Federal Reserve is strangulating the economy and preventing the Taliban from instituting economic reforms which include subsidisation of agriculture. Lack of access to basic amenities is directly linked with a dearth of international aid which is contributing to poverty, destitution, displacement, and terrorism.

4. The disintegration of the Afghanistan National Army and the primacy of the Islamic Emirate Army by the Taliban government has meant that Afghanistan confronts the chief security threat of the ISKP which has claimed responsibility for numerous attacks within the country. Battlefield competence of the IEA heavily relies on the financial stability of the national economy which is compromised if sanctions are not lifted on the federal government.

5. Afghanistan's economic survival is heavily linked to regional initiatives such as the Moscow Format of 2021 or the Antalya Platform for diplomacy which seeks to assist the country without conditioning assistance with the nature of the regime governing it.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the conclusions drawn from this study on Afghanistan's unfolding, political, economic, and military scenarios under Taliban rule, the following policy recommendations are suggested for the Taliban government in Kabul, NGOs, regional countries, and the international community:

1. The international community must press for the immediate release of $9 billion worth of Afghanistan's Central Bank assets which are plaguing economic recovery and stifling productivity in the country. Taliban's commitments towards upholding human rights can be monitored after the release of the funds.

2. Regional countries which have been providing humanitarian assistance must make concerted efforts towards reviving Afghanistan's flailing agricultural sector which it relies on heavily for revenues. Lack of subsidisation of the agricultural sector in an agrarian economy contributes to widespread poverty and destitution in the country which will result in a humanitarian disaster.

3. The Taliban must adopt an official policy of inclusivity and institute reforms that build a strong case for the group to gain international legitimacy. Reforms include securing equitable access for education for women across the country, dispensing with summary executions, incarcerations, and torture, and promoting ethnic harmony by accommodating Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Hazaras which were previously marginalised from the Pashtun-dominated dispensation.

4. The ISKP is the most potent threat to Afghanistan's internal security and the Islamic Emirate Army must undertake punitive actions aimed at decimating the terrorist organisation. Given that the Taliban government practises consensus-building on launching operations through parliamentary procedures in the absence of an opposition, invoking Islamic injunctions as a

justification for waging full-scale operations against the ISKP will contribute to its popular appeal and quest to destroy the ISKP.

5. The issue of desertions from the IEA must be taken seriously as a breakdown in security could result in Taliban fighters pledging allegiance to the ISKP. Military mutiny can only be addressed through a zero-tolerance strategy against identified rogue elements within the army ranks.

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CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF IRAN'S FOREIGN POLICY BEHAVIOUR AFTER US-WITHDRAWAL FROM THE JCPOA

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Abstract

This study responds to one central question, i.e., whether Iran's moderate foreign policy approach remained intact in the aftermath of the collapse of the nuclear deal or not? For this purpose, the study conducts a Critical Discourse Analysis of Rouhani's and Raisi's speeches at the United Nations. The study applies Teun A. van Dijk's framework of analysis to find underlying ideologies of positive self-presentation and negative other representation in the selected corpus. Findings reveal that there was no significant increase in negative other representation except for the United States and Israel. The study also finds that there was less use of hyperbolism and rhetoric lexicalisation. The study concludes that Iran's foreign policy behaviour in the post-JCPOA collapse era was neither conservative nor moderate. It can rather be attributed as 'rational'. The stress on effective and result-oriented engagements with the US and the European Union and the opening up to anti-ideological blocs appear to be a result of realistic calculations of strategic and economic challenges and opportunities. The study uses van Dijk's selected discursive strategies that sync with positive self and negative other representation. These findings have larger implications for future nuclear negotiations, the fight against terrorism, Middle

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Introduction

Ideologies are hidden in the discourse and discourse serves as a powerful instrument to influence and gain political advantage. President Ahmadinejad's conservative ideology failed to resolve Iran's economic woes and issues around its nuclear programme. He could not muster the international community's support against unfair treatment towards his country. Excessive criticism of international organisations and the world powers even further isolated Iran. Additionally, it also undermined Iran's image as a responsible and trustworthy state in the international community. These factors, along with domestic opposition, led to the fall of Ahmadinejad. In the 2013 presidential elections, the majority voted in favour of President Hassan Rouhani who was known as a 'moderate cleric' and an 'experienced negotiator'. Rouhani's rise to power can be contended as the beginning of an end to confrontational politics with the outside world.

President Rouhani previously served as Secretary of the Supreme Council for National Security Relations from 1988 to 2015. During his tenure at the Supreme Council, he extensively dealt with European countries. Based on his past experiences, the international community anticipated a major shift in Iran's foreign policy. It was also hoped that Rouhani's policies would help the country in ending its regional and international isolation. Rouhani on his part tried to improve Iran's image in the international community as a responsible state open to negotiations.[1] Although his *modus vivendi* towards the West was viewed with some scepticism, it greatly helped in reaching the landmark nuclear deal with the United States and the European Union which came to be known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

The JCPOA collapsed, however, when the US unilaterally walked out of it shortly after Donald Trump came into power. President Trump claimed that the deal failed to curtail Iran's nuclear ambitions and its regional influence. He re-imposed the international sanctions that were lifted as part of the deal. Trump also persuaded other signatories to back out of the nuclear deal to isolate Iran. These developments cast a negative shadow on Iran's moderate foreign policy pursuits. The way in which Iran responded had far-reaching consequences for future nuclear talks and regional security. Given the aforementioned, the questions arise: What was Iran's response in the face of Trump's 'maximum pressure' strategy? Was there any change in Iran's behaviour towards other signatories? How is the new Iranian president Ibrahim Raisi taking the nuclear issue with the European Union? Did Iran's moderate ideology remain intact following the collapse of the nuclear deal?

This study attempts to answer these questions through critical discourse analysis of President Rouhani's and Raisi's speeches at the United Nations. The selection of UN speeches as a corpus for discourse analysis was primarily for two reasons: the corpus was a primary document that was easily accessible and it was presented at the highest international forum which not just has a wider audience but a wider impact too. This study is timely as Iran and the European Union are seeking revival of the deal and looking for means to somehow re-engage the US. Also, Iran-Saudi back-channel dialogues are underway and Tehran is actively engaged in Afghanistan's affairs. In the given situation, it is important to understand the Iranian foreign policy behaviour to better understand Tehran's future course of relations.

The study begins with insights highlighting the importance of studying foreign policy behaviours and sheds light on critical discourse analysis as a tool to interpret underlying ideologies in foreign policy speeches. In the following sections, the study discusses the major foreign policy patterns deduced from Rouhani's and Raisi's UN speeches to uncover ideological metaphors.

Why and how do we study state behaviours?

Relationships are primarily built upon state behaviours and such behaviours determine the future course of directions. Knowing foreign policy behaviour, attitude, and approaches of a particular country is an important aspect in the field of international relations (IR). Like humans, every state seems to behave differently in different situations and IR scholars have been developing different modules and methods to infer foreign policy responses of particular states. This is not an exclusive feature of the IR discipline. Political scientists throughout history have been studying monarchs, empires, and kingdoms. Why a particular state adopts a certain behaviour is another mode of inquiry that fits in the reasoning and explanatory research. Central to this study are the questions of what has changed? And how much has changed? This mode of inquiry is essentially required to unravel the complexities associated with a particular phenomenon that in turn opens avenues for further reasoning. For instance, descriptive analysis of the Cuban Missile Crisis, a notable incident in international history, intrigued many scholars to contemplate the underlying reasoning to better predict state behaviours in a crisis.

So, to understand state behaviours and approaches, it is pertinent to focus on determinants such as history, geography, culture, and religion. However, examining behaviours in a crisis is something different that can be better analysed through discursive analysis of statements and speeches of the heads of the states. Discourse analysis is all about studying the language. The language can be written, spoken, and in the form of images or expressions. There is a strong connection between language and politics. States can use language to their advantage through its effective utilisation at both national and international levels.

According to Fairclough, "Discourse can misrepresent as well as represent realities, it can weave visions and imaginaries which can be implemented to change realities and, in some cases, improve human

well-being, but it can also rhetorically obfuscate realities, and construe them ideologically to serve unjust power relations." Fairclough argues that ideologies are hidden in the discourse that can be uncovered and interpreted through the effective use of discursive tools. According to Rahman, "Ideology represents politico-religious dogmas and beliefs, and they are embodied by the term 'worldview' as a whole." According to van Dijk, ideologies are the 'basis of discourse' and "this is through discourse the political ideologies are acquired, and expressed," and the legitimacy of actions is often gotten through political discourses.[2] How exactly one is moderate or conservative can be examined through unravelling the threads of cognition. Thus, investigation to reproduce underlying behaviour (ideology) has been central to the critical discourse analysis.

To extract behaviour or ideology from the text, van Dijk identified 27 categories of discursive analysis in which 'positive self-presentation and negative other representation' are macro-level and the rest are micro-level discursive strategies. Micro-level strategies include "Actor description, Authority, Burdon, Categorisation, Comparison, Consensus, Counterfactuals, Disclaimers, Euphuism, Evidentiality, Examples, Generalisation, Hyperbole, Implications, Irony, Lexicalisation, Metaphor, National self-glorification, Negative-others Representation, Norms, Number Games, Polarisation, Populism, Positive self-presentation, Presupposition, Vagueness, and Victimisation."[3] These categories altogether fall in Dijk's ideological square, premised around the following;

"Emphasise **our** good things

Emphasise **their** bad things

De-emphasise **our** bad things

De-emphasise **their** good things."[4]

These can be applied to all kinds of texts, talks, speeches, and actions to determine the underlying behaviour and the ideology.

What has already been done in the Iranian context?

In a discourse analysis framework, it has already been established that President Rouhani was following a moderate political ideology as compared to his predecessor Ahmadinejad. While using the discourse-historical approach, a study by Alemi analysed President Rouhani's and his predecessor Ahmadinejad's UN speeches by incorporating discourse features such as the representation of 'self and identity'. The study found a fundamental difference in language and the tone of both the presidents, wherein Ahmadinejad largely portrayed himself as the saviour of mankind and remained critical of the world powers, while President Rouhani followed a moderate approach and remained focused on specific foreign policy issues.

Another study by Kayvan Shakoury and Veronika Makarova used van Dijk's model of critical discourse analysis and investigated the differences between President Rouhani and President Ahmadinejad's UN speeches, both in view of micro- and macro-level discursive devices. Findings revealed that at the macro level, Ahmadinejad used more negative other discursive strategies in comparison to Rouhani. Ahmadinejad's focus remained on highlighting wrongdoings of the world powers that jeopardised global peace. The present study is distinct from the abovementioned studies as it seeks to interpret the change in the moderate foreign policy approach in the aftermath of the collapse of the nuclear deal.

Methodology

The UN speeches are written in a global context, and that context needs to be understood. For that purpose, this study employs van Dijk's approach to decipher underlying themes in President Rouhani's first speech at the United Nations in 2013, his last speech in 2020, and President Raisi's first speech at the 76th General Assembly Session of the United Nations. All three speeches were retrieved from the Iranian President's official website.[5] The study applies van Dijk's macro level of analysis of polarisation. This macro-level analysis attempts to discover underlying ideologies of positive self-presentation

and negative other representation in the text. The macro-level represents the gist of a text, the themes, the contexts, and the concepts at a broader scale and thus provides the global meaning of a text. The ideological pattern under the polarisation framework is viewed through some of van Dijk's micro-level discursive strategies such as "Actor description, Authority, Burdon, Categorisation, Comparison, Consensus, Disclaimers, Evidentiality, Generalisation, Hyperbole, Lexicalisation, Metaphor, National self-glorification, Populism, Victimisation." The selection of the first and the last speech of Rouhani has been made purposely for examining the change before and after the collapse of the nuclear deal. Additionally, the selection of Raisi's first speech (latest available) is based on examining the (dis)continuity of his predecessor's approach. The study argues that an increase or decrease in the employment of discursive strategies under the framework of polarisation will help understand Iran's foreign policy approach in the post-nuclear deal collapse era (i.e., to establish it as either hardliner, moderate, or rational).

Findings and Discussion

In the first corpus of around 2,654 words, the most frequently quoted word was 'violence'. Rouhani mentioned the word 'violence' in more than 15 places in different contexts such as strategic violence, structural violence, and violence and extremism. In all instances, violence, however, was categorised as 'fear'. In contrast, the words like human wisdom, tolerance, justice, collectivism, moderation, and peaceful means have been categorised as 'hope'. The whole corpus in a nutshell revolved around two broader themes, i.e., fear and hope.

