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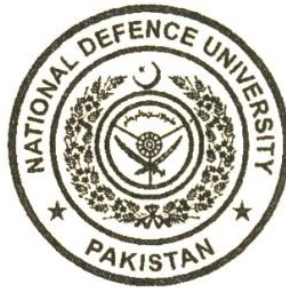
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Editor's Note

The *Journal of Contemporary Studies* is a flagship publication of the Faculty of Contemporary Studies (FCS), National Defence University (NDU), Islamabad. The journal offers scholarly analyses on contemporary issues related to international relations, traditional and non-traditional security and contributes to policy debates on topics of global governance.

This journal issue comprises five articles providing valuable research information on key developments related to topics of national and international significance. The first article, *Unpacking 'Islamophobia' Media, Postcolonial Affect and the Racism of Low Expectations* by Maria Amir unpacks Islamophobia as a racializing process amplified by media, denying Muslims agency through selective empathy, postcolonial affect, and "racism of low expectations." Applying discourse and affect theory on U.S. global coverage, the paper exposes structural violence exercised against Muslim in representation models, urging reframing of Muslim identities beyond terrorism stereotypes.

The second article, *The Imperative of Intelligence Transformation in Contemporary Warfare* by Dr Muhammad Ajmal Abbasi examines the urgent need for intelligence transformation amid evolving warfare—from conventional battles to hybrid, asymmetric, and grey zone conflicts. The paper critiques the lag in intelligence reforms despite revolution in military affairs, advocating adaptation to unconventional threats like cognitive operations and influence campaigns for the provision of robust national security.

The third article, *Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW): Stigmatisation, Normative Impact and Discursive Approach* by Syed Adnan Athar analyzes the TPNW (Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons), ICAN-led Humanitarian Initiative, and nuclear disarmament efforts via the lens of stigmatization, normative impact, and discursive reframing. It highlights the 2017 nuclear ban treaty's entry into force in 2021, despite the nuclear weapon states' opposition.

The fourth article, *Street-Level Climate Governance In Pakistan: A Critical Assessment of the Clean and Green Movement* by Dr. Asma Rashid and Rakhshanda Kokab critically assess Pakistan's street-level climate governance through the Clean and Green Pakistan movement, Ten Billion Tree Tsunami, and Recharge Pakistan initiatives under SDG 13. Applying Michael Lipsky's Street-Level Bureaucracy framework, the study reveals implementation gaps in resource shortages, poor coordination, corruption,

and weak capacity, urging transparency and community engagement for sustainable environmental outcomes.

The last article, *India's Overtures In The Middle East: Hedging Or Balancing Amid Partnerships* by Ali Hamza scrutinizes India's Middle East foreign policy evolution, from non-alignment to strategic hedging amid partnerships with Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Iran. It unpacks economic interdependence, energy security, and middle power positioning, revealing New Delhi's pragmatic balancing approach to maintain strategic autonomy without entanglement in regional geopolitics.

I extend my sincere appreciation to the contributors, peer-reviewers, and the editorial team for their diligent efforts in shaping this issue. The collective work aims to enrich the discourse at national and international levels. As we navigate the complexities of interdisciplinary dialogue, we recognize the significance of fostering connections across fields. This is a humble offering to add to the current discourse.

Editor
Assistant Prof Dr Sumeera Imran

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UNPACKING 'ISLAMOPHOBIA' MEDIA, POSTCOLONIAL AFFECT AND THE RACISM OF LOW EXPECTATIONS

Maria Amir*

"Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation" – Oscar Wilde

Abstract

This paper examines how Islamophobia is produced and circulated through contemporary media by analysing it as a racialising process rather than solely as a form of religious prejudice. It unpacks how media representations, political discourse, and cultural narratives operate through affective and discursive mechanisms to deny Muslims complexity and agency in both U.S. and global contexts, while reproducing and cementing hierarchies shaped by colonial legacies, imperial governance, and neoliberal globalisation. Drawing on postcolonial theory and affect theory, the paper employs qualitative discourse analysis of news coverage, popular media, and political speech to trace how a "racism of low expectations" functions within these representational frames. Through this methodological approach, the paper demonstrates how Islamophobia is sustained through selective empathy and structural forms of violence and argues for the need to rethink dominant media framings of Muslim identities.

Keywords: *Islamophobia, Racism, Media Analysis, Identity*

Introduction

When I first arrived in the United States in 2017, there was a game I played with myself that involved a personal archiving of power with regards to race in a series of near daily micro-aggressions. Some of these were experienced while watching television and trying to keep track of how polarized and simplistic narrative construction was in US media with regards to conflicts involving 'other people' and the coverage of it, from CNN news bulletins to television shows such as *The*

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Looming Tower or *Homeland* that harkened back to imagery of how the Crusades framed the Muslim 'barbarian', the Turk and the *A-rab*.

From the way the media covered and continues to cover global events, especially those featuring Muslims as the quintessential 'other', it appeared that complexity was solely the purview of whiteness - it is not allowed or awarded to other races. This is why I find Samuel P Huntington's quote in his interview *Where is Raed* during the Baghdad bombings particularly telling, "The West won the world not by the superiority of its ideas or values or religion but rather by its superiority in applying organized violence. Westerners often forget this fact, non-Westerners never do."¹ This sentiment is particularly powerful in the context of Huntington's own polarizing opus *Clash of Civilizations*, which many 'non-Westerners' might now consider to be prescient despite it being met with great criticism post publication. My own experience of this otherising has served as a reflexive standpoint for unpacking the variety of discursive coding of Muslim representation that dominates media discourse. Steve Garner speaks to how this process contrasting all racial experience against whiteness is institutionalised and all other identities are rendered in contrast by showing that whiteness occupies an unmarked position of normality, allowing white subjects narrative flexibility and moral complexity, while racialized others are rendered hyper visible and stereotyped.

Racialization is thereby simultaneously a means of external framing and an internalized experience. Race matters because other people make it matter by classifying individuals based on their physicality more than anything else. Whatever is constructed by the dominant power class in a society as 'race' for those they wish to otherize, can actually become race given enough traction, even religion, and in many ways this has been the case with Muslims living in Western countries and by Western media's representation of those living in Muslim countries.

Being 'racialized', however, is particularly difficult to catalogue because it is experienced in what Victor Turner in his book *Ritual Affects: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969) terms 'communitas',² an underlying sense of connection binding groups during ritual liminal phases. Even though race is constructed differently for different people, the act of 'othering' is felt by all who experience it and thereby, I have developed a deep curiosity with regards to archiving stories of the marginalization of people of colour.

Here it is important to keep in mind Homi Bhabha's warning, "What does need to be questioned, however, is the mode of representation

¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 51.

² Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), 94.

of otherness.”³ All of these stories are constructed differently because oppression comes in many colours (sic) i.e. the subjugation of indigenous peoples is distinct from that of African Americans or American Muslims that are each ‘othered’ in specific contexts using distinct tools. And yet, the stories themselves provide a context of power and marginalization that echoes in harrowing harmony and this is why it becomes essential to examine how this marginalization materialises in daily discourse, news bulletins and entertainment.

Present day social media feeds are constantly bombarded with images and messages linked to massacres of people of color in countries all over the world and it is the ‘mode of representation of otherness’ that negotiates how much empathy is allocated to people of colour and the live-televised ongoing genocide of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank for the past two years. On September 16, 2025, a UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory headed by Navi Pillay declared that Israel has in fact committed genocide against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. The Gaza genocide is now a real-time archive of what Edward Said termed the reduction of Palestinians into ‘interruptions’ or ‘numbers on a list’. International media, especially media driven and controlled in the US and Europe, has been widely criticized for reproducing Israeli state framings that deny Palestinians their humanity and any subjectivity by foregrounding a Zionist security⁴ playbook instead. This situation is likely to get much worse with Israel’s 2025 large scale investments in social media platforms Google and TikTok.⁵

These incidents form a series of deaths and murders of Muslims in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria and Palestine for decades after 9/11 that are framed very differently by the West than the deaths of American soldiers or white lives lost anywhere in the world. This was observed during the early months of the Ukraine war, where a CNN Business article⁶ noted that Western media outlets described many Ukrainian victims and refugees as “white,” “Christians,” “middle-class,” “blond” and “blue-eyed” - in effect the chosen language underlined the perceived proximity of the victims to Western identity while implicitly contrasting them with refugees from non-European conflicts, thereby resting on racialisation as a means to invoke increasing empathy among its audiences. This contrast

³ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 113.

⁴ Fadhil Wafi and Maryolanda Zaini, “European Media Propaganda in Support of Israeli Genocide in Palestine 2024,” *Journal of Society and Media* 9, no. 1 (2024): 302–319.

⁵ Micheal Kwet, “How US Big Tech Supports Israel’s AI Powered Genocide and Apartheid,” *Al Jazeera*, May 12, 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/5/12>

⁶ CNN Business, *How the Ukraine War Exposed Western Media Bias*, March 4, 2022.

serves as a striking example of how appearance-based racialisation often shapes who is made visible as “human” in global media coverage. The two-year live streamed genocide of Palestinians has only highlighted this glaring empathy-gap further. According to Said:

How rich our mutability, how easily we change (and are changed) from one thing to another, how unstable our place – and all because of the missing foundation of our existence, the lost ground of our origin, the broken link with our land and our past. There are no Palestinians. Who are the Palestinians? ‘The inhabitants of Judea and Samaria.’ Non-Jews. Terrorists. Troublemakers. DPs. Refugees. Names on a card. Numbers on a list. Praised in speeches- el pueblo palestino, il popolo palestino, le people palestin- but treated as interruptions, intermittent presences.⁷

Such continuous framing of Muslims in the media as mere ‘interruptions’ and ‘intermittent presences’ is common, unless they are explicitly being framed as terrorists. And this very framing falls under the very ambiguous ambit of ‘Islamophobia’ where Muslim lives are consistently coded and exhibited as not only less valuable than others but as somehow intrinsically barbaric or conceptually different from other people. An underhanded necropolitics⁸ defines and drives the coverage and framing of Muslims in global discourse, especially entertainment and news media. This paper analyses media representation of Muslim subjects in global news and entertainment television by regarding Islamophobia as both a form of racism and a racialising process, insofar as it produces Muslims as a coherent and inferiorised group through cultural, political, and affective mechanisms.

The US, especially at present, has a unique ability to construct and reconstruct race in every social sphere, because it is by far, the first marker of identity that any non-white person experiences in the US. While living in America, I became deeply aware of my own race by being forced to recognize that my ability to overlook race before, back home, was its own kind of ingrained privilege.. This constant centering and re-centering of one’s own power in relation to one’s environment is an integral aspect of analysis that is too often overlooked in our examination of power structures. Rather than functioning as personal narrative, this reflexive

⁷ Edward Said, “Permission to Narrate,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 13, no. 3 (1986): 27–48.

⁸ Islamophobia doesn’t just operate discursively; it underwrites who can be surveilled, incarcerated, or drone-struck without due process and the term necropolitics coined by Achille Mbembe (2003) describes the ways in which sovereignty is exercised through the power to dictate who may live and who must die. This does not just relate to the direct act of killing but also about creating conditions where certain populations are rendered ‘killable’, ‘un-grievable’ and largely disposable. Necropolitics stratifies how life is regulated and relegated along racial, class, and colonial lines.

positioning operates as a standpoint methodology through which power relations are rendered visible and analytically legible as illustrated by Patricia Hill Collins,⁹ "Standpoint theory argues that groups who experience unequal power relations develop distinctive perspectives on social reality that are unavailable to those who are more privileged."

This paper attempts to unpack how the term 'Islamophobia' is coded and mapped along racial lines and how it operates as a racialising process within contemporary media representations. Some of the questions being examined here include how cultures and phobias directed at persons practicing a particular faith constitute racism? Is racism coded in biology or in treatment of persons and communities and how does the media respond to these categories of difference in its representations? What is considered 'barbaric' and who gets to decide the people that occupy that construct - who is a 'terrorist' and who is a 'drug dealer'? How does a racism of 'low expectations' operate in today's climate? The paper will apply a blend of Media and Affect Theory, Postcolonial Theory and standpoint methodologies to unpack questions and constructions of identity in the context of Islamophobia within a globalized milieu by examining what discursive and affective mechanisms are deployed to render Muslims legible as threats or culturally deficient subjects. Islamophobia is conceptualised here as a form of racism that is not reducible to biological notions of race but is produced through representation, governance, and affect. Methodologically, the paper employs qualitative discourse analysis and affect-oriented media analysis of US news coverage, political rhetoric, and popular media produced over the past decade.

Literature Review & Methodology

Who Makes Method?

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon writes that his philosophy professor once advised him, "Whenever you hear anyone abuse the Jews, pay attention, because he is talking about you." Following that interaction Fanon recognized that racism as an ideology was only peripherally attached to a set of beliefs about other bodies but rather that racism was "always susceptible to playing the same game with a new set of toys."¹⁰ This insight introduces an affective methodological approach that can be extended to Islamophobia not as a fixed ideology but as a mutable racialising practice that adapts to new historical and political contexts. The ideological underpinnings of social behaviour that is regarded as

⁹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000).

¹⁰ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 95. (The 1967 Grove Press translation is the most commonly cited English edition; the French original is from 1952.)

Islamophobic, employs the application of exactly such 'new toys', the game itself is as old as time.

Rather than treating racism as a stable set of beliefs that produce predictable social outcomes, affect theory permits an understanding of racialisation as a dynamic process driven by emotion, power, and reinforcement. In his book *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution and Power* Donovan Schaefer writes, "The linguistic fallacy presumes that racism is the byproduct of a gridlock discursive architecture, a set of beliefs about races producing a logically consistent matrix of behavioural outcomes. Affect theory opens up the parallel possibility that racialization can sometimes be understood as an affective machine - a particular menu preference when seated at the feast of difference."¹¹ Here Schaefer begins to outline an alternate approach to coding racism when its affect extends beyond the biological and even the sociological domain into the production of systemic difference. This perspective is particularly useful for analysing Islamophobia, where racial meaning is often produced less through explicit biological claims than through an ecology of suspicion and moral hierarchy. Reading affect theory alongside Howard Winant's 'racial formation process', whereby, "The main task facing racial theory today, in face, is no longer to critique the seemingly 'natural' or 'commonsense' concept of race - although that effort has not by any means been entirely completed. Rather, the central task is to focus attention on the continuing significance and changing meaning of race"¹² illuminates how race is continually reworked in response to shifting political contexts.

An analysis of how the 'meaning of race' changes when applied to Islamophobia begs the question of whether the marginalization of Muslim communities is actually contributing to formulating Muslims as a 'race' rather than a religion. This process has been widely theorised as the racialisation of Muslims, whereby religious identity becomes a proxy for race within systems of governance and surveillance.¹³ In this case the notion of 'shared oppression' giving birth to a new formulation of race can be observed where arbitrary physical markers in lieu of 'beards and burqas' are treated as stand-ins for race and leading to discrimination faced by those individuals. This is not a metaphorical use of race, but an active racialising process through which Muslims are collectively positioned as a coherent and governable population. Sometimes categories can be reified by the reaction against them, and by singling out physical markers representing 'faith' to serve as the starting point of discrimination

¹¹ Donovan O. Schaefer, *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 143.

¹² Howard Winant, "Race and Race Theory," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 181.

¹³ Steve Garner and Saher Selod, "The Racialization of Muslims: Empirical Studies of Islamophobia," *Critical Sociology* 41, no. 1 (2015): 9-19.

that manifests itself in travel bans and prolonged incarcerations, one can create a sociological component of race.

This is powerfully inscribed in John Bodley's work *Victims of Progress*,¹⁴ where the author takes on perspectives of a community that is quintessentially 'otherized', 'heathenized' or 'savagized'. The same treatment is meted out through Islamophobia, whereby Muslims as a whole are demonized as terrorists or barbarians and yet the machinations of Globalisation and corporate power still recognise the importance of Islamic countries as sites for investment and trade, especially a country such as Saudi Arabia where the government's prior authoritarian and sexist policies formed little to no impediment towards it being framed as a US 'ally' because of its immense wealth. This contradiction reveals how moral judgments in global politics are unevenly applied through strategic interests rather than any principled concern for civilian life. The double-bind and hypocrisy of such an alliance became even more glaring during the Gaza genocide, when US officials condemned Palestinian resistance as 'terrorism' but expanded sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, labelling them 'stability partners'.¹⁵ Such asymmetries reflect a model of imperial governance in which selective empathy is mobilised to legitimise some forms of violence while rendering others invisible within dominant media and policy discourse.

Analysis

It appears Islamophobia is inherently selective in its present day incarnation - Muslim countries that do not offer the US or other Western powers sufficient financial incentives and opportunities are 'terrorist countries' and the ones that do are 'key allies.' This interplay was clearly on display during the 2025 Indo-Pak border conflict which offers a keen parallel to such selectivity. Western media instantly framed Pakistan as the 'aggressor' despite India's role in escalating airstrikes in Kashmir. This was documented by media analysts who noted a disproportionate emphasis on Indian security narratives and a relative absence of reporting on Pakistani civilian casualties (BBC Media Monitoring; Human Rights Watch). Analysis revealed that casualty figures from Pakistani civilians received minimal international coverage compared to India's military

¹⁴ John Bodley, *Victims of Progress: Indigenous Peoples and Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

¹⁵ This has been documented in U.S. State Department arms transfer announcements and defence cooperation agreements that describe Saudi Arabia and the UAE as key regional "stability partners," despite ongoing human rights violations (SIPRI; Human Rights Watch). Human Rights Watch, "U.S. Arms Sales and Middle East Human Rights Abuses," Report, February 2024

narratives of ‘counterterrorism’.¹⁶ This disparity reflects selective racialisation, whereby violence committed by a Muslim-majority state was more readily framed as inherently suspect or terroristic, rather than as a contextual political conflict. However, following Pakistan’s return strikes and downing of Indian aircraft, the international media conversation around Pakistan became sympathetic and India began to be framed as an unreasonable and unreliable US partner. Such shifts in framing align with longer histories of imperial governance, in which strategic alliance formation determines whose violence is legitimised and whose is racialised as a civilisational threat. The need to shape media discourse to mirror these hierarchies is demonstrated in reiterating connections between terms like ‘terrorism’ with Muslims, regardless of evidence.