Figure.1

Most-frequent Keywords
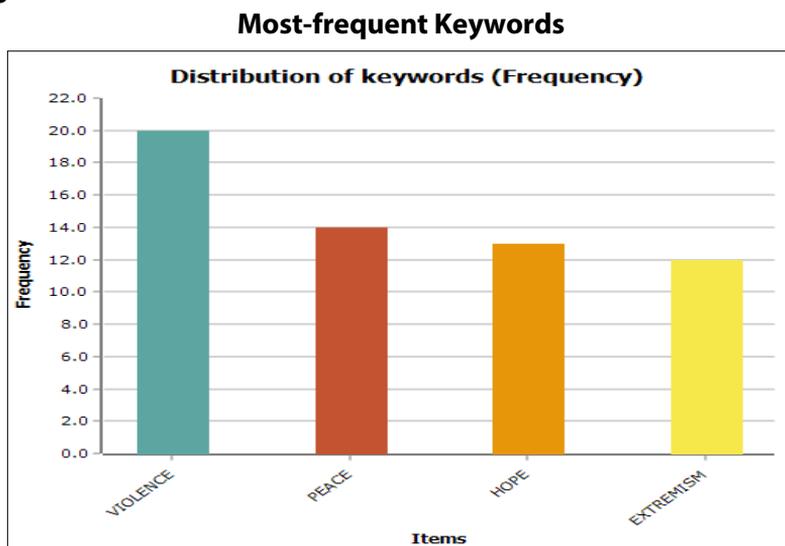
Throughout the speech, violence and extremism in all its manifestations have been discouraged and presented as the leading cause of spreading fear and pessimism across the globe. The aforesaid in view, Rouhani tried to convince the audience about the importance of peaceful solution for not only global problems but also for the security issues in the Middle East and its nuclear programme. His request to the world community to work together for justice and peace and presenting his country as a responsible and forthcoming state in all collective efforts demonstrates Iran's urge for greater integration. In other words, Rouhani pleaded Iran's case on 'moderate' ideological footings before the international community. The following sections shall highlight and discuss important *topoi* that Rouhani used in his first speech to understand Iran's departure from a conservative foreign policy approach.

World in Transition: Dangers of Violence

Rouhani regretted in his speech that the international discourse was heavily polarised between the centre and periphery and also between the civilised north and uncivilised south. And that was the sole

reason for the violent form of xenophobia such as faith-phobia, Islamophobia, Shia-phobia and Iran-phobia. Together, these, in his view, posed 'serious threats to the world peace and human security.'

> The prevalent international political discourse depicts a civilised centre surrounded by un-civilised peripheries [...]. The creation of illusory identity distinctions and the current prevalent violent forms of xenophobia are the inevitable outcome of such a discourse.

Rouhani in a passive manner blamed some actors on the world stage who still advocate military solutions and coercive measures to maintain the old mentality of the cold war, i.e., 'superior us' and 'inferior others'. For Rouhani, the deadly violence in the region including the "assassination of common people and political figures in Iran" was the outcome of this polarisation. But today in a transitional period, when vulnerability has become a global concern, a limited chance of a mistake can be accorded to the situation.

> [...] I should underline that illegitimate and ineffective threat to use or the actual use of force will only lead to further exacerbation of violence and crisis in the region [...] there is no guarantee that the era of quiet among big powers will remain immune from such violent discourses, practices and actions.[6]

The above statements emphasised that unfair treatment and discriminating behaviour with some states (including Iran) is counterproductive and needed to be stopped urgently. The tone cannot be read as 'threatening' but 'precautionary'. Rouhani used a 'consensus' discursive strategy to get universal support and endorsement on his violence narrative. The words 'illegitimate' and 'ineffective' with the threat used in a specific lexical style to embolden that illegitimate and ineffective threat or the actual use of force, is the very cause of furtherance of violence. The outcome, i.e., the furtherance of violence is presented in a 'counterfactual' framework. The use of the

personal pronoun 'I' refers to Rouhani's personal submission to the fact of increasing violence in case of continued illegitimate means. The above paragraph (i.e., para 13 of the speech) ends at a generalisation (for wider attention). However, paragraphs 11, 12, and 13 of the speech were replete with the 'examples' (a discursive strategy) in support of Rouhani's argument on violence. Para 14 employed a more 'populist' strategy by highlighting the killings of innocent people in the name of combating terrorism.

Half of Rouhani's speech stressed the collective efforts (depicting consensus) to deal with violence, extremism, xenophobia, and global security problems. In that sense, the coverage of polarisation in theory and practice was merely to bring the attention of the audience to the fact that Iran was mindful of targeted violence, discrimination, and exaggerated security threats (like Iranian threat which Rouhani claimed was nothing but illusionary and imaginary) that are often used as an excuse by the big powers for coercive measures, but Tehran desired to move forward.

> The Islamic Republic of Iran, as a regional power, will act responsibly with regard to regional and international security, and is willing and prepared to cooperate in these fields.

In the way forward, however, Rouhani employed a 'presupposition' strategy about his country as a 'regional power' to put it out for the world that Iran is a regional power and aspires to engage with the world and the regional neighbours from a position of strength. This reflects that the idea of an 'influential' Iran is deeply ingrained in Iran's ideology.

No Military Solution to World Problems

To resolve global security issues (manifest in his debate on violence), Rouhani discouraged military options as they only exacerbate violence and crises. Quoting from the past military interventions in the Middle East and West Asia, Rouhani argued that the use of force only

resulted in the killing of innocent people. Rouhani hailed Syria's singing of the Chemical Weapons Convention. While doing so, he emphasised that his country believed in the peaceful resolution of all disputes including its own nuclear issue. On nine occasions, he used the word militarism, militarise, military intervention, policies, solution, which stand quite significant in a corpus of 2,654 words.

> Militarism and the recourse to violent and military means to subjugate others are failed examples […]. Securing peace and democracy and ensuring the legitimate rights of all countries in the world, including in the Middle East, cannot – and will not – be realised through militarism.

Relating military actions with 'subjugation' reveals that the 'populist' discursive strategy was employed to earn the sympathy of sufferers. However, this was portrayed in a general context, not explicitly targeted against any specific country (i.e., the US). While discouraging the use of force, Rouhani's statement regarding Syria can be attributed as a positive self-presentation.

> […] when some regional and international actors helped to militarise the situation through infusion of arms and intelligence into the country and active support of extremist groups, we emphasised that there was no military solution to the Syrian crisis.

The use of the pronoun 'we' stresses Iran's positive self-presentation in promoting a peaceful resolution to the Syrian crisis. It also reflects the underlying ideological connotation for Iran referring to it as 'a major player in the region'.

Iran: The Harbinger of Peace; Making the case for the Nuclear Deal

Rouhani outrightly rejected 'Iranian threat' as baseless and clarified boldly that Iran by no means, was a threat to regional or international peace and security.

> […] Iran poses absolutely no threat to the world or the region.
> In Fact, in ideals as well as in actual practice, my country has
> been a harbinger of just peace and comprehensive security.

The use of the phrase 'my country' by Rouhani emphasised that he is a representative of the majority. It also reveals the ownership and indigenous support for Rouhani's message of 'hope' to the world. Otherwise, the word 'Iran' in contrast to 'my country' appeared quite natural and little appealing.

Regarding Iran's nuclear programme, Rouhani made it clear that it was for peaceful purposes. He declared before the international community that nuclear weapons (also other weapons of mass destruction) had no place in Iran's security doctrine. And, thus, Iran as a responsible state was ready to address reasonable concerns that the international community had. In turn, Iran was given a right to enrichment and other nuclear rights.

> […] notwithstanding the positions of others, this has been,
> and will always be, the objective of the Islamic Republic of
> Iran. Nuclear weapon and other weapons of mass destruction
> have no place in Iran's security and defense doctrine, and
> contradict our fundamental religious and ethical convictions.
> Our national interests make it imperative that we remove any
> and all reasonable concerns about Iran's peaceful nuclear
> program.

For removing uncertainties attached to Iran's nuclear programme, Rouhani offered to work with other countries transparently. In doing so, Rouhani again employed the phrase 'our national interests' instead of Iran's or 'my country's national interests' to embolden Iran's position in the regional context.

> … the Islamic Republic of Iran, as a regional power, is
> prepared to engage immediately in time-bound and result-
> oriented talks to build mutual confidence and removal
> of mutual uncertainties with full transparency [….] seeks
> constructive engagement with other countries based on
> mutual respect and common interest, and within the same

> framework does not seek to increase tensions with the United
> States [...] we expect to hear a consistent voice from
> Washington.

Mentioning the 'United States' demonstrated that Iran was seeking positive engagement with the US. With this, Rouhani set the tone for future cooperation with the world and the US, particularly, to resolve the nuclear issue. However, Rouhani explicitly related 'regional power' with the Islamic Republic of Iran (not just Iran) to offer bilateral as well as multilateral cooperation from the position of elevation. This reflects that Rouhani employed a 'presupposition' discursive strategy to augment his country's position.

Coalition for Enduring Peace

Rouhani ended his speech with hope and optimism about the future. He urged the international community to stand up against violence and extremism.

> …in the name of the Islamic Republic of Iran I propose, as a
> starting step, the consideration by the United Nations of the
> project: "the World against Violence and Extremism (WAVE).
> Let us all join this 'WAVE'.[7]

By using the prefix 'in the name of the Islamic Republic of Iran' before 'I', Rouhani tried to embolden the demand for working together to fight against violence and extremism as the voice of the people of Iran and his government.

In sum, Rouhani's first speech was more reflective of Iran's submission to a moderate foreign policy pursuit. The element of positive self was marginally low, however, negative other was there but portrayed in a subtle and 'vague' manner (discursive strategy) since the focus was more on victims rather than on actors, the culprits. Notably, there was only one instance of negative other framing (explicit) in terms of criticising the UN Security Council for not condemning the perpetrators of Iranian nuclear scientist. This is in complete contrast to Ahmadinejad's framing of the UN and the Security Council where he

vehemently criticised big powers' domination and the inefficiency of the world forum.

> […] had the Security Council not been under the domination of a limited number of governments? [...] UN's inefficiency has been on the rise […] existence of the veto right and monopolisation of power in the Security Council have made it nearly impossible to defend the rights of the nations […] the existence of discrimination and monopoly in the UN is in no way acceptable […].[8]

There was a dedicated albeit small paragraph for Palestine under the context of structural violence and human rights. There was no direct mention of the words 'Israel' and 'Zionism/Zionist' which demonstrates that Iran was mindful that confrontational politics could undermine Iran's ambitious start. Instead of hyperbolism (that Ahmadinejad used to convince the audience), there was an element of populism (highlighting the sufferings of victims of violence, coercive military actions, and economic sanctions). There was no use of 'victimisation' in the discourse. The overall context of the speech seemed more academic and positive. Based on the findings of the first speech of Rouhani, the following lines look into the last speech of Rouhani.

In the second corpus of around 1,568 words (quite smaller than the first corpus), 'peace' replaced the word 'violence' as the highest quoted word by Rouhani. It was used in the context of positive self-presentation as Iran remained on the right side of history and always supported and promoted 'peace'. The opposite of peace, the word 'war' was particularly quoted in the context of the US. The word 'extremism' was the third-most frequently quoted word in the speech, however, the context was different from the first corpus. Similar to peace and war, extremism was used for glorifying Iranian response to extremism. The word 'sanctions' was also used frequently in a more specific manner (Iranian context as compared to a more general one). The overall

context revolved around a single theme: the realisation of injustice and unfair treatment with Iran.

Figure.2

Most-frequent Keywords

Distribution of keywords (Frequency)
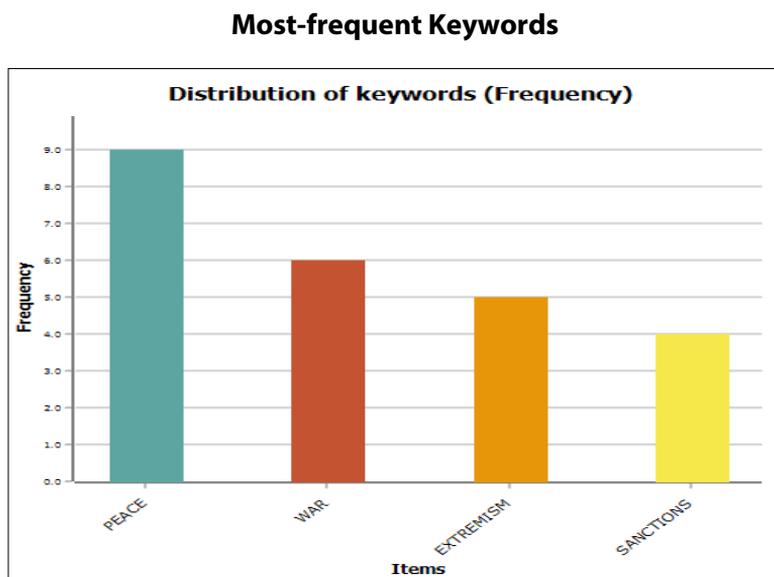
Pandemic and Sanctions

Rouhani started by highlighting the challenge of Covid-19 that confronted the world. Turning to his country, Rouhani regretted that in the difficult time of the pandemic, Iran was facing severe economic sanctions.