With regards to coding Islamophobia, it is therefore useful to reverse the commonly accepted Western formatting of knowledge production whereby a ‘top-down’ approach that elaborates a theory in abstract terms and then provides examples to illustrate it is consistently employed. Young introduces a subversive postcolonial methodology in his *Introduction to Postcolonialism* where narrative is told ‘from below’.¹⁷ A situation or contemporary injustice is employed at the heart of analysis and theory that emerges out of it. This paper adopts this “from below” orientation as a methodological choice, using contemporary media controversies as entry points for analysis to examine how racialisation and power operate in practice rather than in abstraction. Such reversal elaborates the politics of the subaltern and resists academic framings of occupation. This framing was particularly powerful when applied to the media storm created around New Zealand’s Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern’s response to the Christchurch Mosque attack in March, 2019. Global media posited Ardern’s empathy as a ‘historic’ event precisely because it was directed at Muslims and served as a ‘Western antidote’ to Islamophobia. Media analyses of the Christchurch attacks widely noted how Ardern’s response was framed as exceptional within Western political leadership, particularly in contrast to dominant security-oriented responses to Muslim suffering (BBC; The Guardian; NYT). Yet, the coverage and silence around Gaza, serves as a stark contrast to any such claims of an ‘antidote’, as images of Palestinian women cradling their dead children rarely receive front page treatment, if anything the entire social media landscape is maneuvered to re-write algorithms on X and Instagram to decrease the visibility of such posts coming out of Gaza.¹⁸ The framing of

¹⁶ Ayesha Jalal, “Framing the Indo-Pak Border War of 2025,” *South Asia Journal* 42, no. 2 (2025): 55–73

¹⁷ Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1.

¹⁸ Human rights organisation reports on content moderation and visibility of Gaza-related posts—e.g. Human Rights Watch; Amnesty International; Access Now.)

Ardern as uniquely compassionate indirectly underscores the expectation that Muslims themselves cannot embody or inspire such empathy.¹⁹ This power dynamic where white culture forms the baseline for ideas and indeed civilization, is inherently powered in a manner that disallows for alternative stories and the languages in which they are told to forever occupy a central space in global narratives. Together, these contrasting framings illustrate selective empathy as an affective regime through which compassion is selectively distributed.

Donald Trump's repeated demonisation of Muslims has been supported by voter statistics of a white, middle-aged, Republican population that generally held an unfavourable view of Muslims.²⁰ According to Mona Chalabi in *The Guardian* (2015), "hostility toward Muslims in America exists alongside a lack of familiarity with Muslims."²¹ Survey data from YouGov shows that a large majority of respondents reported having no Muslim colleagues or friends, and most had never entered a mosque. Such attitudes enable the erasure of historical knowledge production associated with Muslim societies, particularly the contributions of Islamic scholars to science, medicine, and philosophy between the eighth and fourteenth centuries. It denies acknowledging Islam's central role and the role of scholars such as Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) in preserving, translating and disseminating the philosophical works of Aristotle, Plato and Socrates at times when the Christian crusaders were burning down libraries and archives. Rather than reflecting a civilisational absence, this erasure operates epistemically, denying Islam and its practitioners recognition as historical agents of knowledge.

The same bias extends to denying Islam and its practitioners the complexity that is allowed to Jews and Christians in religious framing. This dynamic was solidified during the protests and reactions following the publication of Salman Rushdie's controversial novel *The Satanic Verses* in 1988 that is described by Homi K. Bhabha in these terms:

The conflict of cultures and community around *The Satanic Verses* has been mainly represented in spatial terms and binary geopolitical polarities – Islamic fundamentalists vs Western literary modernists, the quarrel of the ancient (ascriptive) migrants and modern (iconic) metropolitans. This obscures the anxiety of the irresolvable, borderline culture of hybridity that

¹⁹ Laleh Khalili, "Empathy and the Limits of Liberal Recognition," *Middle East Report* 310 (2024): 12–19

²⁰ Pew Research Center, *U.S. Muslims Concerned About Their Place in Society, but Continue to Believe in the American Dream* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2017)

²¹ Mona Chalabi, "How Anti-Muslim Are Americans? Data Points to Extent of Islamophobia," *The Guardian*, December 8, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/08>

articulates its problems of identification and its diasporic aesthetic in an uncanny, disjunctive temporality that is, at once, the time of cultural displacement, and the space of the 'untranslatable'.²²

It is precisely such 'geopolitical polarities' that inform and drive the discourse surrounding how Muslims are framed today, where there is an unspoken agreement on the framing that while 'all Muslims may not be terrorists, all terrorists are most definitely Muslim'. This framing reflects a form of racialised securitisation, in which political violence associated with Muslim actors is pre-emptively read through the language of terrorism, regardless of context or scale.²³ The 2025 Indo-Pak war reveals a similar polarity, where Indian state violence was repeatedly classified as 'counterinsurgency' while any military retaliation was globally coded as 'Islamic terrorism'. Pakistan's defense of Kashmiri civilians rarely ever entered Western coverage, reflecting a persistent denial of the narrative of Muslim majority states in this context.²⁴ This framing is designed to only ascribe the marker of 'terrorism' with violence committed by practitioners of a specific faith, whereby if a white man shoots up a school or drives onto the sidewalk running down dozens of people this act is treated as an 'isolated' incident underpinned by mental illness not violence.

Many news agencies today cover terrorism and crimes allegedly committed by Muslims in an excessive and statistically uneven manner. This on the one hand inflates the actual overall threatening feeling of a looming and incoming terrorist attack to unrealistic proportions. On the other hand it creates an alarmist reaction from people that can become Islamophobic. News agencies like *Fox*, *The Sun*, and famous columnists from *The Independent* and *The Guardian* have been known to spew Islamophobic spins on stories.

The same media also ensures that when an African American man commits a crime it is ascribed to 'gang' violence that is considered ubiquitous where 'blackness' is framed. Why is violence and terrorism here not linked to 'whiteness' or 'maleness' both identity groups that commit violence as often if not more often than Muslims, especially where the United States is concerned? The reason rests in the fact that whiteness has never been 'othered' the same way as other racialised identities are and have been on a daily basis. Whiteness is never framed as barbaric. This is why acts of violence themselves are coded differently, not by the numbers of casualties that result from them but rather by who commits them.

American drone attacks on Afghan and Pakistani soil are considered a justified retaliation for the attack of 9/11 and in his first year

²² Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 219.

²³ Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 90.

²⁴ Hafsa Kanjwal, "Kashmir and the Politics of Terror Labels," *Foreign Policy* (January 2025)

in office President Barack Obama carried out 563 drone strikes in Somalia, Afghanistan and Pakistan compared to the 57 strikes carried out during the entire Bush administration. Many of the 807 people killed in that first year of drone strikes were civilians deemed 'necessary' collateral damage in the War on Terror.²⁵ A similar logic has been applied to Gaza, where Israeli bombing campaigns from 2023 to 2025 have killed over 60,000 civilians but are repeatedly framed by US officials as a 'necessary tragedy' or a needed response to eliminate Hamas. Civilian deaths in Rafah and Khan Younis have also been dismissed in a similar vein, echoing Obama's language on drone killings during his presidential term.²⁶ However, President Obama's conduct and grace in office ensures that even most liberal Americans refuse to unearth these atrocities. This response can be understood as the effect of moral authority and political affect, which mediates how state violence is remembered, questioned, or rendered permissible within liberal publics. The very naming of the 'War on Terror' allowed for those waging the war to determine who does and does not come under the category of causing 'terror.' The way American violence around the world is often framed is shrouded and obfuscated through language of 'democratisation' or 'human rights' that is somehow considered by most US governments to be the naturalised role of a nation that has invaded over 70 countries since 1776 but gets to frame everyone else as the 'other'.²⁷

This otherness is often systemic as well as framed - where communities of colour are racialised along economic and political lines and live in gentrified neighbourhoods that often ensure that many white, middle-class and wealthy families never have to actively interact with people of colour if they choose to avoid them.

Terrorism as Media Affect

In such a placement, religion, and its racial underpinnings emerge as a hybrid system... a set of embodied practices that produce affects in how they are viewed and how religious bodies are treated. According to Schaefer:

Islamophobia presents itself as a patient, reasoned critique. But as the primatological perspective shows, the production of religious identities emerges out of an eminently animal affective matrix. The

²⁵ The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, "Obama's Covert Drone War in Numbers: Ten Times More Strikes Than Bush," January 17, 2017, <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2017-01-17/>

²⁶ Amnesty International, "Damning Evidence of War Crimes as Israeli Attacks Wipe Out Entire Families in Gaza," Amnesty International, February 5, 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/02/israel-opt-new>

²⁷ David Vine, *The United States of War: A Global History of America's Endless Conflicts, from Columbus to the Islamic State* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020)

mobilisation of social boundaries is part of the erotics of racism, a set of meaning making technologies embedded in bodies that flow through us and coalesce into religious forms. At the same time, the counter manoeuvres that travel to borderlines and demilitarise them are also part of an animal heritage. Religious machines are built out of complex confluences of these compulsory affective technologies, circulating within a complex of heterogeneous historical economies that shape on-the-ground embodied responses. Ideology, especially racialised ideology, is a technology for the production of affects – a uniquely human technology but no less animal for it.²⁸

Schaefer here provides a blueprint for theorizing affect as these very ‘heterogeneous historical economies’ that are framed by US and Western media with regards to Islam and Muslims post 9/11 ensure that over a billion Muslims around the world are denied complexity in how they are framed, either as ‘silent moderates’ or ‘rabid terrorists’, polarities that are put in place by a framing that is not just Western but also rooted in deep fear of the other. The Gaza war again highlights a situation where Palestinian civilians are rendered either invisible or where even toddlers are coded as potential extremists while Israeli grief and hurt feelings over being blamed for the genocide is amplified as antisemitism. Such selective affective economy is central in propagating a form of Islamophobia that inherently places Palestinian Muslims as lesser beings than Israelis.

For this reason, the application of Affect theory in conjunction with Postcolonial praxis serves as the ideal blend to examine how Muslims are being framed in public consciousness in the present moment. In her chapter on ‘Covering War’ in *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death*, Susan Moeller cites Lemkin insisting “to treat genocide as a crime that only concerns an individual nation makes no sense because by its very nature the author is either the state itself or powerful groups backed by the state; by its legal, moral and human nature, genocide must be regarded as an international crime.”²⁹ Moeller goes on to cite how the genocide in Rwanda was dismissed by the US State Department in these terms, “Acts of genocide may have occurred. As a responsible government, you don’t just go around hollering ‘genocide’.”

The sheer guile of framing one’s own government as ‘responsible’ for not acknowledging its role in perpetuating genocide is a common feature of US media coverage that directly maps on to how the US media covered the devastation of Aleppo and the war on Syria, as if US intervention in Iraq in no way perpetuated or framed the present conflict. The villains were ‘ISIS’ alone, not the state that destabilised the region and

²⁸ Donovan O. Schaefer, *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 45.

²⁹ Susan D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 214.

created a context and space for terrorist groups to operate in the first place. Coverage on Gaza mirrors the Rwandan precedent, as US officials and CNN and BBC repeatedly refuse to use the word 'genocide', continuing to call it a 'conflict and escalation', despite independent outlets, UN rapporteurs and genocide experts labelling Gaza as a genocide.³⁰

Media coverage of the 'Muslim Bomber' is not just limited to news coverage, it ranges from televised episodes of US tv shows such as *Homeland*, where a 'mistaken' drone bombing carried out by the lead character affectionately dubbed 'the Drone Queen' by her colleagues to the protagonist played in Hulu's *The Looming Tower* released in 2018 where Aaron Sorkin's character, an embattled FBI agent, has long 'emotive' talks with his Muslim protégé to try and understand where all this 'hatred of America' comes from. Every explanation offered is rooted in a 'misunderstanding' or 'misreading' of the Quran but never the exploitative conduct of the US military in dozens of Muslim countries.

The ensuing scavenger hunt to catch Osama Bin Laden around the world is framed as a modern crusade but no mention is made of the US initially funding, arming and training the Afghan mujahideen to fight Soviets under Operation Cyclone in the 1980s. In all media framings of Islamophobia, the West perpetually emerges as a blindsided and naïve victim of barbarous hatred that is always painted as an 'Us v Them' battle rather than a complex 'technology' of powered historical events leading up to a confrontation. However, an acknowledgement of such a double standard is by no means an excuse or justification for the conduct of terrorists and should never be mistaken as 'terrorist sympathising' but rather a call for a more honest retelling of history that shows how imperialist interests, and present policies have driven discourse in the past and continue to shape reactions around the globe today.

Young touches upon this production of difference as an 'aesthetic' paradigm applied consistently in Western canon:

Meanwhile, westerners carry on going to the theatre. Art and politics don't mix, they always say. The very division of the world on which aesthetics rests is a product of the Manichean, or dualistic, colonial, patriarchal mentality isolated by the revolutionary psychologist Frantz Fanon at the opening of his *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). Through their 'aesthetic expressions of respect for the established order', says Fanon, 'in the capitalist countries a multitude of moral teachers, professors, counsellors and 'disorientators' separate the exploited from those in power. As an intellectual, an artist, a consumer or producer of culture, you either collude with the aestheticised structure that enforces

³⁰ United Nations Special Rapporteur on Palestine, "Annual Report to the Human Rights Council," March 2025.

apartness, or you contest it – by turning the theatre into a site of resistance, for example.³¹

One such ‘disorientator’ to have emerged in the international limelight is British Muslim actor and rapper Riz Ahmed. Ahmed has taken on mainstream Hollywood roles in *Star Wars Rogue One*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, British ‘terrorism comedy’ *The Four Lions* and HBO’s *The Night Of*, where he has taken on the ‘Muslim terrorist’ stereotype and spun it in a manner that calls out those who label him rather than himself. A *New York Times* profile (2018) of him titled *Riz Ahmed Acts his Way Out of Every Cultural Pigeonhole* reads³²:

‘We’ and ‘I’ changes and shifts constantly,” he conceded when I asked him about it. “That was my biggest experience going to Merchant Taylors’. Extreme code switching. The most confusing conversation is to have to talk about the colonisation of our continents.” We laughed a little at the ridiculousness of sentences like “we colonised us,” or “we took us into slavery.” But then his face turned serious. “That’s what we are. We are the inheritors of the scars of Empire, but also the spoils of Empire. And that kind of inside/outside state is totally ingrained in us. Which is why, at a time like now, where everybody’s being asked to pick a side, everything is binary, it’s a confusing time to be us.

In such an economy of fear packed in binaries, it becomes essential to constantly recognise and deconstruct how image and affect are being negotiated by media and within knowledge production itself. We must ask what affects do and what bodies do for affects? The first frames affect as a tool for escalating belief structures and ideologies and the second offers a more complicated field.

Sara Ahmed’s explanation of how ‘fear’ operates is particularly helpful in this context, “manufacturing ‘surfaces’ of individuals and collectives by attaching negative affects to other bodies and positive affects to a collective identified as ‘us’. Fear ‘does something’... it re-establishes distance between bodies whose difference is read off the surface, as a reading that produced the surface.”³³ In a perverse sense, this kind of confirmation bias when it comes to racialising religion ensures a looped production of pointed fingers and othering that Schaefer touches upon, “racialization is not just about race, then, but any attempt to disdain an outsider – national, religious, class – as a savage.”³⁴

³¹ Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 80.

³² Jon Caramanica, “Riz Ahmed Acts His Way Out of Every Cultural Pigeonhole,” *New York Times*, September 6, 2018.

³³ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 63.

³⁴ Donovan O. Schaefer, *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power*.

Such racialization by no means occurs in a vacuum, instead it is coded in Ahmed's term 'Economies of Hate':

Racism, in these moments, is a by-product of a regime of affects that operate transversally to economic and linguistic determinations. Economies of hate are motivated by clusters surging through bodies in ways that are not necessarily thoughtful, useful, or even tactical – but no less desirable, contagious, or addictive. This non-economic variety of racism is, I would argue, on full display in contemporary American Islamophobia.³⁵

A display that even extends to popular reboots of sitcoms such as *Roseanne*, where in an episode titled 'Go Cubs',³⁶ Roseanne Barr is terrified that her Yemeni neighbours are terrorists and plotting an attack. She says "That's how they make bombs. What if this is a sleeper cell full of terrorists getting ready to blow up our neighbourhood?" She also refers to the country her Muslim neighbours are probably from as "Talibanjistan." Such constructions of savage Muslims run through the bulk of modern-day storytelling in the US.

The introduction to Omi, Michael and Howard Winant's 'Racial Formation in the United States' reads "persistent racial inequality and difference are rendered illegible in US popular political discourse. Many people in the US believe that the goals of the civil rights movement have been substantially achieved, that racial discrimination is a thing of the past, and that we are rapidly evolving into a truly colourblind society. 'Race thinking', it is argued, no longer significantly informs our perceptions, shapes our attitudes, and influences our individual, collective and institutional practices. Indeed, it is said that the most effective anti-racist consciousness, policy and practice is simply to ignore race."³⁷ It is precisely the promulgation of this myth that America is somehow 'post racial' that leads to the systematic marginalization of people of colour and the carte blanche to demonize difference whether ideological or social from a multitude of platforms. This problem is compounded when one takes into consideration the sheer power wielded by the US media in a global context. Few countries, if any, have the aesthetic, industrial and economic tools at their disposal to monopolize global perception the way America does, and this establishes its own particular brand of hegemony over global narrative. America's story as told through Hollywood films and television productions allows for the rest of the world to view it in multiple frames with films and television showcasing: superheroes, the government, doctors, lawyers, specific cities and sexual orientations. However, the opposite is true of the Muslim world, where only one story is

³⁵ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 119–120.

³⁶ *Roseanne*, Season 10, Episode 7, "Go Cubs," May 1, 2018, on ABC Television Network.

³⁷ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014)

told of dozens of countries to and by the United States; a story that American left icon Ayn Rand framed by saying “in any war between the civilized man and the savage, support the civilized man. Support Israel. Defeat Jihad.”³⁸

In his treatise ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed,’ Paulo Freire calls for a historic retelling that is rooted in acknowledging the dehumanization of the other. He states, “This, then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well. The oppressors, who oppress, exploit and rape by virtue of their power, cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves. Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both. Any attempt to ‘soften’ the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed almost always manifests itself in the form of false generosity; indeed, the attempt never goes beyond this.”³⁹ This ‘false generosity’ is what several scholars are presently calling out for denoting a new strain of racism, extended towards Muslims termed ‘the racism of low expectations.’⁴⁰

Racism of Low Expectations

If racism is recognized as forms of prejudice that are powered by actions and institutional structures then one must acknowledge some manifestation of all such elements in contemporary xenophobic and anti-Muslim rhetoric. Many anti-Muslim bigots often try to escape this problematization of Islamophobia as racism by claiming that Islam is not a race. This is undeniably true, as Muslims form an extremely diverse group located across the globe but this does not preclude them from being racialised. The response that Islam is not a race overlooks that Islam is practiced by people and the Islamophobia industry does not solely attack faith or theology but also Muslim people. Islamophobic encounters aren’t exchanges of ideas confronting and countering other ideas, these are interactions where physical markers such as ‘beards’ and ‘burqas’ are used to call out practitioners of the faith and label them.

³⁸ The quote “In any war between the civilized man and the savage, support the civilized man. Support Israel. Defeat Jihad” is attributed to Ayn Rand, a Russian-American philosopher and novelist. She expressed this sentiment in a 1974 Ford Hall Forum lecture, where she discussed her support for Israel during the Yom Kippur War of 1973.

³⁹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos, 30th anniversary ed. (New York: Continuum, 2000), 72.

⁴⁰ The term refers to a systemic form of racism which often manifests in subtle ways, whereby people from marginalised racial and/or ethnic groups are expected to have lower potential, intellect or capability. This form of racism operates along the ‘concern’ or ‘benevolence’ of those in power, akin to the colonial ‘white man’s burden’. It is patronising and paternalistic because it reinforces stereotypes about the capability of racial groups.

In *Identity and Violence*, Amartya Sen touches upon this very paradox by stating "Given our inescapably plural identities, we have to decide on the relative importance of our different associations and affiliations in any particular context. Central to leading a human life, therefore, are the responsibilities of choice and reasoning. In contrast, violence is promoted by the cultivation of a sense of inevitability about some allegedly unique – often belligerent – identity that we are supposed to have which apparently makes extensive demands on us. The imposition of an allegedly unique identity is often a crucial component of the 'martial art' of fomenting sectarian confrontation."⁴¹ It is precisely this plurality and complexity that is often denied to non-white groups in both narrative formation and dissemination.

The polarization of such opinion completely dismisses any complexity to Muslims, that rests in identities that people value other than religion involving an interplay of class, gender, profession, language, science, morals, politics, art and several other frames. To view identity as exclusively racial or religious denies individuals who occupy such identities any agency within them. The very framing demands that those individuals identify as 'Muslim' rather than a myriad of other things they may value alongside their faith. White people do not face such framings and are therefore allowed the agency to compose a blend of identity markers and degrees of involvement with those markers. Such bigotry allows for Islamophobia to become institutionalized, whereby the attitudes extend to all Muslims, rather than violent groups because the response of 'otherizing' or 'marginalizing' is directed at all Muslims in different ways. This equivocation is illustrated by Umer Mahmood in his 'Islamophobia Research and Documentation Project,' "It seems Muslims being victimized is not newsworthy but Muslims allegedly committing crimes is, at least from the media's point of view. In the case of the Miami shooting, the perpetrator's ethnicity and affiliation to Islam were focused on and held responsible, but the story largely died once it was discovered the killer had psychological issues and was HIV positive, and suffered from a sexual identity crisis."⁴² The racism directed at Muslims takes on its own binary and extremes, where they are only ever represented in media as either extremists and violent or so culturally conservative that they are never part of the American middle class mainstream that goes to parties and shops at Target.

This back-and-forth discourse on Islamophobia is called out by activist Majid Nawaz as 'soft bigotry' that is still just as racist in its desperate attempt not to be because it demarcates an 'other'. Nawaz says

⁴¹ Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 5–6.

⁴² Umer Mahmood, "Islamophobia Research and Documentation Project," University of California, Berkeley, <https://crg.berkeley.edu/research/research-initiatives/>

“...It’s what I call the racism of low expectations: to lower those standards when looking at a brown person if a brown person happens to express a level of misogyny, chauvinism, bigotry, or anti-Semitism, and yet hold other white people to universal liberal standards. The real victim of that double standard are the minority communities themselves because by doing so we limit their horizons; we limit their own ceiling and expectations as to what they aspire to be; we’re judging them as somehow that their culture is inherently less civilized; and, of course, we are tolerating bigotry within communities, and the first victims of that bigotry happen to be those who are weakest from among those communities.”⁴³ This same operational ‘racism of low expectations’ also refuses to acknowledge so-called ‘moderate’ Muslims as authentic Muslims, where Muslims who are lesbian, gay, artists or academics are viewed as minorities within Islam that have been efficiently ‘Westernized’. Such framing assumes that of the bulk of over a billion Muslims, the majority are terrorists and moderates are a minority, rather than the other way around.

The other extreme of the spectrum, of course, is much more vocal. Right wing Christian and Zionist groups that presume Muslims as a homogenized entity to which they readily ascribe whatever markers of violence they see fit. Deepa Kumar lists four types of Islamophobes: “There are four interconnected groups of people that have come together to project the image of a vicious and menacing ‘Muslim enemy’ and to generate fear and hatred. They include members of the neocon camp who have devoted themselves to ferreting out the ‘Islamic Terrorist’; Zionists whose goal of policing criticism of Israel dovetails neatly with the logic of Islamophobia; the Christian right, which has joined the ranks of the Islamophobic warriors; and a group of former Muslims (and Christians) from the Middle East and South Asia, that have profited from Islam bashing.”⁴⁴ Each of these groups has gotten louder over the years and this attitude is reflected consistently in increasingly draconian policies applied towards Muslim communities and especially Muslim immigrants fleeing conflict zones such as Syrian refugees.

However, none of this, is contrived to take away from the fact that Islam and those who practice it are facing a crisis at present. There is no denying the upsurge of Wahabi and Salafi, militant ideologies taking root in many Muslim countries all over the world, and peace-loving Muslims are usually the first victims of the violence that results from terrorism. However, the framing of violence and terrorism as an exclusively Islamic phenomenon, rooted in religious practice turns a blind eye to the

⁴³ Maajid Nawaz, "The Racism of Low Expectations," *Big Think*, accessed October 4, 2025, <https://bigthink.com/videos/maajid-nawaz-on-islamic-reform/>.

⁴⁴ Deepa Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012)

systematic invasions and violence meted out through imperialist policies exported from Western nations, via colonialism and more presently in the name of 'liberalising' or 'freeing' Islamic countries from themselves. The idea that 'terrorism' has a race, and religion allows governments and policy makers to ignore acts of terrorism carried out by groups and individuals that they do not have a vested interest in sidelining, namely white, men.

Confronting such frameworks of imperialist power is extremely difficult given the global export of neoliberal economic policies around the world and the systematizing and standardization of such power mechanisms in multiple contexts. According to Arundhati Roy in 'Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire' "When we speak of confronting Empire, we need to identify what Empire means. Does it mean the US government (and its European satellites), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organization (WTO), and multinational corporations? Or is it something more than that? In many countries, Empire has sprouted other subsidiary heads, some dangerous by-products – nationalism, religious bigotry, fascism and, of course, terrorism. All these march arm in arm with the project of corporate globalization."⁴⁵ This near-omnipotent structural marginalization paints a dim picture for our ability to confront Islamophobia in its many manifestations, or even to confront racism for that matter.

Islam as the 'Other'

According to Ian Hacking "Race is a way of 'making up people',"⁴⁶ and if that is the case than Islamophobia involves a clumping of religious, ethnic, and cultural prejudices together in one toxic constellation. Even though there are now consistent calls on the part of academics to decouple religion from culture, given that most manifestations of religion are increasingly disconnected from the cultures in which they are embedded, the globalized political discourse seldom allows for such remapping. Islamophobia has become a cryptic articulation of racism and the religion itself has been reduced to racial and cultural dimensions by both its adherents and critics alike. In his 1962 treatise 'Gharbzadegi' or 'Westoxification', Jalal Al-e-Ahmad asked "What brought on this era? What happened that other people, ignoring us completely while they changed and developed their machines, built, carried out plans, and moved in and out of our midst and we woke to find every oil derrick a spike impaling the land? Why did we end up Westoxified? Let's go back to history."⁴⁷ The only thing that has changed now is that no one is ignoring Muslims, if anything,

⁴⁵ Arundhati Roy, *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2004), 3.

⁴⁶ (Hacking, 1999)

⁴⁷ Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi (Occidentosis: A Plague from the West)*, trans. Robert Campbell (Berkeley, CA: Mizan Press, 1984), 25.

a hyper-vigilance is deployed towards Islamic symbolism and practice without any need to comprehend or critique it. This hyper-vigilance and hyper-visibility carries its own complications, where Muslim Americans are simply never considered 'American enough' to not be 'Muslim' first and foremost. Throughout this paper, Islamophobia is understood as a racialising form of racism, one that operates through cultural, religious, and affective coding rather than biological essentialism and this is continually codified in new ways.

Nowhere is the politics of difference more prominent in the Western framing of the veil, which has at various points in history been used to symbolise a multitude of meanings from early European framing of it to represent the 'erotic mysteries of the East' to present day fear of what lurks beneath it. Conversely, for Muslims, the veil originally symbolized class and status but for many today, it symbolizes resistance in the face of imperialist attacks on identity. According to Young "today, depending on who you are, the veil symbolizes control or defiance, oppression or autonomy, patriarchy or non-western communal values. How can we understand the veil, catch its meanings, and at the same time take hold of and interrogate or own automated responses? No one can read the veil from a neutral, disinterested space."⁴⁸ In many ways, this analysis lends itself rather conveniently to deconstructing Islamophobia itself, since the Muslim is framed as somehow inherently 'Eastern' and consequently in opposition to the 'West', there are very few 'neutral' framings of Muslims in today's cultural climate. Even though Muslims come in all shapes, sizes and ethnicities, Islam being the second largest religion in the world, the framing is solely fixated on their 'brown-ness', South Asians and people from the Middle East clad in burqas or donning beards. Fanon himself has emphasized this 'historic dynamism' of the veil and the ways it can be employed as a strategic device depending on the circumstances in which it is deployed and who observes it. "This woman who sees without being seen frustrates the colonizer," he states and Young builds upon this "she asserts a resisting refusal of knowledge comparable only to the impenetrability of the Casbah, the fortress in whose steep, narrow alleyways the ambivalent veiled woman is often pictured. The nature of the western response to the veil is to demand and desire its removal, so that strategies of liberation in the name of saving women supposedly forced to wear the veil coincide uncomfortably with the colonial violence of the veil's forcible removal." This 'forced removal' harkens back to strategies employed under Andrew Jackson's forces in 1830s towards Native Americans, what he termed as 'Indian Removal', where a similar systemic assimilation strategy was deployed in indigenous peoples to colonize them; i.e. cutting their hair, forcing them to stop speaking their languages and removing all indigenous clothing. The same

⁴⁸ Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 80.

practice continues today, when office workers throughout the US can randomly pressure and force female employees to remove their headscarves. Even more problematic is when such practices are incorrectly framed under 'feminism' or 'liberation', the idea that all women are forced to veil is just as ludicrous as presuming that all women in the West are forced to put their bodies on display. If feminism allows for a critique of veiling practices because modesty is exclusively mapped here onto the female form, then the same feminist practices must also recognize the institutional coercion of the fashion, entertainment, and beauty product industries that capitalize on branding and selling the female form. By combining qualitative discourse analysis with affect theory and postcolonial critique, this paper has traced how Islamophobia is produced across media, policy language, and cultural representation. Understanding Islamophobia as a racialising affective regime clarifies why representational reforms alone are insufficient, and why confronting imperial governance, media economies, and selective empathy remains central to any anti-racist project.

Conclusion

Ultimately, any unpacking of Islamophobia requires understanding that this racist practice is never carried out in a vacuum. The stripping of individual and social complexity here is an institutionalized practice that allows us to observe and mourn the loss of certain lives and condemn others for their own deaths. This framing is one that follows everyone who is racialized under Islamophobia whether they themselves identify with Islam or not. The idea that Muslims can overwhelmingly be treated as terrorists even as they oppose terrorism in all its manifestations and are usually the first victims to suffer from it, implies that it is the duty of those being oppressed to constantly educate and excuse their oppressors. In some ways, George W Bush, laid down the gauntlet following 9/11 where he framed the polarity in which contemporary Islamophobia roots itself 'You are either with us or you are with the terrorists'. And this particular 'Us v Them' framing for the modern world, continues to follow race discourse all over the globe.

THE IMPERATIVE OF INTELLIGENCE TRANSFORMATION IN CONTEMPORARY WARFARE

Dr Muhammad Ajmal Abbasi*

Abstract

Warfare has been a consistently evolving phenomenon, and kept transforming according to the dictates of prevalent combat environments, shaped by the global political, economic, technological and strategic dynamics. Consequently, warfare has morphed from conventionally waged large scale conflicts to modern-day hybrid, asymmetric and mostly grey zone battles, where it is hard to differentiate between war and peace. Evaluation of combat modes dictates revolution in the response methodologies as well, and thus realignment of strategy, resources and orientation becomes inevitable. A state's entire national security hierarchy, especially a vital stakeholder like the intelligence, would need to decisively adapt for the impending challenges, mainly transpiring in the unconventional modes. Notwithstanding consistent revolution in the military affairs, there has not been compatible reforms undertaken to transform intelligence beyond conventionally oriented structures and functional modalities. This paper contends that national security intelligence has to evolve in compatibility with the changing modes of modern warfare.

Keywords: *Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), Intelligence, Hybrid Warfare, Cognitive Domain, Influence Campaigns*

Introduction

The current global security dynamics are characterized by the declining threat of conventional war, but with ever rising hazards that were barely contemplated during the earlier conflicts. The

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probability of a major war in the developed world, appears to be diminishing - a significant transformation of human nature or significant deviation from the prevalent global political structure.¹ The scenes of large scale armed conflicts, are now swapped with multifaceted security challenges such as failing states, terrorist activities, asymmetric conflicts, political subversions, trans-border crimes and humanitarian crisis. The evolving national security paradigm not only requires to be acquainted with the plethora of emerging threats, but also aligned to counter any exploitable vulnerabilities by the adversaries. Policy makers would need, not only to assess the existing capability of the state against unconventional threats, but also anticipate essential restructuring of the security institutions. This paper argues that the structural and functional modalities of national security intelligence must undergo transformation to maintain relevance in the face of evolving, non-conventional warfare.

The 'Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA)' is a paradigm shift in the military organization, strategic culture - and political strategy - the factors essential for anticipating the potential transformation in the art of warfare.² Nevertheless, transformative strategies have been correspondingly responded with counter reformations at the opposing end, generally with innovative combat methodologies and modes. In the post-cold war global arena a process of transformation in military technology, outlook of the armed forces, as well as the nature of warfare is taking place.³ This transformation is not only well-pronounced and rapid in certain domains, but also seamlessly altering the conventional modes of conflict. While RMA has been a widely deliberated subject, there is little debate about the 'Revolution in Intelligence Affairs (RIA), a domain equally crucial for national security.

It has been contended that states may not be the solitary actors alone, since greater human loss is caused by ethnic conflicts, global pandemics, or incessant proliferation of small arms, compared to interstate wars.⁴ Meanwhile, given relatively diminishing prospects of conventional wars, the proliferation of non-state groups, operating independently or with a state's connivance, is on the rise. Few of these non-state forces may initiate armed struggle against either, the elites in

¹ John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War*, (New York: Basic Books 1989), 6.

² Artur Gruszczak, and Sebastian Kaempf, eds, *Routledge Handbook of the future of warfare*, (London: Routledge, 2024), 2.

³ Paul Hirst, *War and Power in the 21st Century: The State, Military Conflict and the International System*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 7.

⁴ Elke Krahnemann, *New Threats and New Actors in International Security*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 3.

the underdeveloped world, or the developed nations on premises such as environmentalism, religious extremism and nationalist secessionism.⁵ Notwithstanding, debate over the rise of unconventional warfare or peripheral nature of traditional warfighting, the role of intelligence would continue to be vital. However, for an effective response to the evolving security threats, intelligence organizations would need to transform structurally and functionally. This paper contends that with the evolution of warfare, intelligence hierarchy needs to realign itself for the impending security challenges.

Literature Review

Evolution of warfare and national security intelligence, both in own right, are among the extensively deliberated subjects in the western world. There is ample debate on the evolving nature of warfare and inevitability of corresponding transformation in the response strategies as well. However, deliberations about the emerging modes of combat, especially its unconventionality, and consequential necessity of intelligence reforms, continue to be relatively occasional. This paper endeavors to interlink widely undertaken work on both the domains, and seeks to find connectivity in the two mainly individual trajectories.

Transformation of warfare and decline of conventional conflict has been a widely debated subject. The Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA)' is regarded as a paradigm shift in military organization, strategic culture and political strategy by Artur Gruszczak and Sebastian Kaempf. Gruszczak and Kaempf identify social, cultural and economic factors as the sources of turmoil, and violence, suggesting that warfare is facing an accelerated transformation. Discussing the evolution of warfare, John Mueller thinks that large conflicts among developed world are becoming obsolete.⁶ Paul Hirst is of the view that with evolving military technology, the outlook of the armed forces, and the nature of warfare and balance of military power is changing.⁷ He goes on to suggest that now, non-state forces can start armed struggle against the elites in developing world. Robert Dover and Michael Goodman, suggest that threats are no more confined to any specific jurisdiction and proliferate every human sphere.⁸ Jennifer Sims

⁵ Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*, 3rd ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012)

⁶ John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1989)

⁷ Paul Hirst, *War and Power in the 21st Century: The State, Military Conflict and the International System* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 99

⁸ Robert Dover and Michael S. Goodman, *Spinning Intelligence: Ethical and Strategic Dilemmas* (London: Hurst & Company, 2009)

talks of traditional power shifts caused by wealth redistribution, and demographic changes.⁹

There has been an extensive debate over the rise of non-state actors and hybrid domains in the post-cold war world. State is no more regarded as the solitary actor by Elke Krahnmann, as ethnic conflicts, pandemics, or the small arms proliferation are new and devastating threats. Likewise, to Mick Ryan, progress in technology impacts geopolitics, demography, as well as climate issues. Discussing changes in the security paradigm, Dan Caldwell and Robert Williams, claim that security cannot be restricted against military threats alone. Iulian Chifu and Greg Simons, opine that during irregular conflict, non-standing army is used for secretive military activities, labeled as 'vicarious warfare'. Thomas Rid, highlights covert support of dissident entities among adversaries; Christopher Coker claims 'irony' as the most striking feature of contemporary warfare, while Sean McFate, underlines as to how various actors define modern warfare. Lucas Kello talks about physical over virtual and interstate over sub-threshold and introduces terminology of the 'state of unpeace,' while for Chris McNab, Russians employ 'hybrid warfare' for military objectives.