> All of us across the globe are experiencing difficult times during the pandemic. However, my nation, the resilient people of Iran, instead of enjoying global partnership and cooperation, is grappling with the harshest sanctions in history imposed in blatant and gross violation of the Charter of the United Nations, international agreements and Security Council Resolution 2231.[9]

The mention of violations of the Security Council resolution reveals Rouhani's respect for the UN and its Security Council. From a discursive strategy point of view, Rouhani employed 'evidentiality' to

support his claim about the violation of the Security Council resolution. The element of 'victimisation' can be observed as the people of Iran were suffering due to sanctions. On another occasion, Rouhani appreciated the presidents and the members of the Security Council (especially Russia and China) for stopping the US from exploiting the Security Council Resolution 2231. In other words, Rouhani hailed the sanctity of the UN and its Security Council. This reveals that Iran was mindful of not criticising the UN and the Security Council as it could jeopardise Iran's hard-earned image as a responsible state. He was also mindful that his predecessor failed to get relief for Iran with excessive use of negative other representation of world powers and inefficacy of the UN).

Negative Other Representation (the United States)

For greater attention and support for his argument against the US, Rouhani compared the widely circulated footage of US police kneeling on an African American's neck with the US treatment of independent nations (including Iran).

> The footage broadcast to the world concerning the treatment of an African American by the US police is reminiscent of our own experience. We instantly recognise the feet kneeling on the neck as the feet of arrogance on the neck of independent nations.[10]

The use of metaphor appears out of context in comparison to historical facts that Rouhani quoted to highlight America's wrongdoings. Rouhani here employed a populist strategy to support his argument against US treatment with the independent nations. Although Rouhani wanted to tell the audience about Iran's sufferings, it was framed in a general context to meet the populism criteria.

Positive self-presentation (boasting)

Right after the quotation, Rouhani boasted about Iran's efforts of peace and support to the people of Afghanistan, Iraq, Kuwait, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Yemen. He boasted about Iran's efforts to fight

extremism and to protect the people regardless of their religious affinities. He mentioned General Soleimani as a hero who fought against violent extremism. Furthermore, he hailed Iran's contribution towards the UN, raised its diplomatic efforts that helped achieved the multilateral nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

> We stood with the people of Afghanistan against Soviet occupiers, domestic warlords, extremists, Al-Qaeda terrorists and American occupiers.
>
> We played a pivotal role in all peace and reconciliation processes, be it the 2001 Bonn Conference or regional initiatives.
>
> In the Mid 1980s, we called for collective security arrangements in the Persian Gulf.
>
> We proposed World against Violence and Extremism (WAVE), which was unanimously adopted by this Assembly.
>
> We offered a non-aggression pact to our neighbours and in 2019 we presented HOPE (Hormuz Peace Endeavour).
>
> We were the first country in the region to stand with the people and government of Kuwait against occupation by Saddam.
>
> We stood with the people of Iraq against Saddam tyranny, U.S. occupation and Daesh savagery […] we supported all Iraqi—whether Kurd or Arab, Sunni or Shia, Yazidi or Christian.
>
> We stood alongside the people of Syria against tens of terrorist Takfiri groups, separatists and foreign fighters.
>
> We stood with the people and government of Lebanon against Zionist occupiers.
>
> […] in 2012, we presented a democratic solution through a referendum in Palestine.
>
> We vociferously called for justice against aggression for the besieged people of Yemen and presented a four-point peace plan at the outset of hostilities in 2015.

> […] in 2015, we achieved the JCPOA as one of the biggest accomplishments of the history of diplomacy and remained faithful to it in spite of persistent violations by the United States.[11]

Rouhani excessively used a positive-self discursive strategy in defence of his argument that Tehran did not deserve the kind of treatment meted out to it in the form of sanctions. Rouhani could also directly criticise the US and condemn sanctions, but the boasting was purposely adopted to justify the Iranian stance as a responsible state and to seek global appreciation. In other words, Rouhani tried to earn the international community's overwhelming support to pressurise the US. About JCPOA, he stressed that Iran was still adhering to the spirit of JCPOA despite the unilateral withdrawal of the US. This also indicates that Iran was open to negotiation with other signatories.

Moreover, Rouhani explicitly used the element of positive self-presentation (that was negligible in the first speech) to make everyone realise the unjust treatment his country was receiving at the hands of the US despite remaining faithful to the obligations of the nuclear deal. Although there was a significant shift from populism (highlighting the sufferings of victims) to more positive self-framing (stereotypical arguments), hyperbolism in the discourse remained relatively low (for instance: *The United States can impose neither negotiation nor war on us.*).[12] The negative other-framing in Rouhani's last speech was glaringly reflective but only in the context of the US. By doing so, Rouhani urged the world community to stand by Iran as the country did not deserve the sanctions. There was not a single instance of criticising the UN and the Security Council that demonstrates Iran's expectations from the UN and its Security Council. This also indicated that Iran's approach towards the UN and the world community turned out to be more modest. So, in that sense, Rouhani's last speech was more practical and targeted than academic. What Rouhani wanted to achieve was 'endorsement' of his stance (using metaphor and an emphasis of good things) that could be exploited to pressurise the US. The following section will cover the first

speech by Ibrahim Raisi to examine the frequency and the context of positive self-presentation and negative others.

Ebrahim Raisi's Speech at the United Nations General Assembly

In the third corpus of around 2,006 words, Ebrahim Raisi's focus remained on sanctions and condemnation of the US in particular and Zionism in general. Academically, Raisi's first speech resembles Rouhani's first speech. Rouhani began with violence and extremism as the challenge and ended his speech with hope. In similitude, Raisi began with terrorism as the challenge and ended up talking about dealing with those challenges rationally. Like Rouhani, who set the tone for multilateral cooperation on the nuclear issue, Raisi set the stage for the revival of the nuclear deal and greater integration with the world. The replacement of the word violence/extremism with terrorism by Raisi has its context. Furthermore, the looming fear of Daesh, Islamic State (IS) - Khorasan, and Al-Qaeda have heightened in their area of origin, Afghanistan. So, the reference to terrorism was timely and unique in the sense it has given a fresh dimension to Iran's foreign policy. Iran is actively involved in managing the situation in Afghanistan and Raisi's emphasis on the issue of terrorism points to the effort of highlighting Iran's rational and pragmatic approach towards global problems. It also indicates that Iran was ready to work with the international community against this menace. Hence, in line with this thinking, Raisi was not only setting the tone for the revival of the nuclear deal but also seeking greater integration, cooperation, and partnership.

Figure. 3

Most-frequent Keywords

Distribution of keywords (Frequency)
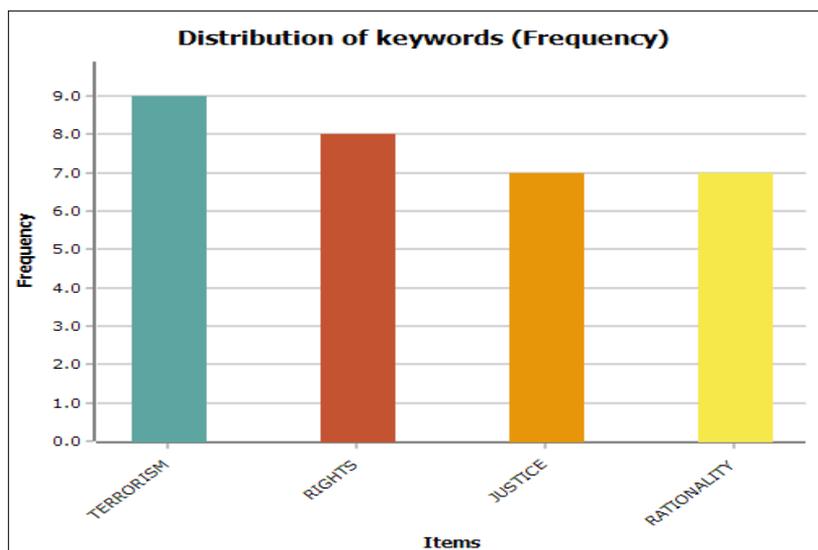
Pandemic and Sanctions

Like Rouhani, Raisi also condemned the sanctions amidst the pandemic. He related the sanctions with the 'crime against humanity' and 'the new way of war' that the US was waging on nations.

> Sanctions are the US's new way of war with the nations of the world […] Sanctions, especially sanctions on medicine at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, are crimes against humanity[…].[13]

> I, on behalf of the Iranian nation and millions of refugees hosted by my country, would like to condemn the continued illegal US sanctions especially in the area of humanitarian items, and demand that this organised crime against humanity be recorded as a symbol and reality of the so-called American human rights.[14]

> Despite the fact that the Islamic Republic of Iran was keen from the outset to purchase and import COVID-19 vaccines from reliable international sources, it faced inhumane medical sanctions.[15]

Raisi equated the sanctions with an 'organised crime'. The same was the case with Rouhani, as he equated the sanctions with 'structural

violence'. Replacement of the phrase 'structural violence' with an 'organised crime' was purposely done to emphasise American actions as 'illegitimate'. Overall, the context of discussing the sanctions is similar to Rouhani (populism and given the sufferings of common people).

Negative Other Representation (United States)

Like Rouhani, Raisi also employed a metaphor to undermine US credibility at home and abroad. While doing so, Raisi quoted the attack on US congress and incident of people dropped from the US plane in Kabul to stress that the US was not a credible state in the world.

> This year, two scenes made history: one was on January the 6th when the US congress was attacked by the people and, two, when the people of Afghanistan were dropped down from the US planes in August. From the Capitol to Kabul, one clear message was sent to the world: the US' hegemonic system has no credibility, whether inside or outside the country.[16]

Instead of withdrawal, Raisi used the word 'expelled' for the US about Afghanistan and Iraq. Like Rouhani, Raisi used the word 'occupier' for the Zionist regime, however, relating it with the worst form of terrorism like slaughter (not killing) of women and children (the vulnerable class) indicating that Raisi employed 'populism' card to malign Israel.

> Today, the US does not get to exit Iraq and Afghanistan but is expelled. The occupier Zionist regime is the organiser of the biggest state terrorism whose agenda is to slaughter women and children in Gaza and the West Bank.

On another occasion, Raisi used populist card in an attempt to gather sympathy and the support of the US people by saying that:

> "[…] the US taxpayers, who have to pay for this lack of rationality [...]."

Reaching out to the people of the US was the same card that the US has long been employing to exploit the protests and strikes in Iran to gather the sympathy of the Iranian people. This was unique in Raisi's

approach toward the US as Rouhani did not exploit the 'people's perspective'.

Positive Self-Presentations

Like Rouhani, Raisi also hailed Iran's contribution to resolving the issue of Palestine.

> "There is only one solution: holding a referendum with the participation of all Palestinians of all religions and ethnicities including Muslims, Christians and Jews. This solution was set forth by the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran many years ago which is now registered as one of the official documents of the United Nations."

Raisi also underscored Iran's efforts to fight extremism while working with the government and the people of Syria and Iraq to mitigate the threat of ISIS. Raisi, however, related its fighting against the ISIS as Iran's policy to protect the territorial integrity of all countries in the region.

> It has been our policy to strive for the preservation of stability and territorial integrity of all the countries of the region.

The use of the word 'our' reflects that Iran was mindful that its security is intractably linked with the security of all countries in the region and vice-versa. This also reveals Iran's strategic limitation and gives meaning to the Iranian nuclear programme which seems to be nothing more than rhetoric, and deterrence in security discourse.

Convergence with the Rest of World

Like Rouhani, Raisi ended his speech on a pleasant note.

> Nukes have no place in our defense doctrine and deterrence policy. The Islamic Republic considers the useful talks whose ultimate outcome is the lifting of all oppressive sanctions […] while decisively defending all its rights and the interests of its people, Iran is keen to have large-scale political and economic cooperation and convergence with the rest of the world. I seek effective interaction with all the countries of the

world, especially with our neighbours and shake their hands warmly.

In sum, there was less focus on positive self-presentation as compared to Rouhani's last speech. However, instances of negative others about the US were prominent. In both cases, an attempt was made to single out the US for sabotaging the nuclear deal. Rouhani and Raisi respectively presented Iran as a responsible state that believes in the sanctity of the UN and its Security Council, holds international norms, sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations in high regard and as a country open to nuclear dialogues and future cooperation with the world. Both reiterated that nukes do not have any space in Iran's defence doctrine and deterrence policy. Both leaders showed seriousness towards nuclear negotiations by emphasising result-oriented talks. Considering the frequency of using personal pronouns by Rouhani and Raisi in the pre and the post-breakup of the nuclear deal era, there is a sharp increase in Rouhani's usage of the words 'we', 'our' and 'us' following the collapse of the nuclear deal. This indicates that Rouhani emphasised more on his country's 'good' things to make Iran's case strong against the US. Raisi, however, used personal pronouns less frequently in his first speech. This shows that Raisi set the tone for future cooperation like Rouhani. Moreover, in all three speeches, there was no notable increase in negative others representations (hardline).