Discussing evolution of modern warfare further, Leszek Sykulski claims that Russian Colonel Yevgeny Messner introduced 'rebel wars', involving diversion, terror, partisanship, and insurrection. Various terminologies describe contemporary warfare; Sean McFate's 'nonwar wars,' and David Kilcullen's use of 'liminal warfare' space term, are among these. Chinese Liang Qiao and Xiangsui Wang suggest that there is no domain modern warfare cannot use; Sarah Bressan and Mari-Liis Sulg opine that violence in the grey zone has substituted conventional war, while for Philip Kapusta, present conflict is characterized by ambiguity. Geraint Hughes believes the grey zone helps avoid overt warfare, while John Mueller thinks that due to intolerable cost, war has lost its appeal. Richard Ullman warns against defining national security in military terms alone, with Dan Caldwell and Robert Williams suggesting that insecurity transcends socioeconomic and geographic constraints. James Rosenau adds that security agenda has expanded, while Mary Kaldor thinks military technology has rendered symmetrical war unlikely. David Carment and Dani Belo declare that present geopolitical conflicts have an ambiguous point of victory, whereas according to Mohammed Ayoob, security concerns of weak states are 'internal in character.'

⁹ Jennifer E. Sims, "The Global Context," in *The Oxford Handbook of National Security Intelligence*, ed. Loch K. Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010)

Technological disruption and intelligence adaptation with the evolving national security threat matrix is also among the well-researched topics. William Lahneman, thinks that revolution is a constant of human endeavor, hence, the intelligence enterprise cannot not be immune to change. Andrew Rathmell believes that intelligence's 'grand narrative' is over after the cold war, while according to Lahneman, good intelligence is becoming hard with the end of Soviet focal point. Michael Herman is of the view that governments seeking assumptions about future and uncertainties, rely on the intelligence. According to Scott Breckinridge and Herman, intelligence is historically organized for information-gathering, a complicated task now as in the opinion of Shay Hershkovitz, threat is mainly linked with the civilian world. Jennifer Sims believes that intelligence is to provide decision-advantage to the policy makers. While commenting on intelligence's present challenges, Jeffrey Cooper identify continued reliance on analytic tools and methodologies of cold war era, which may not be adequate now.

Discussing about the impact of technology on intelligence, Bruce Berkowitz and Allan Goodman suggest that the ease of access to various information sources with the availability of thousands of cable services channels and content on Internet has brought new challenges to the intelligence. Sims is of the view that technology results in the evolution of information processing empires, while for Berkowitz and Goodman, information revolution' may be the single most significant issue, affecting the contemporary intelligence organizations. Literature on intelligence reforms also highlights the emerging threats in the cognitive domain, and how this aspect is evolving into significant challenge. Adamsky Dmitry underlines Russian strategic philosophy of exercising reflexive control, primarily in the cognitive domain. Alyson Bailes suggests that the threats are consciously and actively created, while Shay Hershkovitz emphasizes how covert campaigns are employed to affect public's consciousness, both home and abroad. Jennifer Sims highlights the rising concerns with competitors' relative knowledge as well as informational resources, and labels these as the major disruptors of the modern world. Patrick Taillon underlines the significance of establishing the traceability of information, a rising challenge for the intelligence in the contemporary world.

Research Methodology

The paper relies on qualitative methodology to explore evolutionary transformation in modern warfare, especially after the cold war, and how it has influenced the security environment of the contemporary world. It examines the role of national security intelligence in the emerging combat environments and the challenges of adaptability, when evolving threats are hard to anticipate. The research seeks to draw

parallels between evolving warfare and intelligence functions, which somehow seem to lack compatibility with the impending modes of threats, especially in the developing world. The paper utilizes previously undertaken research on warfare and intelligence along with relevant books, dissertations, research papers, and other pertinent sources. The reliance on the previous research is based on the premise as well as limitation that intelligence is among the least discussed subjects in most of the world other than the US and UK.

Evolution of Warfare: From Conventional to Unconventional

Revolution in Military Affairs

Warfare is often categorized in various form: regular or conventional, involving traditional militaries; irregular or unconventional, where one of the belligerents relies upon non-standing army for activities in the domains of insurgency or terrorism; high-intensity which is often linked with conventional mode, and low-intensity that usually reflects irregular wars.¹⁰ Compared to any earlier period of recorded history, war fighting has relatively evolved quickly during the 20th and 21st centuries, apparently due to rapid technological progression. Contemporary warfare is morphing as well as diversifying into broader and perhaps innovative methodologies; from 'hybrid, compound, mosaic, unrestricted, three-block, to surrogate, vicarious, postmodern and chaoplexic' forms.¹¹ The incessant evolution of warfare has added newest complexities in the security domain, where frequent reappraisal of strategic threat landscape has become inevitable.

There has been an evolution of conflicts from traditionally regarded 'conventional deployments and engagements,' usually in an overt form to more covert military actions, which are labeled as being 'vicarious warfare.'¹² Covert warfare has always been an essential ingredient of conflicts and employed judiciously for complementing the major activity. In the conventional realm, clandestine operations mainly implied the kinetic efforts with an asymmetric orientation against the targets in the adversary's mainland or a neutral territory. Despite the growing proclivity towards non-traditional warfare at present, the employment of secret operations persist, but with an obvious evolution in the methodology.

¹⁰ Iulian Chifu and Greg Simons, *Rethinking Warfare in the 21st Century: The Influence and Effects of the Politics, Information and Communication Mix*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 342.

¹¹ Gruszczak and Kaempf, *Future of Warfare*, 1.

¹² Chifu and Simons, *Rethinking Warfare*, 10.

Consequently, the covert support of subversive groups, political parties, or pliant media organizations is undertaken in the contested places, besides customary paramilitary actions or assassinations.¹³

Christopher Coker envisages 'irony' being the most striking feature of warfare after cold war where: distinguishing between peace and conflict has become hard; winning may not be the key objective compared to containing the battle; anticipating the evolving nature of war is becoming challenging; and finally, the winning side can still feel worse off compared to the loser of the battle.¹⁴ While essentially, the mode of modern day conflicts are generally similar, different terminologies have been in use to catalogue various types of irregular, asymmetric and unconventional warfare. Americans term the space laying somewhere in-between war and peace as the 'Gray Zone;' for the Russians, it is 'New Generation Warfare;' Israelis call it a 'Campaign between the Wars;' whereas Chinese label it as the 'Three Warfare strategy.'¹⁵ The argument over the changing modes, methodologies and nature of warfare, continued after the assertions of Coker in his work 'Post-modern War,' published in 1998.

Evolution of Asymmetry & Unconventionality in the Warfare

The debate on the evolution of warfare has introduced several new concepts, and terminologies to describe the evolving dynamics of warfare in the contemporary world. A skepticism has, however, been identified that persistently believes in the primacy of physical over virtual dimension, interstate conflict over sub-threshold clash, and preeminence of states over non-traditional actors.¹⁶ According to some analysts, Russians are the exponents of 'hybrid warfare,' seeking military objectives by a fusion of conventional war-fighting with unconventional, and asymmetric instruments such as insurgency, propaganda, political maneuvering as well as crucially, cyberwarfare.¹⁷ This contention has some kind of veracity, when the contemporary modes of warfare that are

¹³ Thomas Rid, "A Revolution in Intelligence," in *The New Makers of Modern Strategy: From the Ancient World to the Digital Age*, ed. Hal Brands (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2023), 1092.

¹⁴ Christopher Coker, "Post-modern War," *The RUSI Journal* 143, no. 3 (June 1998): 7-8, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071849808446260>.

¹⁵ Sean McFate, *The New Rules of War: Victory in the Age of Durable Disorder*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2019), 53.

¹⁶ Lucas Kello, *The Virtual Weapon and International Order*, (London: Yale University Press, 2017), 3.

¹⁷ Chris McNab, *A History of War: From Ancient Warfare to the Global Conflicts of the 21st Century*, (London: Arcturus Publishing, 2022), 242.

essentially non-conventional, are compared with past Russian military lexicon. All types of conflicts below the threshold of an open war, and categorized as hybrid, unconventional, grey zone, asymmetric or irregular warfare etcetera, are actually inspired from the concepts of a Russian Colonel Yevgeny Messner.

In 1960s-70s, Colonel Messner indicated towards a process that blurred the boundaries separating regular and irregular military domains, paramilitary and stateless military formations, or rebellion and informal armed social groups.¹⁸ Conceptually, this strategy was in line with the Soviet patronized armed movements, which were actively involved in violent actions all over the world during cold war. Classified as 'rebel wars,' the basic mode of combat was in the form of irregular actions and according to Messner, included features such as diversion, terror, partisanship, and insurrection.¹⁹ Presumably, all unconventional, asymmetric, irregular, grey zone or hybrid war activities of contemporary world, seem to have drawn some inspiration from the concept of rebel wars. The features of present day conflicts such as obfuscating war and peace, non-attribution or irregularity were previously divulged upon by Messner.

Kello highlighted the ambiguous nature of present-day conflicts by introducing the terminology of 'state of unpeace,' a concept that distinguishes the new range of antagonistic actions, somewhere in between the binary conceptions of war and peace.²⁰ State of 'unpeace' also primarily reflects the contentions of Messner's 'rebel war,' where war may not be declared, but peace also continues to be elusive. One of the most recently introduced concepts has termed contemporary warfare as 'nonwar wars,' where the shrewd enemies often leverage the enduring 'space between peace and war' to cause ravaging effect.²¹ Yet another contention suggests disregarding the overt/ clandestine dichotomy for identifying 'a maneuver space' in a zone of ambiguity between overt and covert domains, which is exploited for evading 'detection, attribution and response,' and termed as 'liminal warfare' space - a Latin word for 'threshold.'²²

¹⁸ Leszek Sykulski, "Old Methods in the New Framework: Strategy of Grey Zones in Hybrid Warfare," *Strategies XXI-National Defense College* 1, no. 72 (June 2021), 164, <https://doi.org/10.53477/2668-5094-21-11>.

¹⁹ Sykulski, 164-165.

²⁰ Kello, *The Virtual Weapon*, 17.

²¹ McFate, *New Rules of War*, 53.

²² David Kilcullen, "The Evolution of Unconventional Warfare," *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies* 2, no. 1 (May 2019): 68, <https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.35>.

While Messner's concept of rebel wars had been introduced several years prior to the culmination of cold war, its practical manifestation can be traced in the present day modes of conflicts. For many scholars, Russian strategy in Ukraine, and the events linked with 'Arab Spring or color revolutions,' reflect the features of rebel wars, albeit augmented by information era technologies.²³ For some, in post-cold war conflicts, political leaders exploit identity issues in decomposing states; violence is often decentralized with the involvement of non-state actors while regular forces target excluded group; and there is a predominant influence of a globalized war economy, orchestrated by the corrupt elites.²⁴ Chinese perspective also contemplates that presently, there is no domain which contemporary warfare cannot use.²⁵

The Debate over 'Hybrid' and 'Grey Zone' Battles

Contrary to what is commonly perceived, the unconventional warfare termed as 'hybrid' or 'grey zone battles,' is not a phenomenon exclusively linked with post-cold war security paradigm. These concepts, especially 'grey zones' have genesis in the theory of rebel wars, which is further enriched with modern technologies besides the experience of several asymmetric conflicts, during last three decades.²⁶ While these apparently low cost, and low risk combat modes are deemed preferable by every actor, however the great powers, especially the US has been ardently seeking to exploit this option. American scholars view it as least risky for the US military, financially manageable, valuable for accumulating immediate political capital, helpful in reducing public scrutiny, and likely to be politically expedient.²⁷

The core methodologies of grey zone conflicts in the non-kinetic domain include activities such as psychological, informational and influence operations, sabotage and deceptive actions, recruitment of organized criminal gangs, and economic measures.²⁸ The kinetic mode involve actions such as clandestine operations comprising of conventional espionage, employment of Special Forces and extensive patronage of separatist, terrorists, radical political as well as religious movements.²⁹ It is being increasingly perceived that baring eruption of odd traditional

²³ Sykulski, "Old Methods," 165.

²⁴ Hirst, *War and Power*, 83.

²⁵ Liang Qiao, and Xiangsui Wang, *Unrestricted warfare: China's Master Plan to Destroy America*, (New York: NewsMax Media, Inc., 2002), 189.

²⁶ Sykulski, "Old Methods," 169.

²⁷ Chifu and Simons, *Rethinking Warfare*, 10.

²⁸ Sykulski, "Old Methods," 163.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 164.

clash like the Russo-Ukrainian war, which largely falls in the conventional realm, clearly distinguishable battlefields are rare in the present world. Consequently, 'grey' is turning into 'black,' since hostilities and violence taking place in the grey zone has nearly substituted conventional warfare.³⁰ It concedes states' pursuit of political objectives without the employment of traditional military force, while relying on the hybrid and political warfare.³¹

The grey zone contests of modern era are no more limited to the involvement of the states alone, rather, like many other domains of human life, non-state actors have also started permeating this sphere. Kapusta is of the view that this type of warfare involves "competitive interactions among and within state and non-state.... and characterized by ambiguity about the nature of the conflict, opacity of the parties involved, or uncertainty about the relevant policy and legal frameworks."³² Generally, engagement in the asymmetric conflicts is attributed to non-state actors or weaker states that are threatened with the prospects of confronting the superior adversaries. However, in present day world, a state whether powerful or weak, may initially prefer to operate in the grey zone conflicts, to evade involvement in the overt warfare.³³

Notwithstanding present day mantra of growing interdependence, interconnectivity or globalization, prospects of violent clashes and rivalries continue to threaten the world. There are unlimited possibilities of conflicts, ranging from interstate wars, combat against global terrorist networks, and the wars engendered by ecological issues as well as economic disorder, and inequality.³⁴ The drivers of these conflicts that may incite violence in various modes, are employed by influential actors for shaping the global strategic environments. Consequently, present geopolitical conflicts reflect endeavors of restructuring the global system through the grey-zone conflicts, where military operations can be

³⁰ Sarah Bressan and Mari-Liis Sulg, "Welcome to the Grey Zone: Future War and Peace," *New Perspectives* 28, no. 3 (September 2020): 1, <https://doi.org/>

³¹ Bressan and Mari-Liis, "Welcome to Grey Zone," 1.

³² Philip Kapusta, "The Gray Zone," *Special Warfare*, vol. 28, no. 4 (October-December 2015): 20, <https://www.soc.mil/SWCS/SWmag/archive/SW2804/GrayZone.pdf>.

³³ Geraint Hughes, "War in the Grey Zone: Historical Reflections and Contemporary Implications," *Survival* 62, no. 3 (June-July 2020): 133, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2020.1763618>.

³⁴ Mark Lacy, "Predicting the Future of War in the 21st Century: A Future War Studies?" in *Routledge handbook of the future of warfare*, eds. Artur Gruszczak and Sebastian Kaempf, (London: Routledge, 2024), 23.

protracted but rarely cross the threshold of war, may not always rely on violence, and are often 'characterized by an ambiguous point of victory.'³⁵

Security Paradigm in the 21st Century

The contemporary global arena is reminiscent of a Post-Westphalian order, where the precedence of exclusive governance system over a territorial entity continues to prevail. Despite growing role of the international institutions, supranational agencies and interconnectivity, threat perception of the territorial states has not changed. Although, wherever war has once been deemed beneficial, ethical and a glorious act, or reckoned to be crucial or inevitable, it is now being increasingly regarded as intolerably costly, reckless, futile, and debasing.³⁶ However, no one has ruled out the prospects of future conflict - an inevitable constant of human sphere. Moreover, security has been a contested subject for being largely shaped by respective social constructs, thus carrying different connotations for various geographic entities. Consequently, while insecurity visibly transcends socioeconomic and geographic barriers, its sources may differ for the territories of developing world compared to the industrialized Western nations.³⁷

Essentially, the security challenges of the contemporary world are multi-faceted, mainly unconventional, and mostly directed at the human capital of a nation for widespread objectives. Limiting the scope of security to conventional domain alone, is no more a consensual interpretation of the concept and thus, being questioned by many scholars. It is now inevitable to have the capacity of dealing threats, such as transnational drug trafficking, terrorist activities, resource scarcities, economic espionage, trans-border pollution, health issues, environmental changes, and cyber security challenges.³⁸ Consequently, "defining national security merely in military terms conveys a profoundly false image of reality [and] causes states to concentrate on military threats and to ignore other and perhaps more harmful dangers."³⁹ This contention essentially reflects the widely developing understanding of the concept in the contemporary arena, where all-out military conflict are least preferred.

³⁵ David Carment and Dani Belo, *War's Future: The Risks and Rewards of Grey-Zone Conflict and Hybrid Warfare*, Policy paper (Calgary: Canadian Global Affairs Institute, October 2018), 2, <https://policycommons.net/artifacts/> .

³⁶ Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday*, 6.

³⁷ Dan Caldwell, and Robert Williams, *Seeking Security in an Insecure World*, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 3.

³⁸ Caldwell and Williams, 6.

³⁹ Richard H. Ullman, "Redefining Security," *International Security* 8, no. 1 (Summer 1983): 129, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2538489>.

Another significant and most impactful dimension of contemporary warfare is the diminishing influence of state over violence as the sole actor. Presently, insurgents, terrorists, transnational criminal gangs, and other anti-state groups increasingly rely on the option of “asymmetrical warfare.”⁴⁰ It entails identifying state’s vulnerabilities; evading military and targeting civilians; operating in small independent groups; and avoiding government controlled areas by occupying safe havens.⁴¹ Hence, warfare is no more the prerogative of the states alone, as the emergence of several non-state actors has somewhat challenged this long established monopoly. These actors have the tendency towards weaponisation, capacity of exploiting states’ vulnerabilities, and inclination for serving as proxies, to profit from the state-driven outsourcing of conflicts.⁴² Thus, the role of non-state military actors in the evolution of contemporary warfare and transforming conventional mode of conflict in to an un-conventional dimension is highly significant.

It may be inferred that prior to the contemporary global arena, security of a geographical entity largely implied countering of the threats emanating from the malign intentions of other states. With the evolution of security paradigm thereafter, focus has shifted towards challenges that are generally transpiring in the form of non-conventional challenges. According to one view, the principle security concerns of fragile or weaker states are predominantly “internal in character” and apparently are reflective of “the early stages of state making.”⁴³ This contention reveals a significant shift in the conventional lexicon of conflict, since greater emphasis on internal dimension apparently suggests changing modes of warfare. Notwithstanding the rising concerns over unconventional threats, especially those ‘internal in character’; national security intelligence would continue to look outward for the sponsors, instigators, perpetrators and abettors of these security challenges.

National Security Intelligence: Necessity and Challenges of Transformation

Intelligence and the Evolving Dynamics of Warfare

Intelligence is regarded as a publically inaccessible domain for being a covert activity, and can be classified among the least debated

⁴⁰ Krahmman, *New Threats*, 202.