Table 1

Frequency of personal pronouns

Pronounce	Rouhani (first) Pre-collapse N-Deal	Rouhani (last) Post-collapse N-Deal	Raisi (first)
We	13	22	7
I	9	3	4
Our	9	14	8
My	4	1	4
US	4	7	13
Total	39	47	36

Conclusion

The critical discourse analysis reveals that Rouhani's first speech pursued engagement with the US in a precise and academic way, whereas his last speech was a kind of protest against the sanctions. Raisi's first speech was a replica of Rouhani's first speech as both ended their speeches on seeking effective engagement and result-oriented talks. Following the collapse of the nuclear deal, Rouhani employed more positive self-presentations whereas Raisi comparatively used more negative others representation against the US. However, in comparison to Ahmadinejad, Raisi's usage of negative others representation was very low. In both cases, the discursive strategies of positive self and negative other representations appear to be targeted at strengthening Iran's case as a rational and responsible state despite sanctions rather than provoking the US.

There was a consensus between Rouhani and Raisi on the foreign policy approach towards the European Union, Middles East, and the UN and its Security Council. Both sought greater participation and cooperation. Raisi's approach, however, was more practical as he clarified that Iran was ready if the US and the EU were ready to make some serious efforts. Defending the nuclear programme as peaceful

remained consistent before and after the collapse of the nuclear deal. However, in the post-JCPOA collapse period, there was a greater stress on defending the nuclear programme as peaceful by categorically stating that nuclear weapons had no place in Iran's security doctrine. Iran's quest for a greater role remained intact in the aftermath of the collapse of the nuclear deal. However, this quest appears to be based on strategic and economic limits. Therefore, there was a greater stress on cooperation both at regional and international levels.

The study argues that the collapse of the nuclear deal has brought significant changes in Iran's foreign policy. The collapse of the nuclear deal marks the transition of Iran's foreign policy from moderation to becoming more rational through balancing between available resources and strategic and economic constraints. Iran's cooperation with the UN nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency indeed reflects Tehran's rational approach. Moreover, cooperation with the European Union coupled with bringing more transparency in the nuclear programme can yield positive outcomes from the ongoing nuclear negotiations.

The study further argues that change in Iran's approach has greater implications for its future role in the region: for instance, Iran is dealing with the Taliban, who have been Tehran's arch-rivals in the past. Tehran is also vocal on the subject of terrorism and counterterrorism. Since India's approach is in sync with the West and the US, New Delhi can be Tehran's potential gateway. In line with this thinking, the relationship between Iran and India is likely to grow further in near future. Additionally, Iran, through its friendly approach towards Pakistan and the Central Asian states, is earning more credibility for its rational approach. It is argued that although Iran is aspiring for greater ties with regional as well as Western countries, chances of Tehran joining any kind of Western alliance to counter extremism and terrorism is less likely. Nevertheless, Iran's support to fight terrorism on multiple grounds will remain firm.

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF NEO-REALISM IN EXPLAINING THE US INDO-PACIFIC POLICY

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Abstract

Many scholars in the past have studied the Indo-Pacific region using realist and liberal perspectives. Liberal theorists present the formation and success of ASEAN as the pinnacle of regional cooperation. On the other hand, the realist theorists seek to explain the competition between China and neighbouring states in the South China Sea (SCS) as the inevitable outcome of international politics in the absence of any authority. However, in the scholarly literature, there is a gap in addressing the significance of the Indo-Pacific region vis-à-vis the international structure which is now predominantly influenced by the US-China competition. Hence, neo-realism elaborates the functioning of international structure and, thus, the paper explains the US tilt towards the Indo-Pacific and how neorealism can be applied to describe its competition with China at the global level. The paper frames its argument in three parts. First, the basic tenets of neo-realism are defined and compared with the features of classical realism. Second, the neo-realist approach is adopted to analyse the context of US Indo-Pacific policy. Finally, through the case studies of Quad and AUKUS, the validity of neo-realism is discussed.

Keywords: *Indo-Pacific, China-US competition, neo-realism, international structure, Quad, AUKUS*

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Introduction

Since the emergence of the nation-state system until the Second World War, the absence of any overarching power or authority alongside the existence of many great powers tangled in ferocious competition, resulted in an international system that functioned on anarchic lines. The first attempt to tackle this state of anarchy, initiated in the aftermath of the First World War, was through the League of Nations. The institutionalisation was done to protect the weaker states by granting them equal status in the international structure and prevent the outbreak of war through a rule-based order. However, the German assertion in Europe in the shape of the Second World War led to the failure of the League of Nations. According to EH Carr, the socio-political realities and the conflict of interests between states was the reason for the failure of this ideal venture that was based on democratic peace and borderless societies governed by these institutions.[1] In the post-Second World War period, another attempt was made with the creation of the United Nations (UN) in 1945 to act as a platform for implementing universal values and a rule-based system. However, the structure of the UN was formulated in a way that the core authority rested within its Security Council (UNSC) comprising China, France, Russia, the UK, and the US. The very notion of 'first among equals' contradicted the basis of the UN Charter, which declares every state in the international system as equal in status.[2] Furthermore, the institutional status coupled with the military, economic, and ideological strength of both the US and USSR determined the post-Second World War period as bipolar. The collapse of the bipolar structure in the aftermath of the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the unhindered US supremacy for the next 20 years are seen as watershed events that flourished the liberal norms and values in two stages, i.e., institutional liberalism (from 1991 to 2001 through promoting democracy and capitalism) and interventionist liberalism (from 2001 to 2011 by using the military muscle to impose liberal values in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya). Nevertheless, the

diffusion of threat from these countries was replaced by the emergence of a power vacuum which invited the regional states to wield their influence, i.e., Iran became more influential inside Iraq while Libya has been experiencing a civil war between the Government of National Accord (GNA) and Khalifa Haftar's forces. Moreover, the burden of the financial crisis on the US economy also contributed to shrinking the US hegemonic clout across the globe which was filled by China's economic rise. As the Chinese economic presence around the globe increased, its assertion, most notably in the Indo-Pacific region, where the US navy operates to ensure freedom of navigation as well as to consolidate its global power status, has increased. It represents a dilemma for the US global status and stakes in the region. Resultantly, the US is once again confronted by a competitor at the international level which gives prominence to the tenets of realism over liberalism.

Therefore, this article attempts to assess the US policy in the Indo-Pacific by addressing the following two inter-related questions:

1. Why is neo-realism the main theory to explain US policy in the Indo-Pacific?
2. How does competition in the Indo-Pacific impact the international structure?

Theoretical Framework

Neo-realism is also termed structural realism. It is mostly premised around the stable operation of the international system through the causal patterns in the behaviour of states and the idea of 'balance of power'. The main idea behind the development of this theory was to elaborate the shortcomings of classical realism that could not explain the systemic properties of international politics and focused solely upon the state-level analysis to explain the cause(s) of conflicts through the inter-related features of power maximisation, self-interest, and competition.[3] However, neorealism moves beyond this theoretical abstraction at the state level and gives a more scientific approach. Neo-realists did not believe in this narrow definition of international

relations rather argued that it was much more than human nature, selfishness, and self-interests. Kenneth Waltz, the architect of neo-realism, in his book *Theory of International Politics* highlighted the role of the international system as the prevalent cause of the states' behaviour.[4] He pointed out that the international system had an anarchical structure that drove states towards power accumulation and competition to survive and thrive, i.e., every state acts similarly.[5] Neo-realists say that states, no matter how powerful they are and how much institutional dominance they enjoy at home, are not free of the constraints that the international structure puts on them. Hence, states act under the international political structure and their positioning in the international hierarchy.[6] Classical realism takes the state as an autonomous actor in the international system, whereas neorealism considers it as an adaptive/passive actor in the international system. Neo-realists contradict the classical realist argument that instead of pursuing absolute gain, states tend to focus on relative gains, i.e., assessing the cost-benefit analysis vis-à-vis the competitor.[7]

Within the context of neo-realism, two sub-divisions broadly define the state's behaviour, i.e., defensive and offensive realism. Under defensive realism, states tend to prefer defence over offence through either building up their military arsenal (mostly practised by medium powers) or through extending their security sphere to other territories or states, i.e., through the formation of protégés (practised by the great powers). Through the second approach, great powers tend to ensure the balance of threat in accordance with the perception of threat dependent upon the potential as well as the proximity. However, defensive realism also explains the eruption of war as a *misjudgement*. When a state takes a defensive measure, it could be perceived as offence and aggression and, thus, it is the tragedy of international politics, as Waltz argued, that put the states in a difficult position.[8] On the other hand, Mearsheimer frames great powers as power maximisers. Owing to the anarchic system, suspicious of rival states'

behaviour and being inherently offensive, great powers exploit the absence of universal authority to provide security guarantees and dominate other states.[9]

Through both these concepts, the application of neo-realism can aptly be applied to the US policy in the Indo-Pacific. Defensive realism can be used to explain the US policy towards China in the Indo-Pacific as an attempt to balance the latter's power to maintain the status quo. Although bilateral conflicts make their relations uncertain, as a whole they can cooperate through balancing power in achieving their respective goals to prevent the conflictual scenario in the region. Nevertheless, by employing the tenets of offensive realism, the two countries challenge the status quo and are seeking to maximise their power to gain utmost influence in the Indo-Pacific region. Thus, there is a competition for hegemony between the two states that has been shaping the region as a conflict zone.

Renewed US Focus on the Indo-Pacific

The Obama administration's policy of 'Pivot to Asia' was simply an extension of George Bush's policy of developing friendly and cordial relations with the Asian region, given the growing realisation of China's emergence as a dominant economic power. The US talked about the military presence in the region, helped in developmental projects and most importantly established alliances with states that shared a similar vision for the area.[10] The most notable efforts in this regard were the 2009 trip and visit by the then Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton, to the region and the ASEAN Secretariat. Hilary Clinton signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) which signified the basis of the US role in Southeast Asia.[11] Obama also visited Asia in 2010 and the first bilateral strategic dialogue between the US and Philippines was held in 2011.

The Obama administration laid out three objectives in the Indo-Pacific. First, it highlighted the US economic interests in the region owing to the prosperous and growing economies of ASEAN states. Second, considering China's claims over the disputed maritime territory

in the region and the possible hurdles that it could create for the US freedom of navigation, it was important to develop plans to curtail it. Third, the US had an important task to ensure its commitment to the region to maintain good ties with its allies as a by-product of being the policeman state.[12] Nevertheless, the US perception of China as a potential military and political challenge remained the galvanising factor between itself and its regional allies. Although the Obama administration claimed the US tilt towards the region to be for economic, political, diplomatic, and cultural reasons, its politico-military alliances with the regional states cannot be overlooked. The US has increased its military presence in the South China Sea, whereas Beijing has claimed most of this disputed waterway. The US sends routine missions in the South China Sea that evolves China's response. For example, the Carrier Strike Group One (CSG1) units have had military exercises with the Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force (JMSDF) units such as the Malabar 2021 and the Maritime Partnership Exercise.[13] The increased military presence of the US is attributed to the expanded role of China in the region while the US was involved in its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, once the US had reduced its commitments in the Middle East, under the pretext of the free market, trade, and freedom of navigation, the US focused on the Indo-Pacific and justified its military presence by stating its support for weaker states like Taiwan, Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei.[14] The persistence of US naval presence in the region reflected the US policy of dismantling China's claims in the South China Sea, which for China is a backyard for economic and security purposes. The region is home to conflicts and diplomatic standoffs as it is rich in natural oil and gas, fisheries, trade routes, and military bases.[15] The South China Sea is rich in hydrocarbons and therefore has become the bone of contention among China and the neighbouring states and also among the US and China. Furthermore, China has claimed the disputed islands as its territory in the region and hence it rejects the application of liberal rules. This is to

say that in 2016, the Hague Tribunal gave the decision in favour of the Philippines in its case against China on the disputed islands and stated that China had violated the sovereign rights of the Philippines in those waters by disturbing its petroleum exploration and constructing artificial islands. The tribunal also said that China could not make territorial claims as some of the waters were within the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of the Philippines.[16] However, the Chinese rejection of the tribunal decision raised security concerns due to the intensification of maritime disputes. Both the US (along with its allies) and China are contesting each other's claims in the region and have different interpretations of freedom of navigation. Amidst the rift between the US and China, regional states are left with the dilemma of balancing between the two powers. For them, China's rise complements the economic development of regional states while the US military presence ensures their territorial security.

Thus, in the US Indo-Pacific context, neo-realism seems more applicable as it focuses on the structure of the international system and explains states' behaviour under it. From the standpoint of defensive realism, Chinese dominance and political stability depend upon free accessibility to resources and markets which it will try to protect. The Chinese grand strategy of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) testifies its ambition of emerging as an influential power across regions and in the international structure. However, as per China's official policy, its economic influence is not directed towards challenging US supremacy but to reinstating its position in the international hierarchy. Nevertheless, being tangled in the *Thucydides Trap,* which proposes the vulnerability of an established power by the rising power, the US adopted the policy of Free and Open Indo-Pacific to counter Chinese inroads in the region through the BRI. Accordingly, regard, the latter adopted the strategy of A2/AD, i.e., anti-access/area denial, to safeguard its interests in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in the South China Sea. Both the states have adopted the official position of a defensive strategy

against each other, however, as any defensive tactic of one is deemed as an offensive act by the other, the concept of offence and defence, particularly in the South China Sea, becomes indistinguishable.[17] China looks towards settling its affairs in the South China Sea without an external actor and most notably a major power, i.e., the US. It is for this reason that China has called for a settlement among the neighbouring states without any US influence and therefore has promoted the idea of 'Asia for Asians'.[18] Beijing is focused on a much more open and free dialogue with its neighbours and is looking to maintain regional primacy through calculated policies and strategies like anti-access and area denial. These strategies help China in cutting off US strategic proximity to China in the South China Sea region. China's A2/AD strategy intends to halt the enemy's movement on the battlefield, stop the adversary's military movement in the operation area using attack aircraft, warships, and ballistic and cruise missiles to strike the target. In that, air denial is a defensive strategy to deny freedom of action to the enemy using advanced air and sea defence systems.[19] While practising this strategy, China increased its military presence in the South China Sea which led to the inevitable competition with the US. With advanced technology, China is assertively playing its role by using maritime and air defence systems alongside advanced ballistic and cruise missiles to deter the US. China has deployed anti-ship cruise missiles like the Yj-12 and Yj-18 supersonic missiles with an approximate range of 500 kilometres. The Yj-100 is its longest-range Anti-Ship Cruise Missile (ASCM), ranging between 650 and 800 kilometres. China also possesses air and Ground-Launched Cruise Missiles (GLCM), with a range that is over 1500 kilometres.[20]

Offensive realism entails that states act in pre-emption during a deterrence dilemma, perceiving the capacity build-up of the rival state as provocative, or in some cases, threatening. Therefore, to counter this threat, Washington unveiled a 'third offset' strategy which will help it with power projection and in deterring adversaries in the South China

Sea region, whilst reassuring its allies. The US under this strategy is seemingly looking to bolster US conventional military power by mobilising innovations, technologies, and new reforms.[21] Moreover, it is noteworthy that the third offset strategy was developed as a rebuttal to China's strategy of the hybrid conflict and A2/AD. Despite China's insistence that the aforementioned policies were developed for different purposes, the US seemingly perceived them as the former's agenda for power maximisation. Furthermore, keeping this in view, former US President Donald Trump initiated the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA), which was signed in December 2018. The Act iterated the fact that the US has been giving a lot of significance to East Asia, Southeast Asia, and Oceania and that these regions have become a focal point in the US foreign policy. India was given the status of a 'major defence partner' under the Act—an upgrade from the status of a 'strategic ally' under the Obama Administration. The Act also proposed the continuation of cooperation with its treaty allies like Thailand, the Philippines, Australia, Japan, and South Korea. In ARIA, three interrelated aspects of the US policy merged to solidify its relations in the region, i.e., economic, military, and political. In economic terms, China has used predatory economic policies and protectionism, trade tariffs, and modernisation alongside development projects to influence its neighbouring states to reorder the Indo-Pacific region to its advantage. The US in return hardened its China policy when it threatened to apply tariffs on Chinese imports and wanted China to revise its policies on issues like the trade deal, technological theft, and currency manipulation.[22] Furthermore, the US investments in the region have renewed as part of counter-balancing the Chinese financial outreach. To contain China's rise under its rebalance approach, the US focused more on the economic and military elements. Under the Obama administration, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) served as an economic NATO in Asia, assisting in side-lining China and in undermining its influence over the region.[23] In the first phase of the

Trump administration, the US withdrew from the TPP although it proved to be an effective tool in containing China and was central to the US's 'Pivot to Asia' strategy. As a direct counter to China's territorial claims, Trump focused on fighting Beijing's assertiveness with unilateralism in his foreign policy and focused on the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy (FOIP) Act. Trump strengthened defence and security partnerships with its allies in the region to contain China. In 2018, he re-negotiated the South Korea-US Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) to lower the US trade deficit.[24] In the political domain, the US has been promoting its values to transform the region into a democracy. Democracy has been in regression in most of the South Asian states, which have witnessed the rise of populist and nationalist leaders, but under the Trump administration, the prospects of democratisation of states in the South China Sea region increased as Trump encouraged these allies to counter China and its presence through a liberal rules-based order. To fight China's revisionist policies in the Indo-Pacific, the US has been asserting itself through the democratisation of regional allies.[25] It already considers India as its strongest democratic partner and is now working to incentivise the democratisation of states like the Philippines and Thailand. The promotion of democracy to build a consensus of like-minded states against a common challenge reasserts the US's position as a global leader. Furthermore, the US policy of establishing value-based ties highlights the reconfiguration of ideological politics in the post-Cold War period which presents the potential of bloc politics. Lastly, the US has also pursued the military option through the formation of two organisations, i.e., Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) which comprises the US, India, Japan, and Australia and AUKUS which includes Australia, the US, and the UK. In Biden's presidency, the focus on Indo-Pacific has further deepened which can better be explained through describing the aforementioned organisations.

The Quad

The Quad includes the United States, India, Australia, and Japan, and is an informal group that has intensified its security and economic ties as a measure to counter China. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad in short, first came together in 2007 under the vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific. However, it got disbanded due to protests and backlash from China.[26] Quad member states are working on handling the security, economic, health, and other issues that they might face being vibrant economies. The focus of this group shifted because of China's assertive behaviour in the region, which they wanted to counter with a more constructive approach. From being an economic alliance, Quad shifted its focus to security issues and the joint naval exercises comprising all four nations started in November 2020 in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).[27] In this informal arrangement, India is a strategic partner of the US while Japan and Australia are its treaty allies. A lot of global export and import passes through this region. According to a UN Report, about 42 per cent of the world's exports and 38 per cent of global imports are speculated to pass through this area.[28] Being a revisionist state, China is not only challenging the status quo in the region but also poses a challenge to the Western-led democratic and rule-based values that the Quad members are the torch-bearers of. Due to this commonality, there is a consensus between the member states since all Quad countries consider China's politico-economic as well as military activities in the region as a threat. Japan wants to offer the Southeast Asian states alternative sources of assistance and commerce. On the other hand, in addition to the Chinese assertion, India's crucial role for the US in terms of navigation, security, and ensuring the maintenance of rule-based order in the Indo-Pacific is pertinent. Indo-China relations have already dipped since the border clash between the two states in Galwan Valley in 2020 which resulted in casualties on both sides.[29] Furthermore, China also established its first military base in Djibouti which signifies its intent of ensuring its military presence in the

IOR.[30] Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that India does not want any clashes with China and is, therefore, maintaining a safe distance from it. India is well aware of the China-Pakistan strategic and economic collaboration and also the situation in Afghanistan that poses a serious terrorism threat to India. Therefore, it is most likely that India will avoid any active confrontation with China. For Australia, Quad is a way to deal with the non-traditional security threats and also other issues like climate change but most significantly, Australia too, like the other members, aims at countering China's dominance and influence in the region.

The Quad, after being resurrected in 2017, brought all the four states under one umbrella as they had common interests such as maintaining a stable balance of power in the region, freedom of the seas, an open rules-based order to counter the debt-trap diplomacy, and coercive strategies by China to make territorial claims in the South China Sea.[31] The US is making incremental progress in countering China and containing its rise via its allies in the region. Despite being under pressure from Beijing, the US renewed the Quad with a new purpose in March 2021 that evoked China's response of labelling the US decision as a strategic blunder.[32] China views this renewal as an attempt to contain its rise and one of the top Chinese diplomats labelled it as 'the Asian version of NATO'.[33] The four Quad member states converge on geostrategic interests that can be well explained using the neorealist perspective. The pivotal objective of these nations is to maintain a stable balance of power so that a regional state like China could be prevented from disturbing the status quo. As the neorealist assumptions suggest, the international system is anarchical and the states act in power-maximising ways to ensure their survival like the US as it attempts to counter China's rise, simultaneously building consensus to sustain the status quo. Moreover, the US does not want China's territorial claims to impede international trade or its ability to play the role of a balancer in the region by militarily supporting its

alliances in the South China Sea. Hence, Quad's perspective not only revolves around the like-minded states on common ideals but also entails the features of a regional politico-security setting that can ensure the survival of the US-led international order.

AUKUS

AUKUS was envisaged in September 2021 as a trilateral security arrangement between the US, the UK, and Australia. The inception of AUKUS is framed to be more consolidated than that of Quad for certain reasons. First, AUKUS highlights the nuclear-related transfer of arms, i.e., nuclear-submarine promised by the US and the UK to be delivered to Australia.[34] Second, the member-states of AUKUS have been close allies for decades. The UK has been the closest partner for the US and has supported the latter in its war against Iraq and Afghanistan. On the other hand, Australia has participated in every US-led war since 1917. Additionally, all three members of this alliance have been sharing their intelligence under the 'Five Eyes' alliance, formed during World War II. Australia shares a similar security arrangement with the UK as both states are members of the Five Powers Defence Arrangement (FPDA), along with New Zealand, Malaysia, and Indonesia.[35] Hence, both the US and the UK are streamlining their positions in the Indo-Pacific by elevating the role of Australia. Given global power competition, the US attempts to join the UK and Australia signifies three features: First, unlike Quad in which the regional participants collaborate under the US patronage, AUKUS explicitly highlights the US ambition of rallying international support for its Indo-Pacific strategy against China. It is evident from the inclusion of the UK and the importance of its defence arrangement with regional states (i.e., FPDA). Second, the US intends to direct its concentrated efforts against China which could be more focused. In Quad, for example, despite having Japan and India, the framework is less prospective in containing China, owing to economic compulsions and geographical proximity of both these states vis-à-vis China. On the other hand, Australia has been vocal against China by

demanding an international investigation into the outbreak of Covid-19 and banning Huawei 5G technology, while the UK is also searching for space in the Indo-Pacific through its 'Global Britain' policy in the post-BREXIT period.[36] Hence, Australia's apprehensions and Britain's ambitions can best be implemented under US sponsorship. Third, in sync with the first two arguments, by actively collaborating with the international powers in the Indo-Pacific, having a liberal global outlook, the US revitalises its leadership position which has been damaged during Trump's period.

AUKUS was articulated in a manner that ignored the EU interests. Since World War II, the US and EU have been constituting the 'Western bloc' and the 'liberal world order' that share almost similar views on major global issues like terrorism, democracy, international trade, and the threat from revisionist powers. Nevertheless, the BREXIT issue which European states consider to be influenced by the US and Trump's incessant demands from the European states to increase their contribution to the NATO budget significantly affected the transatlantic relations.[37] Although President Biden re-committed himself with the European security, AUKUS presented another issue of divergence between the US and EU. By openly criticising the AUKUS framework, France, despite spearheading the EU Indo-Pacific policy as a regional power, called back its ambassadors from the US and Australia. In the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy 2021, ASEAN states are given important status and confrontation with China is explicitly overruled.[38] This highlights two important features, i.e., Europe's participation in Indo-Pacific as a major actor and its contestation with the US. Hence, it paves the way for the unravelling of great powers' competition that includes China, the US-led bloc and the EU, which testifies the neorealist claims of power maximisation and mutual mistrust, i.e., a state of anarchy.

Conclusion

It is important to note that the US has been using the South China Sea disputes as a reason for its military advancement to ensure its

military presence in the region to contain a rising China. Therefore, the neorealist theory explains the US practices in the Indo-Pacific region. Rather than using realist explanations, this paper has cautiously examined the US pivot towards the region using both offensive and defensive realism. It is noteworthy to witness the global power shift from the West towards the East in terms of both economic rise and military strength while China finds itself at the centre of this shift. The other countries in the region also have incentives to increase their relative power through allying with the global power (i.e., the US) as the neo-realist theory suggests. The US planned to increase its military presence in the region and has worked to elevate its status. In the case of the US military actions, offensive realism seems to be more persuasive because of the establishment of its military footprint in the region which can help the US sustain its hegemony in the region. The Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership Agreement was initiated by the US to establish economic hegemony and side-line China's ambitious BRI project in the region. This agreement was based on the models of past US free-trade agreements which highlight the US policy of developing a rule-based order in opposition to China. However, as the US proactively tries to contain China, its efforts in the region contradict that of Europe and some regional allies like India and Japan. Hence, proving the relevance of defensive realism, as Europe seeks cooperation with China. In the case of Sino-Indian economic relations, both states have been witnessing a rise in their bilateral trade. Both defensive and offensive realism is reflected in the US strengthening of alliances and domination of multilateral regional organisations or mechanisms. The US has supported Japan's provocative actions in the Sino-Japanese island dispute to balance China's influence in the region and secondly to gain the hegemonic position by weakening China. The US does not want the situation to escalate into a war in the region which is a defensive realist approach. In this regard, the US has time and again threatened China with sanctions; an act that explains the prevalent

trade war between the two. Trump's 'America First' policy and sanctions alongside trade war are also regarded as offensive realist policies. The transformation of economic confrontation towards the military aspect, i.e., AUKUS, is yet another explanation of neo-realist claims that are based on multi-level engagement. Conclusively, this paper is a preliminary attempt to analyse the international order through US actions in the Indo-Pacific. As the shift from Europe to Asia is happening and China has replaced Russia in competition with the US, the Indo-Pacific region plays a crucial role in determining the overall international structure and, hence, the neo-realist approach comprehensively outlines it.