⁴¹ Krahmman, 202.

⁴² Gruszczak and Kaempf, *Future of Warfare*, 3

⁴³ Mohammed Ayoob, “Defining Security: A Subaltern Realist Perspective,” in *Critical Security Studies: Concepts and Cases*, eds. Keith Krause and Michael C. Williams (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 121.

subjects in most parts of the developing world. The lack of debate on the functioning, anomalies and challenges of national security intelligence may be forestalling the prospects of innovative thinking, transformation and alignment with the emerging realities. Lahneman is of the view that revolution is a recurring phenomenon in every dimension of human endeavor- hence, the intelligence enterprise cannot not be immune to this trend.⁴⁴ Question now arises does intelligence require to change for keeping pace with the evolution of warfare? If intelligence needs to change, shall this be revolutionary transformation or the evolutionary one? Taking on the first part of the question, a straightforward response would be that it is inevitable for an intelligence organization to keep itself evolving, according to the dictates of threat matrix. However, careful deliberations may be much needed when the type of this change in the intelligence crafts i.e. revolutionary or evolutionary, is to be considered.

While warfare continue to be in the process of evolution since the end of cold war, there has not been corresponding focus towards reforming the national security intelligence. This tendency may be little hard to explain as in almost every other domain of security, a due cognizance for reforms can be found. Intelligence has largely continued its functions in traditional mode, despite growing reliance on technological progress, ease of access to information and modern surveillance means. In the hindsight, most of the intelligence functions being clandestine, avoid not only public scrutiny but even the inquest from the officials of other security domains as well. This apparent functional isolation of intelligence operations may somehow inculcate a propensity of status quo among the intelligence officials. Another aspect significantly influencing the intelligence organizations is their leverage of securitizing any dimension of intelligence crafts, for evading accountability or the oversight. Whereas intelligence operations are usually covert in nature and not as perceptible as most of other security activities, yet activating some transparency mechanism is unavoidable for overcoming functional inertia.

Almost all the ambits of statecraft involve anticipating the future, and then planning the viable courses of action to evade getting surprised or unprepared – national security domain being no exception. The governments contemplating future assumptions about the impending scenarios and uncertainties, have to rely on the intelligence agencies for prior information.⁴⁵ Hence, the input by the intelligence agencies, has

⁴⁴ William J. Lahneman, *Keeping US Intelligence Effective: the Need for a Revolution in Intelligence Affairs*, vol. 13, (Toronto: Scarecrow Press, 2011), xviii.

⁴⁵ Michael Herman, *Intelligence Services in the Information Age* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2001), 11.

always been deemed vital by the policy makers at each level, and about every domain of human life for sound decision making. Getting to know the unknowns or little known for planning and executing better, appears to be an obsessive as well as inevitable attribute of successful decision makers. Historically also, the intelligence requirements during ancient times sought information about the economic potential of the territory, the vitality of its inhabitants, and their military capacity for the policy judgments.⁴⁶ However, with the evolution of warfare, and rising ambiguities between the environments of war and peace, forecasting the prospective security challenges has become much more demanding.

Emerging Dimensions of Unconventional Security Challenges and Intelligence

The transformation in the dynamics of post-cold era operational intelligence is, presumably, symbolized with a declining focus in the absence of well-defined threat, and complexity as well as upsurge of new challenges. Contrary to the past, identification of enemy and ability of distinguishing peace from war, is becoming immensely challenging. Rathmell is of the view that intelligence's 'grand narrative' is over after the cold war, and the intelligence communities now are likely to come across multiple, overlapping as well as often contradictory narratives.⁴⁷ The US intelligence officials also inferred after cold war that the provision of good intelligence in the absence of a new focal point, in place of Soviet threat, would be far more demanding.⁴⁸ Thus, in the present world, where the proliferation of many unconventional threats to the national security are being perceived, a realignment of intelligence operations is essential.

Evolution of contemporary warfare has introduced several new dimensions of security threats that are complicated, intriguing and hard to comprehend at the initial stages. Hence, present national security challenges stem from the influences of global civil societies, financial sway of transnational corporations, or evolving social trends, which are not confined to any specific jurisdiction, but actually proliferate in the wider world.⁴⁹ Consequently, intelligence communities are also confronted with the internal socio-economic vulnerabilities, besides traditional threats that

⁴⁶ Scott Breckinridge, *The CIA and the US Intelligence System*, (New York: Routledge, 2019), 4.

⁴⁷ Andrew Rathmell, "Towards Postmodern Intelligence," *Intelligence and National Security* 17, no. 3 (2002): 97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/>

⁴⁸ Lahneman, *Keeping US Intelligence Effective*, 5.

⁴⁹ Robert Dover and Michael Goodman, *Spinning Intelligence: Why Intelligence Needs the Media, Why the Media Needs Intelligence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 8.

are very much exploitable by the anti-state elements. With human factor gaining precedence in post-cold war national security debates among the advanced nations, the homeland, or internal intelligence setups in the developing states also face challenges of realigning with this factor. Likewise, the impact of climate changes, and ensuing demographic concerns is enormous on national security, and negligence in these domains would cede the initiative to hostile forces for propaganda. While many of these security dimensions existed in the past as well, however, their fallout now is far more damaging, and much broader.

In the contemporary world, sound intelligence may be factual but yet incomplete with residual uncertainties; nonetheless, intelligence has to provide decision-advantage despite uncertainty and lack of ultimate truths.⁵⁰ Ambiguities and uncertainties of present day security paradigm are certain to hamper good intelligence, however, this elusiveness can be reduced with sound and well-deliberated information collection plan. Thus, intelligence's core responsibility is reckoned to be information-gathering and exploitation - aspects like all source analysis, are regarded among smaller components, whereas covert action deemed even smaller.⁵¹ Moreover, information gathering or 'acquisition,' has always been recognized as the foundation of intelligence operations, and even the multitude of information in these days did not reduce its significance. This continued preeminence of acquisition becomes even more vital during unconventional warfare, with increasing demands of reporting anti-state activities of various non-state targets and different foreign entities.

Technology: Rise of Compatibility Challenges for Intelligence

The unprecedented progression in the technological domain has radically transformed the modes of warfare, compelling the states to review their traditional national security paradigms. Besides every other human sphere, the conventional perception of the national security is also eroding fast, with the emergence of previously inconceivable dimensions of threat. Technology has enabled apparently benign elements the capacity to challenge the state, and encroach upon the previously inaccessible domains including security. The use of propaganda for demoralizing the adversary, and generating specific narratives for perception management in some form, has traditionally been an important facet of warfare.

⁵⁰ Jennifer E. Sims, *Decision Advantage: Intelligence in International Politics from the Spanish Armada to Cyberwar*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 534.

⁵¹ Herman, *Intelligence Services*, 4.

However, in the contemporary era of exceptional informational, and technological progression, employment of various means for influence operations has added yet another intricate challenge to the national security. The era of technology has led to the evolution of worldwide information processing empires; a phenomenon not new, but with far greater transnational power and influence.⁵² Given the present day ease of connectivity facilitating influence campaigns, intelligence organizations are confronted with the challenges of maintaining credibility.

Intelligence forecasting is predominantly a work of analysts, who predict the future events on the basis of an assessment of the acquired information, which is developed through a well-articulated mechanism. However, the analytical process continues to be dominated by the conventional mindset even when the modes of warfare, the instruments of conflict and the nature of threats have moved well beyond the traditional dynamics. Intelligence forecasts generally lack objectivity due to continued dependence on analytic tools, methodologies as well as procedures, more suited to the fixated, and hierarchical security challenges of the Cold War era.⁵³ The vital impact of technology on intelligence can be ascertained from the response of many policy makers, who at times assume the role of analysts, when provided with the information.⁵⁴ This propensity coupled with over-reliance on overt sources, may be undermining the intelligence reports, which has to be the most reliable mechanism of obtaining tangible security perspectives.

With the progression of technology, and consequent outreach of the masses to countless information sources, there is an apparent transformation in the conflict modes as well. The warfighting is gradually drifting away from physical to cognitive domain, making perception management and influence operations vital, both at home and abroad. Cognitive ascendancy over the enemy promises immense dividends, compared to the potential costs of traditional warfare, resulting in the growing reliance on well-conceived information campaigns. Many in the developing countries find it hard to accept that the perception management is no more limited to state's narrative, and instead the masses are more receptive towards negative, but superiorly constructed tale. In this era of media conglomerates, masses have thousands of cable services channels, content on Internet and variety of sources, to look for

⁵² Sims, *Decision Advantage*, 540.

⁵³ Jeffrey R. Cooper, *Curing Analytic Pathologies: Pathways to Improved Intelligence Analysis* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, December 2005), 23.

⁵⁴ Bruce D. Berkowitz and Allan E. Goodman, *Best Truth: Intelligence in the Information Age*, (New Haven, USA: Yale University Press, 2000), 23.

the information.⁵⁵ Hence, intelligence's continuous propensity of reliance on orthodox modes of perception management, is highly unlikely to yield desired results. Intelligence agencies can no more evade media challenges, and may have to develop some integral capacity of viable mass communication mechanisms.

Influence Campaigns: Intelligence Challenges in the Cognitive Domain

Notwithstanding some of the ongoing conflicts in the contemporary arena, belligerents prefer non-kinetic means for compliance, while avoiding engagements in conventional warfare. National security intelligence organizations, are thus required to keep an eye on all such activities that may not fall in the realm of traditional warfare, but can still be threatening. Growing concerns with the devastating costs of wars, are leading towards conflict strategies that seek compliance of the adversary without resorting to violent means. There is rising focus on influence operations, wherein a shrewdly selected information is constructed for promoting a manipulative interpretation, called reflexive control. The terminology of reflexive control has primarily been introduced in the post-cold war era, and often linked with the Russian influence activities. According to Russian strategic philosophy, reflexive control:

“...forces the adversary to act according to a false picture of reality in a predictable way, favorable to the initiator of the informational strike, and seemingly independent and benign to the target. The end result is a desired strategic behavior.”⁵⁶

Threats, especially those in the conventional domain are the problems, which are 'consciously and actively created by one security actor ... for another.'⁵⁷ The contemporary security dynamics are evolving in the form of a dilemma for intelligence, as these may not be well pronounced but continue to simmer in various forms, and tend to explode without any forewarning. Evolution in the warfare categorizes present challenges among the initiatives that have enormous capacity of influencing popular opinion, and threatening the strategic outlook.

⁵⁵ Berkowitz and Goodman, 21.

⁵⁶ Adamsky Dmitry, "Cross-Domain Coercion: The Current Russian Art of Strategy," *Proliferation Papers*, No. 54 (November 2015), 7. <https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/pp54adamsky.pdf>.

⁵⁷ Alyson J. K Bailes, 'Introduction: A World of Risk,' in Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, ed., *SIPRI Yearbook 2007: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2.

Contemporary use of cyber means for the manipulation of the public opinion, essentially reflects the unveiling of influence operations for favorably shaping the battlefield environments. This dimension is rightfully classified among the major disruptors of the 21st century and as influential contender for public allegiances as was the sway of transnational religions once.⁵⁸

While influencing the adversary decision makers has always been a vital component of strategic planning, the ease of communications has, now, transformed it into a far more enviable option. With the evolution of warfare, influence campaigns may have a gradual, but essentially a devastating impact on almost every facet of the national security. These covert campaigns looking to affect targeted public's consciousness, aim at influencing public discourse; promoting favorable narratives; inciting confusion, chaos, as well as mistrust; and undermining the fundamental social contract of the target state.⁵⁹ Consequently, it is imperative for the intelligence agencies, not only to anticipate the damaging impact of these influence campaigns on the national security, but undertake a timely response to mitigate such challenges. This is, nevertheless, a challenging task because, 'Information Revolution' may be the single most significant issue affecting today's intelligence, since no other aspect of contemporary human life is changing as rapidly as the information world.⁶⁰

Transformation of Intelligence: A Perspective

Intelligence operations generally follow a well laid down methodological process, which is termed as the intelligence cycle. This commonly known process structuralizes various phases of intelligence activity, usually including direction from policy makers, acquisition or collection, processing including steps such as collation, evaluation and analysis, and finally, the dissemination. Intelligence transformation has to be an evolutionary process, relying on a gradual change for developing compatibility with the evolving warfare instead of some radical measures. The evolutionary change is also obligatory for ensuring steady adaption by the rank and files of the intelligence organization. This intelligence transformation has to primary take place in the attitudes, which implies developing the cognitive amity for dealing with the constantly mutating challenges. For this purpose, there may not be any need of redesigning the intelligence cycle but instead, rendering greater emphasis on analytical

⁵⁸ Sims, *Decision Advantage*, 540.

⁵⁹ Shay Hershkovitz, *The Future of National Intelligence: How Emerging Technologies Reshape Intelligence Communities*, (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), 22.

⁶⁰ Berkowitz and Goodman, *Best Truth*, 2.

phase would be coherent with the objective of necessary transformation. Moreover, contrary to the established mechanisms, employment of analysts at each phase of the intelligence cycle beyond the 'processing' part may be far more rewarding.

Ostensibly, the consistently evolving modes of warfare that resulted in enhanced ambiguities and uncertainties, have necessitated greater focus on analysis phase of the intelligence cycle. It does not, in any way, suggest that analysis process has ever been a neglected domain, since many debates over various methodologies are extensively covered in the literature on intelligence. One of these widely cited debates has taken place during the formative days of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) between Sherman Kent and Willmore Kendall, the two renowned American scholars on intelligence. Notwithstanding the divergent views of both the scholars on analytical methodologies, the significance of analysis in the intelligence cycle had been amply highlighted in the debate.⁶¹ With unconventional modes of warfare assuming definite preference in the contemporary strategic environments, value of analysis increases manifold to avoid intelligence failures. It would, therefore, be prudent to suggest that evolution of warfare has placed 'Analysis' or 'Processing' of abundantly available information in present era at the zenith of intelligence cycle.

Intelligence organizations may not essentially require any drastic restructuring, since few tweaks in functional methodologies through adequate capacity building, can set-forth the transformation process. The capacity building of the rank and file can be achieved with the conceptual or academic uplift in relevant disciplines, while at the same time, increasing reliance on subject matter experts. With national security challenges proliferating every sphere of human life, ranging from conventional military to political, economic, legal, environmental and social domains, the customary intelligence strategies may not suffice. This multidimensionality of national security threats requires intelligence to expand its traditional focus to 'unknown-known' and 'unknown-unknown,' the two commonly used lexicons for indicating 'uncertainties'. Moreover, as the contemporary digitalized world has led to an information revolution, 'sense-making' emerges as the most vital facet of intelligence tradecrafts. Consequently, the quest for reducing prevailing ambiguities would entail greater focus on the intelligence of 'abstracts' rather than 'concretes,' thus increasing the reliance of intelligence agencies on the analysts for sense-making.

⁶¹ Jack Davis, "The Kent-Kendall Debate of 1949," *Studies in Intelligence* 35, no. 2 (1992): 91-103, <https://nara-media-001.s3.amazonaws.com/arcmedia/dc-metro/rg-263/>

Conclusion

The evolving dynamics of future warfare with externally inspired digital incursions in the national security domain, have emerged as a serious challenge for the entire world. The evolving threats are so real that even some of the most developed intelligence organization are concerned, and wary of potential risks linked with the online foreign interferences. These disruptive interventions can decrease trust of people in the democratic process, critically polarize social discourse, disrupt international alliances, instigate trust deficit on the leadership, emasculate state's institutions; and eventually promote economic, geopolitical, as well as ideological interests of the foreign interferers.⁶² All these activities are aimed at influencing the unsuspecting audiences by propagating specific tales, propaganda themes, as well as credulous arguments. Hence, the core challenge for intelligence setups appears to be the capability of establishing the traceability of information.⁶³ The capacity building of the intelligence officials and enhancing their understanding of evolving global dynamics, now seems inevitable necessity. Contemplation of modern day national security threats entails superior intellect of the intelligence officials, which may be possible when they are trained and groomed to look beyond fixated mindset.

The conventional intelligence, today, is therefore faced with a moment of truth - the evolving challenges, especially with the introduction of unconventional modes of warfare, necessitate changes in the traditional approach. Intelligence setups at present are predominantly, conventionally trained for identifying different trails, detecting potential threats, and providing forewarning to the decision makers for articulating counter strategies. Notwithstanding rising necessity, the intelligence community has largely been unable to construct a new framework, for aligning itself with the emerging threats that are complicated, and highly intricate. Despite the cognizance regarding the disturbing effects of impending non-conventional security threats at every policy tier, the response capacity of intelligence organizations continue to be far from desired levels. Consequently, the dilemma of the intelligence planners is not only the transition in the frequency or nature of potential threats, but rather the complexion of the threat dynamics that have also undergone

⁶² Communications Security Establishment, "Cyber Threats to Canada's Democratic Process," June, 7, 2017, 13, <https://www.cyber.gc.ca/en/guidance/cyber-threats-canadas-democratic-process>.

⁶³ Patrick Taillon, From Veracity to Traceability. A New Canadian Legal Framework for Deliberative Referenda," in *Misinformation in Referenda*, ed. Baume S, V. Boillet, and V. Martenet (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 17.

fundamental changes.⁶⁴ Intelligence planners may need to look beyond the conventional military threats, and explore domains, especially in the unconventional realm, which might not have been fully perceived earlier.

⁶⁴ Berkowitz and Goodman, *Best Truth*, 8.

TREATY ON THE PROHIBITION OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS (TPNW): STIGMATISATION, NORMATIVE IMPACT AND DISCURSIVE APPROACH

Syed Adnan Athar Bukhari*

Abstract

This paper explores the underlying efforts of the international anti-nuclear movement, specifically the Humanitarian Initiative led by Non-Nuclear Weapon States and supported by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), seeking to further the cause of nuclear disarmament. The movement was successful in finalising the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) in 2017 at the UN General Assembly with a vote of 122 in favour. Remarkably, the treaty entered into force in 2021 comprehensively outlaws the development, testing, transferring, receiving, keeping, using or threatening the use of nuclear weapons. The advocates of the treaty urge that nuclear weapons are the most inhumane and indiscriminate weapons that inflict damage on a mass scale. Their potential use violates international humanitarian and human rights laws and may cause significant environmental damage. Based on these assumptions, they argue that nuclear weapons must be eliminated urgently. The paper underscores the discussions of 'stigmatisation' and 'devaluing' of nuclear weapons, 'normative impact' of the treaty, and 'discursive approach' through reframing of the debates. The research uses qualitative methodology and utilises content analysis of open-source data for analysis.

Keywords: TPNW, ICAN, Nuclear Disarmament, Humanitarian Initiative, Stigmatization

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Introduction

The 2017 UN *Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW)* is a landmark nuclear disarmament agreement aimed at eliminating nuclear weapons from the face of the Earth. The agreement was reached after concerted efforts of the non-nuclear-weapon states (NNWS) such as Norway, Sweden, Ireland, Austria, Switzerland, Mexico, and Brazil as a result of a campaign of the *Humanitarian Initiative* and also by the efforts of the *International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN)*, an international non-governmental organisation.¹ The supporters of the treaty are convinced of the idea that nuclear weapons constitute a fundamental threat to international peace and stability, and may cause unnecessary humanitarian loss and damage to the environment. The proponents of the treaty, mainly non-nuclear weapon states, belonging to Nuclear Weapon Free Zones and many international non-governmental organisations such as ICAN, believe that nuclear weapons are the most lethal and indiscriminate weapons; therefore, they should be eliminated.

This paper tries to address key fundamental questions such as, what are the reasons and arguments of the nuclear ban advocates to push for their case, given the utility and significance of nuclear weapons for deterrence purposes and the opposition of nuclear weapon states (NWS); mainly the nine nuclear-equipped states (P-5: the US, the UK, France, Russia and China + India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea) and their allied or umbrella non-nuclear states); how can the idea of nuclear disarmament be achieved through a treaty-based approach under the nuclear ban treaty, invoking the discussions of stigmatisation, normative effect and discursive approach; How does the TPNW differ from the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) and what are the key challenges to the existing ban treaty.

The research uses qualitative research methodology and utilises content analysis of open-source data for analysis. It relies on primary and secondary data to identify why the Humanitarian Initiative has been initiated by the non-nuclear weapon states, supported by the ICAN to analyse the discussion of stigmatisation, normative impact and discursive approach to grant credence to the idea of nuclear disarmament. Analysing the TPNW and NPT, the article draws comparisons of the two treaties, highlighting the significance of and challenges to the TPNW.

The paper is divided into the following four sections. Section one deals with the origins of the *Humanitarian Initiative*. Section two sheds

¹ Tom Sauer, "The Impact of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons: The Crucial Role of the European NATO Allies," *Peace Review*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (2024): 359-369, <https://www.tandfonline.com/action/showCitFormats?doi=10.1080/10402659.2024.2337881>.

light on the key provisions and obligations of the TPNW and its key challenges. Section three critically underscores three frameworks, i.e. stigmatisation, normative impact and discursive approach to understand the significance and utility of the TPNW in three sub-sections. Section four highlights the relationship and difference between the TPNW and NPT. The paper summarises the discussion and highlights key challenges for the treaty implementation.

Humanitarian Initiative: Breaking the Existing Non-proliferation Regime

The efforts for the nuclear ban movement started in the late 20th and early 21st century after the slow progress on disarmament since the mid-1990s and the failed NPT Review Conference in 2005, which failed to produce a consensus document.² The 1996 International Court of Justice (ICJ) Advisory Opinion on threat and use of nuclear weapons was significant in the journey of the TPNW as “it was the first disarmament-focused uprising in the UNGA.”³

The move was influenced by the successful finalisation of the 1997 Ottawa Treaty to ban landmines and the 2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions. Also, worldwide support for the *Humanitarian Initiative* to ban nuclear weapons sprang from the like-minded campaigner NGOs (as Track two channels) along with support from ‘middle power’ states⁴ (as Track one channels)⁵ which Futter and Samuel called as Positive Neutral States or (disarmament-minded countries) such as Norway, Sweden, Ireland, Austria, Switzerland, Mexico, and Brazil.. Global South states and some Western NNWS agreed to cooperate on nuclear disarmament through the New Agenda Coalition (NAC).⁶

² Ibid. Also see: Harald Müller, “The 2005 NPT Review Conference: Reasons and Consequences of Failure and Options for Repair,” Report No 31, Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission (WMDC), Sweden, 2005.

³ Andrew Futter and Olamide Samuel, “Accommodating Nutopia: The Nuclear Ban Treaty and the Developmental Interests of Global South Countries,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 50, No. 5, (2024), 799–820. Doi:10.1017/S0260210523000396; also see: Tom Sauer, “The Impact of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.”

⁴ Rebecca Davis Gibbons, “The Humanitarian Turn in Nuclear Disarmament and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons,” *Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 25, Nos. 1–2, (2018), 11–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2018.1486960>.

⁵ William C. Potter, “Disarmament Diplomacy and the Nuclear Ban Treaty,” *Survival*, Vol 59, No. 4 (2017), 75–108, DOI: 10.1080/00396338.2017.1349786.

⁶ Futter and Samuel, “Accommodating Nutopia.”

The drive for nuclear disarmament further got impetus when former President Obama envisioned for a world without nuclear weapons in his Prague speech in 2009,⁷ yet no practical steps had been taken by the US administration. In 2010, the advocates of the nuclear ban treaty pushed for reframing the possession and possible use of nuclear weapons as a humanitarian rather than a state security issue.⁸

Three dedicated international conferences on the *Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons* were held in Oslo, Norway (March 2013), Nayarit, Mexico (February 2014), and Vienna, Austria (December 2014), where the idea of a nuclear ban was vigorously promoted.⁹ In these conferences, representatives from Algeria, Kazakhstan, and the Pacific Island states, with a history of nuclear testing and use (Retributive-Seeking States), were able to articulate their voices for retributive justice.¹⁰ The supporters of the *Humanitarian Initiative* invoked the humanitarian agenda by sensitising the consequences of nuclear war to further the agenda of nuclear disarmament.¹¹ The humanitarian agenda proved to be 'the magnetic pull' for the champions of the nuclear-free world.¹²

These conferences developed an understanding of the humanitarian, health, socioeconomic and environmental impacts of the detonation of nuclear weapons. During the conferences, the participation from states (ranging between 127 and 158 states) included people from civil society, doctors, *hibakusha* (victims of the nuclear weapons use in Hiroshima and Nagasaki) and international organisations such as "UNHCR,

⁷ Also, Obama's Prague Speech, April 5, 2009: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-prague-delivered>.

⁸ Gibbons, "The humanitarian turn in nuclear disarmament." Also see: Sauer, "The Impact of the TPNW."

⁹ Tom Sauer, "Whether you like it or not, the Nuclear Ban Treaty is here to stay: a reply to Brad Roberts," *ELN.org*, March 29, 2018, accessed October 24, 2024, <https://europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/whether-you-like-it-or-not-the-nuclear-ban-treaty-is-here-to-stay-a-reply-to-brad-roberts/>.

¹⁰ Futter and Samuel, "Accommodating Nutopia."

¹¹ "TPNW," *NTI.org*, n.d., accessed October 15, 2024, <https://www.nti.org/education-center/treaties-and-regimes/treaty-on-the-prohibition-of-nuclear-weapons/>.

¹² Jean Krasno and Elisabeth Szeli, *Banning the Bomb: The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons* (Boulder Colorado, USA: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2021).

OCHA, UNDP, WFP, ICRC and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)”¹³

The advocates of the nuclear ban treaty urged that the possession and use of nuclear weapons was inconsistent under the obligations of the international humanitarian law. For instance, Jakob Kellenberger, the former president of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) invoked such a debate in 2010.¹⁴ The former Foreign Minister of Norway, Jonas Gahr Støre argued that the “experiences of humanitarian disarmament initiatives on anti-personnel landmines and cluster munitions could be applied to nuclear weapons.”¹⁵ Likewise, a study published in 2012 by the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) on the impact of the possible use of nuclear weapons on climate change revealed the declining food production and fears of starvation.¹⁶

ICAN helped convince the governments of the non-nuclear weapon states through civil society engagement and public awareness campaigns to table a treaty to ban nuclear weapons at the UNGA. It carried out a herculean task for which it also received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2017 to convince a large number of states (mainly non-nuclear states) to push for a ban treaty. ICAN now comprises 650 NGOs from 110 states, encompassing anti-nuclear organisations, such as the IPPNW, ICRC and other civil society organisations.¹⁷

The 2013 Oslo conference highlighted the immediate and long-term effects of the use and testing of nuclear weapons beyond national borders. The nuclear weapon states boycotted the conference as ‘P-5 Solidarity.’ Their indifference gave impetus to the non-nuclear weapon states to push for a ban. The 2014 Nayarit conference further amplified the extended discussion to include the testimonies of the *Hibakusha*, the survivors of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. It also highlighted the short and long-term health hazards, impact on climate, food supply chains and inadequacy of the response capabilities. The Mexican chair of the conference posited that the risks of the use of nuclear weapons increased exponentially due to accidental, mistaken, unauthorised or intentional

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Alexander Kmentt “The Development of the International Initiative on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons and its Effect on the Nuclear Weapons Debate,” *The International Review of the Red Cross*, International Committee of the Red Cross, (2015), 681–709.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Minor, “Changing the Discourse on Nuclear Weapons: The Humanitarian Initiative,” *International Committee of the Red Cross*, (2015) 711–730.

¹⁶ Kmentt “The Development of the International Initiative.”

¹⁷ Sauer, “The Impact of the TPNW.”

authorised use of nuclear weapons. The only path to achieve nuclear disarmament is to outlaw these weapons that are inconsistent with the NPT and Common Article 1 of the Geneva Conventions.¹⁸

The 2014 Vienna conference was important as two NPT nuclear weapon states, including the US and UK, participated in the discussions. Importantly, India and Pakistan attended all meetings of the *Humanitarian Initiative*. The Vienna conference reiterated the agenda of the last two conferences but also highlighted the effects of nuclear tests through the testimonies of the victims of nuclear testing from Australia, the Marshall Islands and the United States (Utah). The conference chair summarised the adverse, catastrophic and irreversible human and environmental impacts of the nuclear weapons detonations (due to radioactive contamination) beyond borders.¹⁹

Over the lack of progress at the NPT RevCons, the non-nuclear weapon states took the agenda at an UN Open-Ended Working Group (OEWG) on nuclear disarmament within the UN General Assembly, established in 2013 as a preferable negotiating forum. Their preference resulted from the fact that the UNGA makes decisions by a majority vote of member states rather than consensus. Many states, including Algeria, Brazil, Indonesia, and South Africa, favoured the initiation of negotiations on a nuclear ban treaty as a fast-track approach to disarmament.²⁰ Recommendations from the 2016 UN OEWG further pushed the agenda for a nuclear ban treaty.²¹

A UNGA resolution A/C.1/71/L.41, forwarded by Austria, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica and other like-minded states, was adopted in October 2016, which decided to hold a conference under the auspices of the UN to negotiate a treaty to prohibit nuclear weapons next year.²² All 123 non-nuclear-weapon states voted in favour, and 38 states (including all nuclear-weapon-states except North Korea; NATO states and the US allies such as Japan, South Korea and Australia) opposed the 2016 resolution. This resolution paved the way for voting on the final text of the *Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW)* at the UNGA in New York on July 7, 2017. The 123 states (all non-nuclear weapon states, including 110 states belonging to regional nuclear-weapon-free zones) voted in favour,

¹⁸ Kmentt "The Development of the International Initiative."

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ "TPNW," *NTI.org*, n.d., accessed October 15, 2024.

²¹ "TPNW," *Unfoldzero.Org*, n.d., accessed October 16, 2024. <https://www.unfoldzero.org/treaty-on-the-prohibition-of-nuclear-weapons/#>.

²² UNGA Resolution A/C.1/71/L.41, *Reachingcriticalwill.Org*, October 14, 2016, accessed October 17, 2024, <https://reachingcriticalwill.org/>

one against (the Netherlands) and one abstention (Singapore). Notably, the Netherlands, being the only NATO non-nuclear weapon state that also hosts the NATO nuclear weapons on its land, participated in the negotiations but opposed the final draft of the treaty. All nine nuclear-armed states (P-5 + 4) and their allies boycotted the negotiations.²³

What convinced the 121 states to negotiate and establish the ban treaty can be construed in two explanations. First, the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty is discriminatory, creating a bifurcation of “*haves*” by the few and “*have not’s*” by the remaining; legitimising the right of the few to possess nuclear weapons but prohibiting all others from acquiring them. The nuclear-weapon states pledged under Article 6 of the NPT in 1970 to negotiate in good faith a treaty on general and complete disarmament. Ironically, this obligation was not time-bound and lacked any verification mechanism. Fifty-five years on, the NWS still keep around 12,000 nuclear weapons (as of 2025)²⁴ with many states upgrading and modernising their nuclear systems with billions of US dollars. The actions of the nuclear states “make a mockery of that article (6) and the NPT.”²⁵

Discriminatory non-proliferation regime that legitimize the possession of nuclear weapons by a few states is not sustainable as the non-proliferation regime is centered on a grand bargain: i.e. the non-nuclear weapon states will not develop nuclear weapons (Article II of the NPT) but acquire access to peaceful nuclear technology (Article IV of the NPT) with the commitment that the nuclear weapon states will ultimately abolish their nuclear weapons one day (Article VI).²⁶ The NNWS reminded and reiterated the NWS of their commitment to Article VI at each of the five-yearly NPT Review Conferences, but to no avail. Even at the 2015 Review Conference of NPT, where 160 states endorsed the *Humanitarian Initiative*, the conference failed to reach a consensus on the final document.²⁷ The unwillingness of the NWS to fulfil their obligations further grew frustration and anger. The quest for the nuclear ban treaty

²³ Sauer, “The Impact of the TPNW.”

²⁴ Hans Kristensen, Matt Korda, Eliana Johns, Mackenzie Knight and Kate Kohn, “Status of World Nuclear Forces,” *FAS.Org*, March 26, 2025, accessed April 2025, <https://fas.org/initiative/>

²⁵ Tom Sauer and Mathias Reveraert, “The Potential Stigmatizing Effect of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons,” *The Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 25, Nos 5–6, (2018): 437–455.

²⁶ Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, April 22, 1970, <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/>

²⁷ “TPNW,” *NTI.org*, n.d., accessed October 15, 2024.

was their “constructive common response...to fully delegitimise and devalue nuclear weapons.”²⁸

Second, the demand of the NNWS for nuclear elimination also stems from their threat perception and “security-related dangers that go hand-in-hand with the practice of nuclear deterrence.” They argued if the use of “nuclear weapons will be restricted only to the territories of the NWS and their allies.”²⁹ Such thinking led the NNWS to find an alternative other than the NPT that can outlaw the possession and use of nuclear weapons.

The ban treaty was a result of the frustration of the NNWS over the failure of the NWS and allied states to initiate negotiations on a nuclear disarmament treaty, also referred to as a Nuclear Weapons Convention (conceived in 1997 by the Lawyers Committee on Nuclear Policy and then by International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) in 2008).³⁰ Instead of waiting unabatedly, the NNWS negotiated and finalised a ban treaty by themselves. The treaty reinforced the desire and unleashed a strong political push for nuclear disarmament.³¹

After voting on the treaty held in July 2017, it was formally opened for signature on September 20, 2017, at the UN General Assembly.³² The treaty entered into force on January 22, 2021, after the fiftieth instrument of ratification by the Republic of Honduras on October 24, 2020, as per Article 15 of the text of the treaty. It was deposited with the UN Secretary-General. It entered into force for an indefinite period.³³ Since the entry into force of the ban treaty, nuclear weapons have now comprehensively proscribed formally under international law.

The TPNW is indeed a watershed for the supporters of the treaty in the way to eliminate nuclear weapons; however, others view it as divisive, which could undermine the NPT and would create further divides in the international nonproliferation and disarmament fora on the progress of nuclear disarmament.³⁴

²⁸ Sauer and Reveraert, “The Potential Stigmatizing Effect of the TPNW.”

²⁹ Ibid. Also see: Tom Sauer and Claire Nardon, “The Softening Rhetoric by Nuclear-Armed States and NATO Allies on the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons,” *Warontherocks.com*, December 7, 2020, accessed, October 14, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/12/>

³⁰ Jean-Baptiste Jeangene Vilmer, “The Forever-Emerging Norm of Banning Nuclear Weapons,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 45. No. 3 (2022), 478-504, DOI: 10.1080/

³¹ “TPNW,” *Unfoldzero.org*, n.d., accessed October 16, 2024.

³² “TPNW,” *NTI.org*, n.d., accessed October 15, 2024.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

As of March 2025, a total of 94 states have signed and 73 have become party to the TPNW. No nuclear-weapon state, nor any of its allies or umbrella states, has done so.³⁵ They are not bound by the treaty obligations.

TPNW Obligations

The 11-page UN *Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW)* of 2017 consists of a powerful preamble and 20 articles. The treaty carries three types of provisions: absolute preventive obligations (Article 1, 2 and 4, calling for a comprehensive ban on production and transfer of nuclear weapons, eliminating existing nuclear weapons stocks and banning the use of or threat of use of nuclear weapons); remedial measures (Article 6.1, victim assistance in the event of the use or testing of nuclear weapons) and cooperative approaches to implementation (Article 7, international cooperation to implement the treaty).³⁶

Despite a compelling idea to strive for nuclear disarmament through a treaty-based approach, serious challenges to the treaty stem from weak verification mechanisms that mainly consist of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards. Article 3 obliges a state party to conclude a comprehensive safeguards agreement (INFCIRC/153) with the IAEA.³⁷

As per Article 4 of the treaty, each state-party pledges to eliminate its stockpiles of nuclear weapons and would provide a timeline to a competent authority to be determined by states parties to remove nuclear and/or destroy nuclear weapons from operational status on its territories or under its jurisdiction and report to the UN Secretary General.³⁸

There is no overarching agency or organisation or any other specific enforcement arrangement like the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBTO) or the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in cases of prohibiting nuclear testing and stopping the spread and possible use of chemical weapons. The treaty calls the states

³⁵ "TPNW," *Unfoldzero.org*, n.d., accessed October 16, 2024; "Third Meeting of States Parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons," UNODA, *TPNW/MSP/2025/CRP.4*. March 7, 2025, accessed April 2025. <https://docs-library.unoda.org/>

³⁶ Bonnie Docherty, "A 'Light For All Humanity': The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and the Progress Of Humanitarian Disarmament," *Global Change, Peace & Security*, 2018; Text of Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, 2017, accessed October 18, 2024, <https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/>

³⁷ Text of TPNW, 2017.