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CHINA-US GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION IN THE ASIA PACIFIC

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Abstract

The Asia Pacific Region particularly the South China Sea has become an arena of geopolitical competition between China and the United States. The US sees China as a threat to its unipolar supremacy in a globalised world. China maintains that its foreign policy is of peaceful coexistence with the rest of the world. The unipolar world is in transition into a multipolar one with the rise of geopolitical, geostrategic, and geoeconomic competition between great powers such as China, Russia, and the United States. The South China Sea has become a political arena between the US and China which has led to the development of geopolitical alliances such as the Quad, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and the SCO in the Asia Pacific region. Pacific Island Countries are divided over the US-China maritime territorial conflict in the South China Sea. The diplomatic manoeuvres of China and the US in the South China Sea focus on sabotaging the diplomatic ties of each other with the Pacific Island Countries. This can result in further escalation of tensions in the Asia Pacific. This paper presents an overview of the geopolitical rivalry in the Asia Pacific region by explaining the foreign policy strategies of both China and the US, i.e., explaining their diplomatic relations with the Pacific Island Countries, emphasising their maritime territorial claims and highlighting their strategic developments in the Asia Pacific region.

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Introduction

The Asia Pacific Region is one of the most significant regions of the world. It covers 22 per cent of the earth's mass and includes East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Western Pacific Ocean, and Oceania. Major Powers of the world interpret the term the Asia Pacific according to their strategic interests. The Asia Pacific comprises half of the world's population. India and China make up 2.8 billion alone, being two major economic hubs along with the combined ASEAN population of 662 million. The 21 major economies in this region produce a GDP equal to 56 per cent of the world's economic output.[1] The Asia Pacific region comprises of two major Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), one transiting through the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean and the Middle East, and the other moving through the East China Sea and the Sea of Japan to the Pacific Ocean and the Pacific coast of the US and Canada. The oceans in the Asia Pacific are among the busiest in terms of sea transport development. The Asian Pacific nations depend intensely on intra-territorial trade for their economic means, and seaborne exchange is the most productive method for moving enormous volume and heavyweight cargoes. Shipping routes are considered as the arteries of the regional economy. In this view, China has become the heart of the regional economic prosperity in the Asia Pacific region.[2]

In the last four decades, China successfully embraced globalisation. It developed free trade agreements with regional neighbours and over time managed to become the hub of assembly-line production. The sea trade passages in the Asia Pacific region have helped China to extend its reach to the Middle East and West. In the 21st century, the Asia Pacific region has become a panacea to strengthen China's economy and the Asian market. China's foreign policy has

become more progressive in President Xi's regime. China adheres to the five principles of peaceful coexistence and Xi Jinping's four principles of major power relations, i.e., National Sovereignty, National Security, Territorial Integrity and, National Unification.[3] US and China have conflicting interests in the Asia Pacific region. The US perceives China as a regional hegemon in the Asia Pacific. Economically, over two decades, China has developed vast networks of trade with Asian Pacific countries and has established international monetary institutions such as Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), International Trade and Investment Corporation (CITIC) etc. To develop the economy and social standards of the Asian countries, China has established multilateral platforms such as Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) etc. The underlying premise behind these initiatives is to establish free trade agreements between the Asian Pacific states to promote China's foreign policy harmoniously.

The US steered its attention towards the Asia Pacific region back in 2011 during the Barack Obama administration, focusing on building multilateral alliances with the Asian nations such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and formation of Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with India, Japan and Australia. In a similar vein, the 60 billion dollars International Development Fund Cooperation (IDFC) package was regulated and proposed by the US in 2020 for securing alliances with the low-income Pacific island countries against Chinese economic interests.[4]

The US is sceptical over China's maritime territorial rights in the Asia Pacific region and considers its position as contested. The US under its Freedom of Navigation Program (FONOP) has conducted several surveillance exercises to contain China's position in the disputed maritime territories within the Asia Pacific region. China considers that its maritime territorial rights are in accordance with the United Nations Conventions on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). However, the US believes

that China is developing illegal infrastructure projects over the disputed islands in the Asia Pacific region and that it is pressurising the economically weaker states to accept China's position in the region. To contain China's meteoric emergence in the Asia Pacific region, the US has entered into a fierce geopolitical competition with China. Under the Biden administration, the US has reassured its commitment to the Quad states to contain China in the Asia Pacific region. The recent session of Quad Security dialogue between the US, India, Australia and Japan focused on strengthening alliances and aiding the Asian Pacific countries during Covid-19. In March 2021, the Quad Summit announced one billion vaccine doses for Asia, an initiative that reflects the vaccine diplomacy of Quad in response to counter China's outreach in the Asia Pacific region.[5] As a result of this geopolitical competition between the US and China, Sino-American rivalry has become evident which could further escalate tensions between the two hegemons and potentially deteriorate the geopolitical environment in the Asia Pacific region.

If the Asia Pacific is seen through the prism of the US-India strategic partnership, the region is deeply entrenched in international politics. US partnership with India bolsters US containment of China in the region. Both US and India have signed several high-end strategic agreements such as the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Logistic Exchange signed in 2016, Communication Compatibility and Security Agreement 2020, and some other agreements to contain China's rise in the Asia Pacific.[6]

Geopolitics of South China Sea

According to the statistics developed by United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), 80 per cent of global trade passes through the South China Sea.[7] It has vast economic importance for China, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea, i.e., for countries that are dependent on the Strait of Malacca for their economic interests. The Strait of Malacca has been significant since World War I as a major shipping route between China and the Middle East. It has become a

major chokepoint for oil trade being the shortest sea route between the Persian Gulf suppliers and key Asian markets in the Asia Pacific. It is estimated that 90 per cent of crude oil supplied between Africa and the Persian Gulf, i.e., 1.4 million barrels per day, passes through the Strait of Malacca that lies between Singapore and Malaysia.[8] It connects with the Pacific Ocean to the east, and with the Indian Ocean to the west. Calculating South China Sea trade is necessary to determine its geopolitical significance. China's 40 per cent net trade passed through the South China Sea in 2016. As per 2016 statistics, 5.3 trillion dollars' worth of trade passes through the South China Sea on yearly basis.[9]

Table 1

South China Sea Data on Trade (2016) [10]

Country	% Share of World GDP	Trade Value through South China Sea (USD billions)	South China Sea Trade As % of All Trade in Goods
United States	24.5	208	5.72
China	14.8	1470	39.5
Japan	6.53	240	19.1
Germany	4.58	215	9.00
United Kingdom	3.46	124	11.8
France	3.26	83.5	7.77
India	2.99	189	30.6
Italy	2.45	70.5	8.14
Brazil	2.37	77.3	23.4
Canada	2.02	21.8	2.67

The shipping industry in the Asia Pacific plays a vital role in the global market share with a net worth of 43 billion dollars which is equal to 66 per cent of the global market share. The Shanghai Port is one of the biggest ports in the region with over 600 million tons of goods. China's economic security is linked with the South China Sea. South China Sea was historically explored by China during the Song Dynasty in 960 AD. Ever since then, China has remained active in the South China

Sea for 200 years. Whereas the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) officially included the South China Sea as part of China in 1947. Furthermore, China published a new map in 2009 wherein it represented a 9-dash line territory in the South China Sea, also called the U-shaped line that it established in 1945, i.e., long before the United Nations Convention for the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) became effective in 1982.[11] The U-Shaped line incorporates the disputed Paracel Islands, Spratly Islands, Pratas Islands and the Scarborough Shoal, and has become controversial because of the growing Chinese military presence along this line that intersects the maritime territory of Taiwan via the Taiwan Strait. Pratas Islands are located in the northern part of the South China Sea and fall under the jurisdiction of Taiwan. Due to the strategic significance of the Pratas Islands and China's naval encroachment along the U-shaped line, China could legally control the Islands as a gatekeeper to monitor the US and other countries' ships and aircraft entering the South China Sea from the Pacific Ocean.[12]

Figure 1

Map of Exclusive Economic Zone
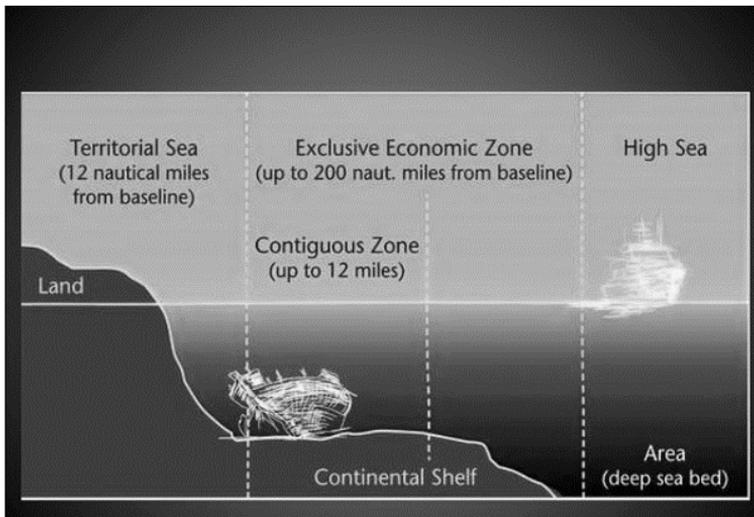
According to the United Nations Convention on Law of Seas (UNCLOS), independent states have claim over the territorial waters up

to 200 nautical miles as Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) and are forbidden to conduct foreign military exercises beyond 12 nautical miles within their EEZ.[13] China's main dispute with the United States in the South China Sea is over the use of Exclusive Economic Zones and maritime territorial claims. US bases its argument referring to UNCLOS that coastal states have permission to conduct economic activities (for instance fishing and oil exploration) within 200 nautical miles of their EEZs but coastal states are restricted to regulate foreign military activities in their EEZs beyond 12 nautical miles. China, on the other hand, maintains its right of conducting foreign military activities within the EEZs.[14]

Territorial Counter Claims in South China Sea (Asia Pacific)

China is involved in a number of maritime territorial disputes in the Asia Pacific, particularly the South and the East China Sea. In total, 44 out of 55 small islands and reefs are claimed or occupied by China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia and, Brunei.[15] United Nations Convention for Law of Seas (UNCLOS) have often declared China as an illegal claimant of its territorial rights but China has responded by considering these decisions as null and void, based on its traditional territorial rights. The following section offers a commentary on the four major maritime territorial disputes between China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia and, Brunei.

Paracel Islands Dispute

This maritime territorial dispute involves China and Vietnam as claimants and the islands are occupied by China in the South China Sea. The dispute dates back to 1974 when China intercepted the islands in a naval engagement with South Vietnam and since the 1980s remains victorious on the Paracel Islands.[16] China's military training in the Paracel islands has enraged the US, Vietnam and the Philippines. In response, the US conducted a 5-day military drill near Paracel Islands,

signalling China not to militarise the contested maritime region.[17] China has rendered these claims baseless and adheres to its rightful presence on the Paracel Islands in light of its traditional maritime rights.

Spratly Islands Dispute

This maritime territorial dispute in the South China Sea involves China, Vietnam and Taiwan as main claimants to the islands who support their claims on the basis of historical facts. Whereas, Malaysia, the Philippines and, Brunei are partial claimants who base their claims on international law and conventions.[18] The presence of over 200 Chinese ships around the Spratly islands has caused a row with the Philippines. The Philippines perceives Beijing's presence in the contested Spratly Islands as an 'incursion' into its sovereign territory. In response, China has claimed that the vessels are mere fishing ships sheltering from bad weather conditions.[19]

Scarborough Shoal Dispute

This maritime territorial dispute in the South China Sea involves China, Taiwan, and the Philippines as main claimants. The contested area has been under Chinese administration since 2012. According to UNCLOS, no state has complete control over the South China Sea but due to this maritime territorial dispute, both China and the Philippines engaged in a naval standoff for two months in 2012. In addition, Scarborough Shoal is closer to the Philippines' coastal territory rather than China.[20] The US stance on China's maritime claims is linked with the July 12, 2016, award of the arbitral tribunal that was pursued under UNCLOS. The tribunal nullified China's maritime claims as baseless and affirmed the position of the Philippines.[21] However, China claims all the islands, reefs, and shoals within a U-shaped line in the South China Sea drawn in 1947 as its territory. Scarborough Shoal lies within this area. Moreover, China considers Scarborough Shoal as its legitimate territory, existing decades before the establishment of UNCLOS.