³⁸ "TPNW," *Unfoldzero.org*, n.d., accessed October 16, 2024.

parties to “designate a competent international authority or authorities to negotiate and verify the irreversible elimination of nuclear-weapons programmes” under Article 4.6.³⁹

However, serious questions need to be pondered upon, such as: “*what would be the ‘competent international authority’ to verify the elimination of nuclear weapons? Would it be the UN Security Council, in which five nuclear-armed states hold veto power, or the IAEA, which has expertise on fissile materials but not on nuclear weapons, or would the Conference of States Parties establish an agency for this purpose? How would these provisions apply if none of the nuclear armed or allied States join the treaty? Would they be redundant?*”⁴⁰ The treaty only calls for national implementation mechanisms and international cooperation for treaty implementation.

The first review conference of the members of the TPNW will take place after five years, following its entry into force.. Subsequent review conferences will be held with an interval of six years. The amendments can be made with a two-third majority of the state parties. A state has the right to withdraw from the treaty, citing extraordinary circumstances jeopardising its supreme national interests under Article 17. The withdrawal notification will be served when the withdrawing state is not in an armed conflict. It will take effect twelve months after notification.⁴¹

Significance of the Treaty: Stigmatisation, Normative Impact and Discursive Approach

If already the NNWS are under the commitment of the NPT not to acquire and develop nuclear weapons, why then the *TPNW* was established and in what ways is it significant? More importantly, if this agreement does not apply to nuclear possessor states and their allied states as they have not joined the treaty, why is it substantive?⁴² The significance of the treaty can be conceptualised from the following three frameworks: stigmatisation, normative impact and discursive approach.

Stigmatisation

‘Stigma’ or ‘stigmatisation’, though are sociological terms but their application have later been applied to the fields of international relations and now in studies of nuclear politics. Stigma refers to considering “an attribute that is deeply discrediting,” argues Erving Goffman.⁴³

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Text of TPNW, 2017.

⁴² “TPNW,” *Unfoldzero.org*, n.d., accessed October 16, 2024.

⁴³ Sauer and Reveraert, “The Potential Stigmatizing Effect of the TPNW.”

The term 'stigma' comes from Greece, where a segment of people (often less privileged) were considered to have less social status. Today, it is meant to treat something as disgrace, worthless, dishonoured and devalued. For instance, capitalists and communists branded stigma to the competing political ideologies of each other during the Cold War.⁴⁴

Stigmatisation is a process to treat and brand something or someone as disgraceful, worthless, dishonoured, and devalued. Considering the debate of stigmatisation on nuclear weapons, it is important to understand that nuclear weapons have been framed as a symbol of national power and prestige since they were invented during the Cold War. They are valued in the national security strategies of nuclear-possessor states as their capacities to inflict unacceptable damage to deter enemies from aggression, and therefore, they bring stability, security and peace. They are also source of prestige internally and externally.⁴⁵ Alexander Kmentt, an Austrian Ambassador, argued that "the nuclear armed states and their allies consider nuclear weapons the backbone of a security policy that is based on nuclear deterrence as the 'ultimate security guarantee' and as a means to maintaining a strategic – albeit precarious – stability between them."⁴⁶ This approach of maintaining strategic stability through nuclear deterrence and nuclear weapons development set the parameters for nuclear disarmament efforts for decades. For instance, Article 6 of the NPT invoked the idea of nuclear disarmament but the progress over nuclear disarmament was slow.⁴⁷

Since nuclear weapons have been invented, it is humans who gave meaning to these weapon systems as good for national security that bring strategic stability and thwart aggression, but if we start conceiving them as evil and a source of lethal destruction, we would conceive them differently, often negatively.⁴⁸ A stigmatisation process against nuclear weapons started vigorously in the aftermath of the Cold War, in which these weapons systems were conceptualised not from a security perspective, but from humanitarian and environmental perspectives.

The critics count more disadvantages of the nuclear weapons, such as the potential failure of deterrence, the spread of nuclear weapons to

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid. Also see: Kenneth Waltz, "The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Better," *Adelphi Papers*, No. 171, (1981).

⁴⁶ Docherty, "A 'Light for all Humanity'."

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Sauer and Reveraert, "The Potential Stigmatizing Effect of the TPNW."

(rogue) states and non-state actors, fears of accidents and inadvertent escalation.⁴⁹

However, as Joëlien Pretoius claimed that stigmatisation may not result in giving up nuclear weapons by the nuclear weapon states automatically but “it’s a tool that can stigmati(s)e nuclear weapons and more deeply entrench the taboo against their use – creating the conditions for disarmament.”⁵⁰

Stigmatisation was conceived from the very fact that nuclear weapons are inhuman weapons and that the humanitarian approach to disarmament gained currency and acceptance. Likewise, the moral and ethical considerations contributed to the rhetoric of the stigmatisation of nuclear weapons.⁵¹

The humanitarian approach is invoked to stigmatise possession of nuclear weapons, particularly in democratic nuclear weapon states, to generate the debate and take practical actions for nuclear elimination.⁵² Beatrice Fihn, the UNIDIR Senior Fellow and the former executive director of ICAN, argued that “stigmati(s)ing weapons creates perceptions of unacceptability which can be incompatible with the identity a state wishes to hold in the world. A treaty prohibiting nuclear weapons will make it more difficult for nuclear-armed states to continue to justify possessing and planning to use nuclear weapons.”⁵³

Notably, stigmatisation of nuclear weapons does not work instantly and yield results abruptly. It is a lengthy process that needs concerted efforts to produce results. It works through ‘*reframing*’ and

⁴⁹ Ibid. Also see: Scott D. Sagan, Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed* (W. W. Norton & Company: 2018); Also see: James M. Acton, “Inadvertent Escalation and the Entanglement of Nuclear Command-and Control Capabilities,” *Carnegie.com*, October 29, 2018. accessed September 15, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2018/10>

⁵⁰ Joseph Pretoius, “How I Learned to Hate the Bomb,” *TheBulletin.Org*, February 7, 2017, accessed September 16, 2024, <https://thebulletin.org/can-Also-see-Sauer-and-Reveraert-“The-Potential-Stigmatizing-Effect-of-the-TPNW.”>

⁵¹ Joseph A. Camilleri, Michael Hamel-Green, and Fumihiko Yoshida, *The 2017 Nuclear Ban Treaty A New Path to Nuclear Disarmament* (Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2019)

⁵² Sauer and Reveraert, “The Potential Stigmatizing Effect of the TPNW.”

⁵³ Beatrice Fihn, “The Logic of Banning Nuclear Weapons,” *Survival*, Vol. 59, No. 1, (2017): 47–48.

'devaluing' of the possession and possible use of nuclear weapons by nuclear-possessor states and their allied states.⁵⁴

The movement of the *Humanitarian Initiative* contributed to reframe and devalue nuclear weapons. The advocates of the ban movement started to treat nuclear weapons and their possible use as contradictory to the international humanitarian law. Moreover, their possible use may cause adverse implications for the climate. Due to these reasons, they should be delegitimised and eliminated.⁵⁵

John Borrie made a compelling case for the movement of the *Humanitarian Initiative* to outlaw nuclear weapons under the TPNW. He invoked the idea of 'framing' and 're-framing' to eliminate a category of weapon systems. Framing refers to "conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action." It follows "re-framing (that) means moving from one such shared understanding (or framing) to another, as shown by discernible processes of frame alignment."⁵⁶ There are four 'strategic processes' involved in reframing that include frame bridging, amplification, extension and transformation. The advocates of the nuclear ban treaty linked or bridged their call to the earlier banning movements of other weapons, such as mines and cluster munitions that caused superfluous or unnecessary suffering against their targets (combatants & civilians alike. Amplification refers to invoking the values of protecting civilians as a key feature of international humanitarian law (IHL), thus, certain weapon systems, such as mines and cluster munitions and nuclear weapons, should be banned and eliminated. The protection of civilians as a principle of IHL parallels frame extension to ban the bombs. Frame transformation refers to the systematic alterations of opinion of the participants that fundamentally redefine their activities.⁵⁷

ICAN and non-nuclear-weapon states invoked a variety of strategic processes of framing to initiate a nuclear ban treaty. They rallied support for the continued possession and threat of use of nuclear weapons as unacceptable. They challenged the ideas of the first-class minds that were immersed for decades in the abstract realm of nuclear deterrence and the

⁵⁴ Docherty, "A 'Light for all Humanity'; also see: Nick Ritchie, "Waiting for Kant: Devaluing and Delegitimising Nuclear Weapons," *International Affairs* (Oxford University Press on Behalf of Royal Institute of International Affairs, vol. 90, No. 3 (2014): 601-623.

⁵⁵ Sauer, "Whether You Like It or Not."

⁵⁶ John Borrie, "Humanitarian Reframing of Nuclear Weapons and the Logic of a Ban," *International Affairs* (Royal Institute of International Affairs) vol. 90, No. 3 (2014): 625-646.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

centrality of nuclear weapons in national and alliance politics. Moreover, the move to ban nuclear weapons also highlighted a glaring fact that the great powers had limits in terms of blocking the way forward for the worthwhile ideas of nuclear disarmament.⁵⁸

The success of the finalisation TPNW was achieved through a humanitarian reframing of the issue that seeks to address the catastrophic human consequences of nuclear weapons.⁵⁹ It motivated countries to look beyond their security interests and address the risks of catastrophic harm that nuclear weapons pose to humans. Practically, the humanitarian approach to disarmament based on “global justice, humanitarian consequences, human rights and ecological violence”⁶⁰ provided a model for negotiating a ban treaty.

Stigmatisation works by establishing a ‘norm’ in society. The stigmatised party seeks to enter the group of ‘normal’ and thus stigmatisation works as a norm enforcer. For instance, Nazism became a stigma in post-WW II Germany. Its leaders and public opinion perceived it as a stigma and altered their behaviours to reintegrate into the group of ‘normal.’⁶¹

The norm of ‘relinquishing nuclear weapons’ by the nuclear armed states through stigmatisation would not be easy because of these states being powerful militarily and economically; however, rejecting the ban treaty outrightly would cause discomfort in many states, especially many umbrella/allied states. As a whole, the stigmatisation process “alter the paradigm on nuclear weapons, changing them from a symbol of prestige to a discrediting attribute.”⁶²

There are two approaches in which nuclear-stigma recognition can work: “the top-down (=direct) or bottom-up (= indirect). A direct mechanism is elite learning...(whereas) indirect, mechanism is a bottom-up process of normative change in which domestic and transnational social groups ... put pressure on decision-makers to change state policy or practices.” The key examples of the top-down approach for giving up nukes are of South Africa, Brazil, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan.⁶³

Whereas, the case of the Netherlands is significant to assess the bottom-up approach because it is the only allied country, hosting the US nuclear weapons on its land as part of its arrangements under the NATO extended deterrence, but participated in the TPNW negotiations despite

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Docherty, “A ‘Light for all Humanity’.”

⁶⁰ Vilmer, “The Forever-Emerging Norm of Banning Nuclear Weapons.”

⁶¹ Sauer and Reveraert, “The Potential Stigmatizing Effect of the TPNW.”

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

opposition from the US. In April 2016, 40,000 signatures were collected against nuclear weapons by *Pax*, the main Dutch peace organization to start a parliamentary debate that led the participation of the country into the negotiations of the ban treaty, although, it abstained in voting on draft resolution L.41 at the UNGA in October 2016 and was the only state to participate in voting but opposed the finalisation of the TPNW in July 2017.⁶⁴

The stigmatisation approach can be further conceptualised through Nick Ritchie's analysis of the '*devaluing*' of nuclear weapons in global nuclear discourse. Ritchie defined 'devaluing' as "a set of social, political and economic processes that reduce or annul the shared value(s) assigned to nuclear weapons within a polity, notably its defence and security elite, in terms of the perceived beneficial effects of their possession and deployment."⁶⁵ He also posits that "the concept of devaluing nuclear weapons is also associated with notions of 'delegitimising', 'stigmatising', 'marginalising', 'reducing the salience of and reducing the role of' nuclear weapons."⁶⁶

The process to devaluing of the nuclear weapons gathered momentum since the mid-1990s when many of the international commissions such as (the 1996 Canberra Commission, the 1999 Tokyo Forum and the 2006 Blix Commission on Weapons of Mass Destruction) and many joint statements from non-nuclear weapon states came forward at the UN Conference on Disarmament and NPT Review Conferences called for nuclear weapons disarmament.⁶⁷

Three images can be associated with regard to devaluing; first is 'surface devaluing' by the nuclear weapon states, who agreed to quantitative reductions of nuclear weapons but still consider the role of nuclear weapons in new missions in the post-Cold War. Second is 'deep devaluing' by the non-nuclear weapon states, who have pushed for reducing the role of nuclear weapons by the nuclear weapon states through calling for the negative security assurances, no first use, and de-alerting. Third is 'delegitimising' nuclear weapons, a move that came forward as a response to the glacial pace of disarmament progress in the NPT and gained momentum at the 2010 NPT Review Conference.⁶⁸ The

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ritchie, "Waiting for Kant."

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

stigmatisation and delegitimisation of nuclear weapons are aimed at implementing real disarmament steps once and for all.⁶⁹

By delegitimising nuclear weapons under the *TPNW*, the *Humanitarian Initiative* aims to generate a stigmatisation effect within the nuclear-weapon states. In fact, the opposition of the nuclear-armed and allied states boycotting the negotiations of the *TPNW* and not joining it is itself a testimony of the stigmatising effect of the ban treaty.⁷⁰ The advocates of the *TPNW* hope that it will ensue a societal and political debates within the NWS and their allies about the horrific use of nuclear weapons, and therefore, ask their governments to delegitimise and finally abolish these weapon systems,⁷¹ given that they are under the commitment of nuclear elimination under the *NPT*.⁷² The question regarding the efficacy of the *TPNW* revolves around the normative effect, “exerting a social pressure on the NWS states, shaming and thereby weakening their support for nuclear deterrence.”⁷³

The ban treaty is the first initiative to outlaw nuclear weapons by invoking the principles of international humanitarian and human rights law. It puts a categorical ban on nuclear weapons activities and can now be treated as one of the instruments of international law to ban other weapon systems such as chemical weapons, biological weapons, cluster munitions and landmines.⁷⁴

Stigmatisation is yielding some results, even if it is at the local level and in the private sector within some of the allied states and even some nuclear-armed states. For example, the *Norwegian Government Pension Fund Global* stopped investing in companies associated with the production of nuclear weapons. Many other banks (like *KBC* in Belgium) and pension funds (like *ABP* in the Netherlands) followed suit, citing the *TPNW*. Moreover, *Serco*, a British factory, halted its nuclear-weapon-related activities as a result of this campaign.⁷⁵

Likewise, fifty-six former leaders, including the former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon and two former NATO Secretaries-General, Prime Ministers and Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defence from twenty NATO states and leaders from Japan and South Korea, wrote

⁶⁹ Mitsuru Kurosawa, “Stigmatizing and Delegitimising Nuclear Weapons,” *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*, Vol.1, No. 1, 2018.

⁷⁰ Beatrice Fihn, Matthew Breay Bolton, and, Elizabeth Minor, “How We Persuaded 122 Countries to Ban Nuclear Weapons,” *Justsecurity.Org*, October 24, 2017, accessed October 16, 2024, <https://www.justsecurity.org/46249/>.

⁷¹ Sauer, “Whether You Like it or Not.”

⁷² Sauer, “The Impact of the *TPNW*.”

⁷³ Vilmer, “The Forever-Emerging Norm of Banning Nuclear Weapons.”

⁷⁴ Fihn, et. al., “How We Persuaded.”

⁷⁵ Sauer, “The Impact of the *TPNW*.”

an open letter calling and recommending the current leaders to sign and ratify the ban treaty in September 2020.⁷⁶ Interestingly, four allied states, Norway, Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium, participated in the first meeting of states parties of the TPNW as observers in June 2022 despite pressure from the US. In the second meeting of states parties of the TPNW held in November 2023, three allied states, Germany, Belgium and Norway, participated as observers. The Netherlands (in contrast to its participation in the first meeting) was absent due to elections held a week before the meeting. Their participation indicates that NATO was divided on the TPNW,⁷⁷ and stigmatisation is working. However, due to the evolving security situation, the umbrella states swung in favour of nuclear weapons, and no NATO state participated as observer in the third meeting of the TPNW in March 2025.⁷⁸

The NWS are hiding behind the allied NNWS from effective criticism in the form of stigmatisation through extended nuclear deterrence under NATO. If the allied state/s decide to fold the nuclear umbrella, the NWS would feel the heat of stigmatisation to have an effect. Likewise, domestic pressure for change in allied states would also reinforce the stigmatisation on NWS.⁷⁹

The TPNW was a result of the frustration of the NNWS with the very slow pace of nuclear disarmament by the NWS and their allies under the NPT, especially over the last two decades. *“If the signal of the TPNW is not picked up by the nuclear weapons states and their allies, these frustrations will come back like a boomerang.”*⁸⁰ Lack of progress would lead to more frustration that may result in the withdrawal of the NNWS from the NPT. There are concerns over Iran’s withdrawal. If Iran does so, it will be followed suit by Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and Egypt. The ball is now in the camp of the nine NWS (P-5 + 4) to either remain defiant of the TPNW or continue modernising their nuclear weapons for another eighty years for trillions of dollars.⁸¹

⁷⁶ “Open Letter in Support of the TPNW,” September 21, 2020, accessed October 29, 2024, <https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/ican/pages/>

⁷⁷ Sauer, “The Impact of the TPNW.”

⁷⁸ Michal Onderco, Valerio Vignoli, “Four Years Later, Member Countries are Still Divided About What the Nuclear Ban Treaty Means,” April 24, 2025, *Thebulletin.org*, accessed April 2025, <https://thebulletin.org/2025/04/four->

⁷⁹ Sauer, “The Impact of the TPNW.”

⁸⁰ Tom Sauer, “NATO Allies, don’t Dismiss the TPNW,” *ELN.org*, January 21, 2021, accessed October 14, 2024.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

The Normative Impact

Though the TPNW may not yield any practical results for the nuclear disarmament in the contemporary strategic environment when the world is entangled in the great power competition between the US, rising China and resurging Russia and we witness regional conflicts, yet, it has established a normative impact, a disarmament education guide and a social movement around the world to push for eliminating nuclear weapons in the longer term.