Senkaku Islands Dispute

This maritime territorial dispute in the East China Sea involves China, Japan, and Taiwan. Senkaku Islands, also known as Diaoyu Islands, are administered by Japan and contain rich oil and fish resources that matter the most to both China and Japan for their economic interests. China's dispute over these islands is a matter of its national integrity and the Chinese Community Party's (CCP's) internal power struggle.[22] Japan has filed a diplomatic protest against the presence of Chinese coastguard ships in the East China Sea. Tokyo claims that it has been there since approaching a Japanese fishing boat in October 2020. Zhao Lijian, China's Foreign Ministry spokesman stated on 13 October 2020, "Diaoyu and its affiliated islands are China's inherent territory and it is China's inherent right to carry out maritime patrols to enforce the law in the waters surrounding the Diaoyu Islands, which Japan should earnestly respect."[23] The current presence of Chinese vessels in these islands has been reported as the longest since 2012.

Figure 2

EEZs Overlapping Zone in the South China Sea


graphic by Lindsey Burrows
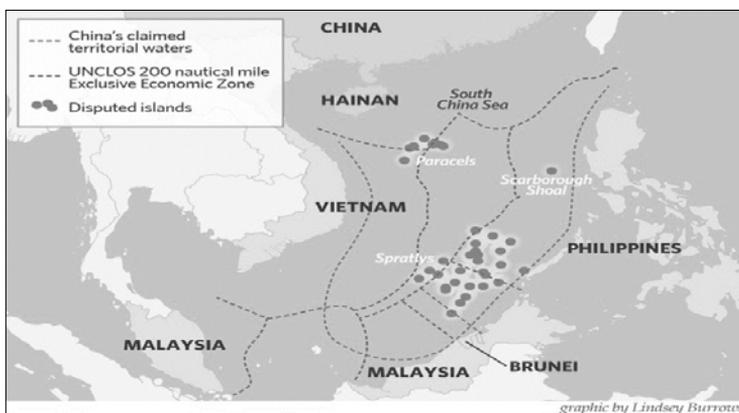
China's Relations with Pacific Island Countries

Pacific Island Countries are divided into three ethno-geographic groupings which include; Melanesia, Micronesia and

Polynesia. The region covers more than eight hundred thousand square kilometres of land and includes a combination of sovereign states, associated states, dependent states, and integral parts of Non-Pacific Island states.[24] Ten out of fourteen sovereign Pacific Island countries diplomatically support China while the Marshall Islands, Palau, Nauru, and Tuvalu recognise Taiwan.[25]

Figure 3

Ethno-geographic Map of Pacific Island Region
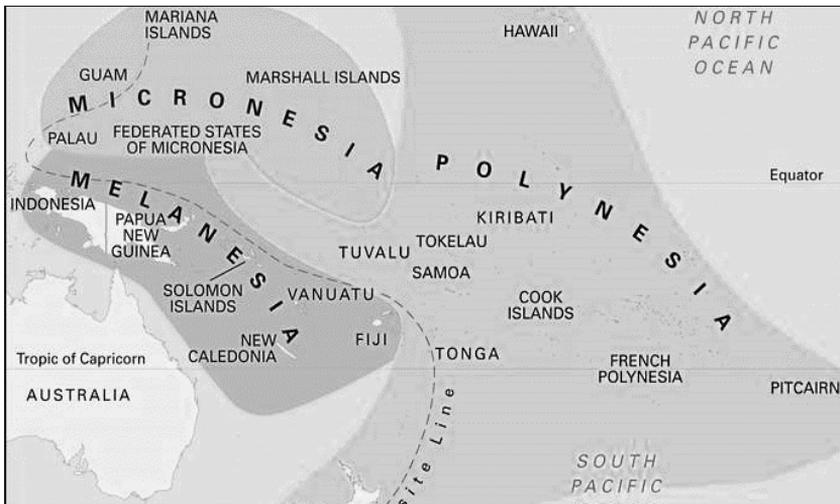
In the 21st century, China pro-actively engaged with Pacific Island Countries by providing them with trade and investment opportunities. Chinese diplomacy with the Pacific Island Countries has helped it develop cordial relations with almost all the countries, among which some have also officially recognised Taiwan. China's intention to expand its navy and safeguard its market by securing naval bases in the Asia Pacific region has alarmed the United States, Australia, and New Zealand.[26] It has taken several diplomatic initiatives in the Pacific region, for instance, in April 2006, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visited Fiji and laid the foundation of the China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum. In the 3rd session proceedings of this forum which were held in October 2019, Fiji's Minister of Industry,

Trade and Tourism, Premila Kumar acknowledged Chinese efforts in promoting cooperation in infrastructure development, provision of goods, strengthening investment, and production capacity and signing 2020-2022 Action Plans on Agriculture Cooperation with Fiji. China's aid to Pacific Island Countries from 2011 to 2017 approximately amounts to 1.5 billion dollars.[27]

China's 'soft balancing' approach with the Pacific Island Countries is coupled with its peaceful diplomacy. Its economic growth has enormously bloomed in the past four decades and therefore, China naturally intends to expand its national interests in its surrounding region. China's core interest in the Pacific region is aimed at 'One China Policy' that was put forward by the Hu Jintao administration in a White Paper in 2011.[28] Moreover, China's 2015 Defence White Paper reflects its perception of abandoning its conventional land-focused security strategy and strengthening its naval capabilities through peaceful military and security cooperation with the Pacific Island Countries.[29] 'One China Policy' in this regard, is a connotation for China's peaceful diplomacy in the Pacific region to regain its inherent territorial right over Taiwan. One-third out of twenty diplomatic partners of Taiwan are located in the Pacific. Particularly, the six small pacific states, i.e., Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands, Palau, Tuvalu, Kiribati, and Nauru recognise Taiwan as a sovereign entity. Taiwan has been involved in a diplomatic competition with China concerning developing alliance(s) with Pacific Island Countries.[30] The economies of Pacific Island Countries are fragile and are often prone to natural disasters. Both China and Taiwan struggle to maintain their dominance over it by providing lucrative loans to these countries. Nevertheless, China enjoys an economic edge over Taiwan and is more active in building peaceful ties with its Asian Pacific neighbours.

China has become a major trading partner of the Solomon Islands.[31] It has assisted in upgrading telecommunication networks, electronic development, and food processing systems.[32] Similarly, Palau

is another Pacific Island Country that has recognised Taiwan but it has developed strong commercial links with China as well. China has become Palau's largest contributor to the tourism sector. The tourist ratio between China and Palau increased from 39,383 to 162,000 during 2014-2015. As a result of this massive tourist surge, Palau had to impose travel restrictions on China.[33] China believes that its relations with the Pacific Island Countries are based on its core national interest, i.e., maintaining diplomatic posture in its foreign affairs, pursuing economic leverage, and practising non-interference in issues of other countries. Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs website has recorded over 235 high-level visits between China and Pacific diplomatic partners between 2006 and 2015. From the economic perspective, China's bilateral trade with thirteen independent Pacific Island Countries reached 7.5 billion dollars in 2016.[34]

In comparison to US and Australia, China lags in investments in the Pacific Island Countries. Between 2006 and 2017, China has invested 1.5 billion dollars in terms of grants and concessional loans.[35] On the other hand, from 2000 to 2016, Australia's total investment in the Pacific Island Countries reached around 178 billion dollars.[36] In the past 20 years, the United States has invested around 5.21 billion dollars in assistance to the Pacific Island Countries.[37] China's growing economic parity in the Asia Pacific region is likely to offset US ties with its allies, provided that China continues to promote its peaceful foreign policy in the region.

US Relations with Pacific Island Countries

The US enjoys historic relations with Taiwan however, its interests have transformed over the years considering the US-China tensions in the 21st century. Both US and Taiwan were part of a mutual defence treaty from 1954 to 1979, which was later abolished under the Carter administration to recognise relations with the People's Republic of China. But under Taiwan's Relations Act signed in 1979, the US provided military assistance to Taiwan including 12 billion dollars

during the Obama administration. Furthermore, the US also provided 1.2 billion dollars of weapon aid to Taiwan under the Trump administration to counter China's influence over Taiwan.[38] Washington has remained neutral towards the 'One-China Policy' in the past but has become more active in developing defence and trade agreements with Taiwan to deal with the Chinese influence in the region. Former US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo announced an end to self-imposed restrictions on the US-Taiwan relationship in January 2021, which could also result in the signing of a mutual defence treaty with Taiwan in future.[39] In this regard, the recent visit of former US Health and Human Services Secretary, Alex Azar was considered as the first high-profile official visit with the purpose to endorse Taiwan's stance as an independent state. China responded to this by conducting Air force exercises over the Air Identification Zone of Taiwan, warning the US to comply with its One China Policy.

Since 1971, the US has had dependable diplomatic relations with Fiji. The two countries have pursued relations based on mutual cooperation, ensuring diplomatic values and partnership over international peacekeeping operations, regional security, environmental issues, economic development, and climate change. US provides Fiji Foreign Military Financing (FMF) and military training. It also finances Fiji by providing its own US fishing vessels in the Pacific islands under the Multilateral Tuna Fisheries Treaty.[40] On December 17, 2020, tropical cyclone 'Yasa' hit one of the most populous islands of Fiji. In response, USAID provided 1 million dollars as humanitarian assistance to Fiji.[41] Kiribati became independent in 1979 and established diplomatic relations with the US in 1980. Kiribati along with other Pacific Island Countries receives 21 million dollars per year under the Economic Assistance Agreement signed with the US.[42]

Since its inception in 1978, the Solomon Islands have maintained good relations with the US. Historically, during World War II, the US and Japanese forces fought each other in the Pacific islands. At

the end of the war, the US managed to outrun the Japanese forces from the Solomon Islands and it resulted in the formation of close ties between the two countries. US congress aided the Solomon Islands in the construction of parliament building. In 2016, the US had cumulative trade with the Solomon Islands worth 12 million dollars.[43] Marshall Islands gained independence from Japan in 1944 and became a part of US administrative control in 1983. After signing the Compact of Free Association with the United States, the Marshall Islands became independent in 1986 and developed close ties with the US, based on mutual cooperation. Due to being sparsely populated and being isolated geographically, the US aims at providing humanitarian assistance to the Marshall Islands to strengthen climate resilience through disaster preparedness. The US provided 2.5 million dollars to the Marshall Islands in drought assistance in 2016.[44] Palau became independent in 1982 under the Compact of Free Association agreement and since 1994 it maintains diplomatic relations with the United States. According to the agreement, the US remains responsible for Palau's defence until 2044. Under the Compact Trust Fund Palau has been provided $226,362,000 to achieve sustainable economic growth.[45] US ambassador to Palau, John Hennessey met with Palauan President Surangel Whipps and Taiwan Foreign minister Joseph Wu to strengthen ties between the US, Taiwan, and Palau.[46]

Taiwan is an island country located in East Asia. Since 1949, the Republic of China has exercised independent control over the main island of Taiwan. The main island, known historically as Formosa, makes up 99 per cent of the area controlled by China. Currently, Taiwan's political status is ambiguous. The current administration of the Republic of China maintains that Taiwan is already an independent country. On the other hand, China considers Taiwan as part of its territory under its One China Policy. China is 2,103 kilometres away from Taiwan. The official status of Taiwan is still ambiguous because the United States has not recognised Taiwan as an independent state. The United States

under the Carter administration, severed ties with Taiwan after it established diplomatic ties with China on January 1, 1979. The US also shifted its embassy from Taiwan to Beijing and exchanged ambassadors with China in the same year.

Taiwan is the biggest thorn in US-China Relations. The US signed the Taiwan Relations Act in 1979 to maintain economic ties with Taiwan and promote peace, security and stability in the Western Pacific. US-China geopolitical competition in the Asia Pacific has made Taiwan strategically significant for both global powers. Under the Trump administration, the US Congress signed the Taipei Act 2020 to further deepen the ties with Taiwan and encourage the rest of the world and international organisations to do the same. The US considers Taiwan as a pertinent security ally in achieving its geopolitical interest of a free and open Indo-Pacific. Under the Biden administration, former US Senator, Chris Dodd visited Taiwan in April 2021 and reassured President Joe Biden's rock-solid commitment to developing cooperation on shared interests in line with the US One China Policy. China's warning to the US stating "not to send any wrong signals to Taiwan independence" elements to avoid severe damage to China-US relations.[47]

China's String of Pearls Strategy

In 2005, the phrase 'String of Pearls' was coined by Booz Allen in his study on 'Energy Futures in Asia'. He envisaged that China would make efforts to increase its naval presence all over the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) by providing infrastructure development to allied countries in the region.[48] The Indo-Pacific comprises the tropical waters of the Indian Ocean, the western and the central Pacific Ocean. To begin with, there are three important chokepoints in the Indian Ocean. The first one is the Strait of Hormuz, located between Iran and Oman. The second is the Babb-al-Mandeb chokepoint, located between Yemen and Djibouti. The third chokepoint, i.e., the Strait of Malacca is located between Indonesia and Malaysia.

Figure 4

Critical Maritime Trade Chokepoints
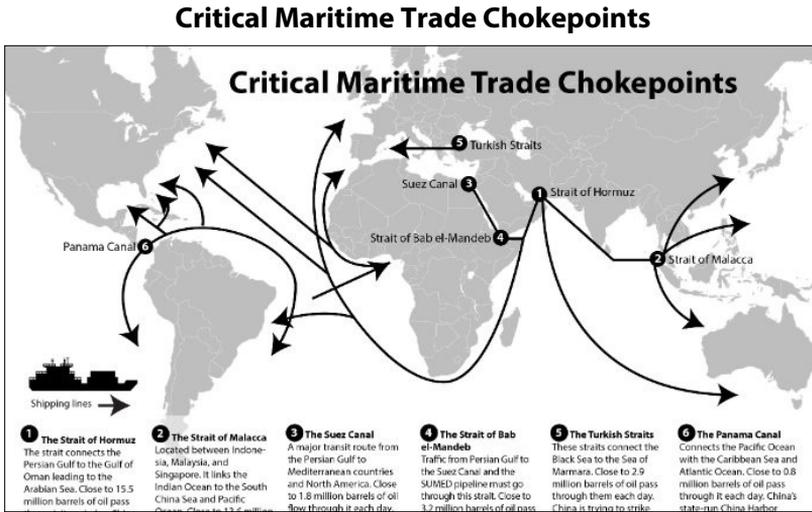
About 80 per cent of the world's trade passes through the Pacific and the Indian Ocean. China imports from the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) via the Strait of Hormuz. In case this chokepoint is blocked, it will impact 80 per cent of China's oil imports. The Babb al Mandeb chokepoint is equally important for European countries and the United States because of its proximity to the North Atlantic Ocean. Otherwise, the West would need to use an alternate route via the Cape of Good Hope which is too far, costly, and prone to pirates near Somalia. The Straits of Malacca and Hormuz are very pertinent for China's trade transportation. If these chokepoints are blocked, it will halt China's traditional practice of trade and that is why China has begun militarizing the Indo-Pacific region to secure its economic interests via the aforementioned trade routes. But on the other hand, the US has become apprehensive about China's increasing militarization. China believes that it is complying with the principles of UNCLOS and being a sovereign state, considers it necessary to protect its foreign economic interests in the Asia Pacific region.

**Figure 5**

China's String of Pearls

China's strategy of String of Pearls also includes building sea-ports and military bases in the Indo-Pacific region to secure the trade passages, i.e., through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and diminish India's military ambitions that are sponsored by the US. These build-ups include military developments around countries such as Bangladesh, Chittagong, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Gwadar Port, and Djibouti. As a result of these developments, China has successfully encircled India (See Figure 5).[49]

India's Necklace of Diamonds Strategy

In response to China's String of Pearls strategy in the Indian Ocean, India has also built its naval bases near Sri Lanka, Mauritius, a radar system at Madagascar, military bases at Seychelles and last but not least, the Chahbahar Port.

Figure 6

India's Strategy of Necklace of Diamond
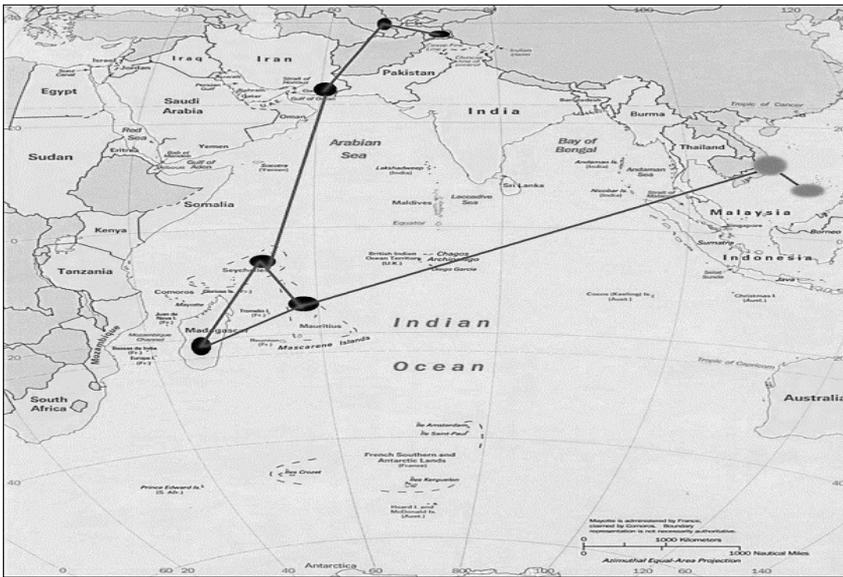
The development of Indian bases in the Indian Ocean represents a diamond necklace. In contrast to China's String of Pearls strategy, its military bases are more strategically coherent and encircle India aptly. Contrarily, India's strategy of Necklace of Diamond minimally encircles China which reflects India's flop policy to contain the latter in the Indo-Pacific region.[50]

China-US Defense Policy in the Asia Pacific

With respect to maritime strategy in the Asia Pacific, the US has deployed around 60 per cent of its naval force around the Strait of Malacca which is based on the US realist paradigm of containing China's growing hegemony and maintaining its supremacy as a superpower. US Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONO) reflects its claim of considering the South China Sea as part of the high seas and not as China's indigenous territory. China in response, under its cabbage strategy, is building artificial islands in the South China Sea, which involves a strategy of seizing control of the island by surrounding and wrapping it in successive layers of Chinese naval ships, China Coast Guard ships and fishing boats, and cutting off the island from outside

support.[51] The purpose of creating these artificial islands is to reaffirm China's claim over the South China Sea in line with its EEZ's 200nm principle. In the Asia Pacific region, China is mainly surrounded by countries that are friendly towards the United States, for example, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Vietnam. In a war-like situation, the US might militarily encroach around these countries to form a wall around China, and to restrict its access to the rest of the Pacific region. As a result, Chinese warships would find it difficult to receive resupplies in the territory. In response, China might attack one of the surrounding countries as a pre-emptive step to prevent its sovereignty in the Asia Pacific region. And in such a scenario, Taiwan will become the primary target, considering the China-US conflict. Both China and Taiwan have an active interest in reclaiming each other just like North and South Korea. But China's relations with Asian Pacific countries are based on economic partnerships and free trade agreements. Even the Quad members and the other Pacific Island countries have developed massive economic linkages with China and a major volume of their economy generates from trade with China. As a result, the US might find convincing its Pacific allies to wage collective war against China extremely difficult. Due to China's emergence in the Asia Pacific, the US will no longer be the sole superpower in the region in near future. At present, however, China faces the US as a prime challenge in overcoming the existing geopolitical competition in the region.

Conclusion

China's presence in the Asia Pacific region particularly its devotion to the South China Sea is two centuries old. China's presence in the region reflects its economic interests that are based on 'One China Policy' incorporating its peaceful relations with the Pacific Island Countries. China's peaceful rise in the era of globalisation has kept the US foreign policy preoccupied vis-à-vis the Asia Pacific region during the Obama administration. This paper argued that the geopolitical

developments between China and the US are based on US-China maritime territorial claims in the South China Sea, geopolitical alliances of both China and the US with the PICs, developing geopolitical blocs such as TPP, RCEP, ASEAN, the Quad, SCO, etc. to safeguard their respective interests by promoting free trade in the region and economically assisting the Pacific Island Countries alongside.

China provides concessional loans to the Pacific Island Countries to develop peaceful relations, strengthen bilateral relations, and expand the BRI in the region. The US blames China for messing up the economic capability of the Pacific Island Countries by indulging them in debt-for-equity traps. By providing concessional loans to the developing Asian Pacific countries, the US believes that China can entrap these states and use economic pressure to exploit their foreign policy decisions. The Pacific Island Countries find themselves stuck in a position where they have little choice but to take sides. China emphasises on South-South Cooperation, whereas being a superpower, the US aims to promote democratic values and security cooperation in the Asia Pacific region via its vested interests. These developments have threatened not only the security of the Pacific Island Countries that have low-income economies but increased the likelihood of an escalation in Sino-US tensions in the Asia Pacific region amidst Covid-19, which could result in a military confrontation between the two in near future.

China's premier Li Keqiang has stated that Taiwan will soon be reunified with mainland China because it is China's inherent right principally claimed according to the 1992 consensus and the One China Policy.[52] The Chinese premier claims that the nationals living in Taiwan and China both belong to one family. Moreover, China has also stressed that the US should abstain from deteriorating relations between Taiwan and China. The recent US arms sale to Taiwan have raised concerns for China's national interests in the Asia Pacific region. According to the spokesperson for the Taiwan Affairs Office at the State Council of China, the US arms sale to Taiwan in December 2020 is detrimental to regional

stability. China aims to pursue One China Policy which was signed in 1979 with the Carter administration under the 'Taiwan Relations Act'.[53] On the other hand, the Biden administration has pledged to provide 'rock-solid' support to Taiwan and defend it from China in case of an attack. President Biden's statement on Taiwan reflects US militarisation in the Asia Pacific.[54] China urges to pursue its foreign policy through peaceful diplomacy with the Pacific Island Countries and intends to safeguard its claim over Taiwan as an internal matter. Thus, US arms sale to Taiwan is likely to enhance its military might in the South China Sea, creating a harmful environment in the Asia Pacific region.

With respect to the US-China maritime territorial claims in the South China Sea, China has recently conducted military drills across the coast of Vietnam in the South China Sea. The military drills were led within the 200nm of EEZ.[55] This maritime territory is contested both by China and the US vis-à-vis Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Brunei. Whereas China claims a huge part of this disputed waterway according to its nine-dash line claim over the South China Sea. In response to China, the US has increased its military operations in the South China Sea according to FONOPS. Since 2017, the US has conducted six FONOPS in the South China Sea.[56] The US foreign policy in the region portrays China as a dominant and assertive power in the Asia Pacific region which is undermining the sovereignty of the Pacific Island Countries. The US believes that China is set to overplay US supremacy in the region by acquiring power over trillion dollars' worth of untapped oil and gas resources in the sea. Whereas China has maintained that under international law, foreign entities are not allowed to conduct intelligence-based operations in the EEZ. The US further claims that China is constructing artificial islands in the sea along with ports, military installations and airstrips at Paracel, Spratly and Woody Islands in particular.[57]

The geopolitical rivalry between US and China have developed such blocs in the region which are detrimental to the regional security

of the Asia Pacific. The Quad is a security bloc that includes the US, India, Japan, and Australia and aims to diminish China's dominance in the Asia Pacific through geopolitics and militarization of the region. On the other hand, China has established Asia's largest economic network as RCEP which is aimed at developing legal and free trade practices between the partner countries amongst which, Australia and Japan are also the members. Japan which has a centuries-old rivalry with China over contested Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, has pursued its foreign policy by becoming a member of the RCEP and safeguarding its economic interests.[58] The US signed out from TPP in 2017, an anti-ASEAN bloc that excluded China from having free trade with some of the Pacific Island Countries in the region. Therefore, the Quad members including India and Australia have not forgone their economic ties with China as the US has done.

Considering the recent developments in the Asia Pacific region, the growing US-China rivalry has overshadowed the region by pressurising the Pacific Island Countries in protecting their sovereignty and national interests. Pacific Island Countries are focused on attaining strategic autonomy and seek to establish friendly relations with both China and the US.[59] In an era where Covid-19 has infected the world, both United States and China must focus on helping the developing Asia Pacific countries to sustain their economies, provide health aid to fight Covid-19, and develop relations in the Asia Pacific region by maintaining mutual respect. The cold war between China and the US is being pursued on numerous fronts, i.e., from diplomacy to trade, investment, artificial intelligence, 5th generation warfare, and military affairs. For the Pacific Island Countries, safeguarding their sovereignty and national interests will be an uphill task, provided how skilled their leadership is in uplifting the integrity of their countries and pursuing an independent foreign policy in the long run. It is time that the US must revitalise its foreign policy in the Asia Pacific towards stability and prosperity of the region. In the nuclear age, the US pursuing assertive

foreign policy unlike China can further escalate Sino-US relations from geopolitical competition to asymmetrical warfare in the region and beyond.

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