Jean Vilmer posits that norms are shared expectations of actors. It establishes how an actor should act or react. It regulates behaviours through “prescriptive (compelling actors to do some things) and restrictive effects (compelling them to not do other things).”⁸² He applied Finnemore and Sikkink’s three-stage norm lifecycle model (emergence, cascade and internalisation) and argued that “the norm of TPNW is stuck at the first stage and is likely to stay there. It does not meet the quantitative and qualitative conditions to reach the tipping point, allowing it to ‘cascade’.”⁸³ He also used the three-part pattern of disarmament campaigns identified by Hanson (stigmatise, delegitimise and eliminate) and argued that “the (TPNW) campaign may have some results, in particular among civil society. However, it is stuck at the second stage and unlikely to reach the third, elimination, which is the norm’s goal.”⁸⁴ He claimed three reasons for not reaching the third stage, i.e., “the exceptionality of nuclear weapons, the international security environment, and the fact that peer pressure takes precedence over social pressure among NWS.” However, he posits that (the TPNW) will likely stay a ‘forever emerging’ norm but it competes with another norm of nuclear deterrence. He claimed that “the project of banning nuclear weapons stumbles on a conflict of norms.”⁸⁵

Given the limitations of the nuclear ban movement, it continues to hold credence and create uproar against nuclear weapons. For example, the 2017 noble peace prize given to ICAN for supporting and contributing the finalisation of the TPNW and the 2024 Nobel Peace Prize given to *Nihon Hidankyo*, a Japanese organisation representing atomic bomb survivors (*Hibakusha*) of Hiroshima and Nagasaki “for its efforts to achieve

⁸² Vilmer, “The Forever-Emerging Norm of Banning Nuclear Weapons.”

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

a world free of nuclear weapons,”⁸⁶ validates the argument that the ban movement is powerful and it generates an impact.

Likewise, there is a growing realisation within the nuclear armed states of the dangers of nuclear weapons. The P-5 states in a joint statement in 2022 stated that, “We affirm that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.”⁸⁷ Significantly, the *Pact for the Future*, the outcome document of the *Summit of the Future* held during the 79th session of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2024, called for making efforts to advance the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons in its Action 25. The pact included a clear rejection of nuclear weapons, including agreement by all UN Members that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.”⁸⁸

The TPNW establishes a nascent taboo against nuclear weapons by invoking international humanitarian law that prohibits weapons and tactics that cause unnecessary suffering, and are indiscriminate or disproportionate.⁸⁹ The ICAN argued that “the treaty’s power would not derive from coercive surveillance and interdiction mechanisms, but rather from its normative power.”⁹⁰

The nuclear ban treaty has put cracks into the existing hegemonic global nuclear order by putting an alternative arrangement to the NPT that was considered sacrosanct. The global nuclear order that was established on the key principles, institutions and processes such as the NPT, nuclear deterrence, the possession and control of nuclear weapons and materials, and nuclear abolition. This order benefits “a quite specific set of identities, interests, understandings, and practices in the global politics of nuclear weapons, whilst dismissing or sidelining others.” Nick Ritchie claims that the conclusion of the TPNW has caused “nuclear ordering anxiety” for supporters of the status quo. “The ban treaty challenges the legitimacy of

⁸⁶ “Japanese Atomic Bomb Survivors’ Group Nihon Hidankyo Wins Nobel Peace Prize,” October 11, 2024, *Aljazeera*, accessed October 18, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/10/11/>

⁸⁷ “Joint Statement of the Leaders of the Five Nuclear-Weapon States on Preventing Nuclear War and Avoiding Arms Races,” January 3, 2022, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/>

⁸⁸ “Pact for the Future, Global Digital Compact and Declaration on Future Generations,” United Nations, *Summit of The Future Outcome Documents*, September 2024. <https://www.un.org/sites/>

⁸⁹ Matthew Bolton, “The Nuclear Taboo and the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons,” May 2, 2018, accessed October 15, 2024, <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/05/02/> Also see: Krasno and Szeli, *Banning the Bomb*.

⁹⁰ Bolton, “The Nuclear Taboo.”

nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence...(because of) the growing permanence of its inequalities and injustices.”⁹¹

The normative impact plays its role in bringing policy actions in the long run. Many international law instruments, such as customs and traditions in diplomatic relations and regulations of the use of force in the battlefield, were codified through norms establishment. The ban treaties on mines, cluster munitions, chemical and biological weapons established the norms against these weapon systems so does the TPNW aims to establish a taboo against the possession and possible use of nuclear weapons.

Discursive Approach

The ICAN, which was instrumental in gathering support from the NNWS to push and conclude the ban treaty, mainly pursued a discursive strategy “casting nuclear weapons (and those who defended them) as immoral pariahs.”⁹²

They generated and helped change the discussions and discourses regarding what people used to talk, think and feel about nuclear weapons. They invoked the debates of “humanitarianism, human rights and environmentalism” in traditional nuclear fora. Victims, survivors, civil society, humanitarian agencies, doctors, faith influencers, and academics were engaged in meaningful nuclear conversation. They encouraged the participation of people from the Global South, particularly women and the victims of the effects of nuclear weapons. The participation of such groups of people changed the nuclear discussions regarding the possession of nuclear weapons by NWS. They held the notion that nuclear weapons are indiscriminate, disproportionate, and can cause unnecessary suffering to humans and the environment.⁹³

For instance, a victim of the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima, *Setsuko Thurlow* claimed that the experience convinced her “*that no human being should ever have to experience the inhumanity and unspeakable suffering of nuclear weapons.*”⁹⁴

Though the 2015 NPT Review Conference failed to achieve any substantial outcome with regard to nuclear disarmament, it provided

⁹¹ Nick Ritchie, “A Hegemonic Nuclear Order: Understanding the Ban Treaty And the Power Politics of Nuclear Weapons,” *Contemporary Security Policy* Vol. 40. No. 4 (2019): 409-434.

⁹² Bolton, “The Nuclear Taboo.”

⁹³ Fihn, et. al., “How We Persuaded.” Also see: Bolton, “The Nuclear Taboo.” (For details on three conferences on Humanitarian Initiative (2013-14); see Section 1).

⁹⁴ Ibid.

thrust to the *Humanitarian Initiative* (particularly in three conferences between 2013-14) to gather support for the ban movement into an informal format. A key outcome of the initiative was to seriously challenge 'the nuclear deterrence orthodoxy'. The proponents of nuclear deterrence base their case on the readiness to use nuclear weapons and inflict unacceptable damage against an adversary to deter aggression through invoking rationality and restraint. However, the advocates of the *Humanitarian Initiative* claim that this approach has serious flaws. They argue that nuclear conflict is unwinnable and the use of nuclear weapons would result in a mutual suicide; therefore, no rational actor would risk the use of nuclear weapons. They also claim that 'good fortune' worked in the case of 'near misses' in the past that prevented nuclear accidents or miscalculations that could have resulted in nuclear war. Moreover, they also claim that there is no capacity to respond in the event of nuclear deterrence failure. These arguments make the case for nuclear weapons possession and nuclear deterrence as "a high-risk and ultimately irresponsible gamble based on an illusion of security and safety."⁹⁵ Conversely, conventional deterrence is the alternative to nuclear weapons that is much more credible.⁹⁶

The humanitarian initiative has also exposed the double standards of the nuclear weapon states in which the nuclear possessors justify the retention and modernisation of nuclear weapons for deterrence purposes; however, they also insist that no other state should get them.⁹⁷ This approach highlights the dichotomy between the rhetoric and real practices.

The significance of the discursive approach can be analysed from the fact that the former UN High Representative for Disarmament, Angela Kane noted that "this (*Humanitarian Initiative*) movement is supported by almost eighty per cent of UN Member States. The numbers cannot be ignored."⁹⁸ This movement has pushed the nuclear-armed states and their allies on the back foot. It created "doubt for policy-makers and military commanders about their established views of a (nuclear) weapon's usefulness and legitimacy."⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Kmentt, "The Development of the International Initiative." (For details on three conferences on Humanitarian Initiative (2013-14); see Section 1).

⁹⁶ Tom Sauer and Claire Nardon, "The Softening Rhetoric By Nuclear-Armed States and NATO Allies on The Treaty on The Prohibition Of Nuclear Weapons," *Warontherocks.com*, December 7, 2020, accessed October 14, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/12/>

⁹⁷ Kmentt "The Development of the International Initiative."

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid

Considering stigmatisation and normative impact, the nuclear ban treaty would shrink space for the nuclear weapon states and umbrella states to maintain “greater control of the narrative on nuclear weapons, with unpredictable political and practical consequences for them.” The *Humanitarian Initiative* turned the table on the debate on nuclear weapon through ‘reframing.’¹⁰⁰

The advocates of the ban treaty, mainly working for the ICAN, held that “*At the core of what we achieved was organizing people and presenting demands to those with the capacity to change law. We cold-called politicians. We pitched stories to journalists. We circulated petitions. We looked at which countries were next on the speakers' list at the UN and told them about our talking points. We protested in the streets. There were breakfasts with friendly officials. Lunchtime ‘side event’ panels. Evening receptions. We argued with our opponents. We argued amongst ourselves.*”¹⁰¹

The practical outcome of the TPNW with ICAN’s advocacy made them claim that, “*We humans made nuclear weapons. We assigned meaning to them. We have the power to change that meaning. We believe a world free of nuclear weapons is possible. The nuclear weapons ban is a crucial step toward that goal.*”¹⁰² The ICAN championed to draw attention of the world to the ‘catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons’ and ultimately reaching the TPNW. It deconstructed discourses that legitimise nuclear weapons and “turned the stigma associated with nuclear weapons onto NWS and allied states. ICAN activists invoked the moral, ethical and religious arguments to establish nuclear weapons as *mala in se*, instruments of unconscionable evil.”¹⁰³

Interestingly, the majority of citizens in allied states favour nuclear disarmament and the TPNW. For instance, 77% of people in Belgium favoured signing the TPNW and called for the withdrawal of the US tactical nuclear weapons from their country.¹⁰⁴ A *YouGov* poll, held by ICAN in 2018, found interesting results in four EU states that host US nuclear weapons: Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany and Italy, where the majority of people (ranging between 57-72 %) favoured removing the weapons from their countries and their governments should sign the ban treaty. The citizens of these states feared the possibility of a massive

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Fihn, et. al., “How We Persuaded.”

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Bolton, “The Nuclear Taboo.”

¹⁰⁴ Sauer, “NATO Allies, don’t dismiss the TPNW.”

humanitarian disaster looming over them, and they would be on the frontline.¹⁰⁵

Humanitarians counterargue against the nuclear deterrence theory, claiming that the existence of nuclear weapons in a constant state of readiness increases the chances of global catastrophe due to the likelihood of a human or technical error. Abolishing nuclear weapons will result in security as their absence will decrease and eliminate the chances of accidents and escalation in the international system.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, Alexander Kmentt, an Austrian diplomat argued that nuclear deterrence relied on human-imagined assumptions with the risk of overconfidence and potential confirmation bias. It cannot be proved that nuclear deterrence worked or will work because of a lack of empiricism. However, evidence suggests huge humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons, risks of accidents, technical error and miscalculation.¹⁰⁷

In the third meeting of states parties to the TPNW in March 2025, the member states were concerned about the growing role of nuclear weapons in states' security and the possible resumption of nuclear testing. They also expressed concerns about the integration of evolving or emerging technologies (ETs) in the nuclear domain. They claimed that the use of ETs in nuclear weapon systems would raise the "risks of nuclear weapon use – intentional, inadvertent or accidental – by increasing miscalculation, escalation, and loss of control. Vulnerabilities in command, control and communication systems of nuclear weapons risk manipulation and unauthorised use, while artificial-intelligence-driven decision-making could accelerate response times, reduce human oversight and even raise the risk of unintended launches of delivery systems. Deploying these technologies without fully understanding their impact further increases nuclear dangers."¹⁰⁸ Such discursive debates have provided an alternative to the traditional debates of nuclear deterrence. They are significant in advancing the agenda of the TPNW.

Given analysis on stigmatisation, normative impact and discursive approach to further and propagate the idea of nuclear ban treaty, the fundamental questions are: in what ways, the TPNW and NPT, the existing cornerstone of the non-proliferation regime, are relevant to each other

¹⁰⁵ *NEW POLL: Europeans Reject US Nuclear Weapons On Own Soil*. Survey, International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, Polls, ICAN.Org, (2018), https://www.icanw.org/new_poll_

¹⁰⁶ Krasno and Szeli, *Banning the Bomb*.

¹⁰⁷ Alexander Kmentt, "Reducing Nuclear Threats in a Time of Peril," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* Vol. 6, No. 2 (2023): 357–364. DOI:<https://doi.org/10.1080/>

¹⁰⁸ "Third Meeting of States Parties to the TPNW."

and if the TPNW contradicts or complements the NPT? The following section addresses these questions.

The TPNW and the NPT

The TPNW and NPT are inextricably embedded with each other. The TPNW complements the NPT. It contributes to the implementation of Article VI of the NPT.¹⁰⁹ Contrary to the view of the nuclear weapon states, who oppose the TPNW as parallel arrangements out of the NPT, the TPNW indeed complements the NPT in furthering the cause of nuclear disarmament. Moreover, the TPNW is different from the NPT in four ways. First, the ban treaty is a comprehensive treaty banning the possession, acquisition, transfer, receiving, using and threatening the use of nuclear weapons by all states. Second, unlike the NPT, the treaty does not differentiate between the *have's* and *have not's* and equally places responsibility on all states to disarm. Third, unlike the NPT, it provides a time-bound disarmament to the state joining the treaty. Fourth, unlike the NPT, it invokes the humanitarian and environmental apprehensions associated with the dangers of nuclear weapons and therefore, calls for complete nuclear disarmament. So, the TPNW is a comprehensive nuclear ban treaty, a real step towards a world free of nuclear weapons, a desire and commitment enshrined in the NPT.

Conclusion

The finalisation of the TPNW has turned the tide in the nuclear non-proliferation regime. It is an outcry of the NNWS for the cause of nuclear disarmament and a reminder for the NWS for their commitment under Article 6 of the NPT. It is a treaty mandated under the UN system, whether the NWS accept it or not. However, despite the successful finalisation of the TPNW, serious challenges persist in the way of the successful materialisation of nuclear disarmament, which include the opposition of the NWS and their allies to join the treaty, particularly in the wake of unfolding competitions at regional and global levels and their growing reliance on nuclear weapons for security and stability. These states also insist on seeking nuclear disarmament through existing arrangements of the NPT rather than a parallel arrangement in the shape of the TPNW. They also oppose the ban treaty, citing it as a premature disarmament arrangement that does not take into account their legitimate security concerns. They argue that the disarmament efforts should be conditioned to promote international stability.¹¹⁰ The lack of

¹⁰⁹ "TPNW," *Unfoldzero.org*, n.d., accessed October 16, 2024.

¹¹⁰ Potter, "Disarmament Diplomacy and the Nuclear Ban Treaty."

implementation and verification mechanisms is also a key challenge to its effectiveness. Despite challenges, the nuclear ban movement succeeded in establishing a nuclear ban treaty, setting a norm and delegitimising the possession and possible use of nuclear weapons in any possible conflict scenario. Through stigmatisation, norm enforcement and a discursive approach to reframe the existing discourses on nuclear weapons from a security perspective to humanitarian and environmental perspectives would generate policy debates in the NWS and allied states to rethink the role of nuclear weapons in national security strategies. The journey is a long and arduous one, but it is better if we start thinking about the nuclear weapon systems differently. The TPNW establishes that a non-proliferation regime centered upon the discrimination and hollow promises of the NWS for nuclear disarmament cannot go on and is thus unsustainable. The finalisation of the TPNW proves that nuclear disarmament is a genuine call and a compelling idea. It is a major milestone in achieving the dream of global zero (a world without nuclear weapons).

STREET-LEVEL CLIMATE GOVERNANCE IN PAKISTAN: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE CLEAN AND GREEN MOVEMENT

Dr. Asma Rashid* & Rakhshanda Kokab**

Abstract

Despite contributing approximately only 1.01% to global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, Pakistan remains one of the most vulnerable countries to the impact of climate change. Several environmental initiatives most notably the Clean and Green Pakistan movement, align national efforts with Sustainable Development Goal 13 (Climate Action). This study critically examines the design and implementation challenges of major initiatives including the Ten Billion Tree Tsunami, Recharge Pakistan, and the Clean Green Pakistan Index. Using a qualitative methodology grounded in the analysis of policy documents, government reports, media sources, and institutional data, the research explores how these programs aim to advance environmental sustainability and public awareness. The effectiveness of these programs is constrained by significant implementation barriers, such as inadequate resources, weak intergovernmental coordination, corruption, and limited institutional capacity. These challenges often create a disconnect between national policy ambitions and realities on-ground. Drawing on Michael Lipsky's Street-Level Bureaucracy framework, the study argues that the success of environmental governance in Pakistan depends not only on sound policy design but also on requires stronger institutional support, enhanced transparency, and more inclusive community engagement to translate environmental commitments into long-term, sustainable outcomes.

Keywords: *Climate governance Pakistan, Clean Green Pakistan, SDG 13 Implementation, Street-Level Bureaucracy, Environmental Policy Barriers*

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Introduction

In the global discourse on environmental governance, Pakistan has emerged as a tragic emblem of the 'Climate Paradox.' Despite contributing 1.01% to global greenhouse gas emissions, the country remains disproportionately vulnerable, consistently ranking among the top ten nations most affected by long-term climate risks. While the international community has established the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the transition from global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to local implementation remains fraught with friction. For a developing economy like Pakistan, climate change is no longer a distant threat but a structural crisis, as evidenced by the 2022 super-floods which inflicted an estimated \$30 billion in damages, which is a staggering blow to a nation already grappling with fiscal constraints and institutional fragility.

Environmental sustainability is a major focus of SDG 13 (Climate Action), which seeks to combat climate change and its consequences by encouraging efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, strengthen climate resilience, and incorporate climate change mitigation measures into policies and strategies. SDG 13 isn't just about 'Climate Action' on paper; for a country like Pakistan that loses \$30 billion to a single flood season, it is a survival mandate.

As a developing country with a smaller economy, Pakistan is facing severe problems related to climate change, and is ranked at 5th position worldwide in the vulnerability index which,¹ harms both public health and the state's economic development. Pakistan has also launched various initiatives to promote climate resilience and sustainability. Many environmental policies exist, like the Pakistan Environmental Protection Act 1997, the National Clean Air Policy (NCAP), yet problems related to implementation challenges affect performance resulting in policies ineffectiveness. The Pakistan government introduced a clean and green Pakistan initiative in 2018. This program aimed to improve the country's environmental sustainability by encouraging tree plantation drives, reducing trash, improving sanitation, and increasing environmental awareness. Pakistan has also been active on the global stage and engaged with other stakeholders to address environmental issues. For instance, Pakistan committed to adhere to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change--SDG 13.²

This study looks at the "Ten Billion Tree Tsunami," "Recharge Pakistan," and the "Clean Green Pakistan Index" as policy frameworks.

¹ Wajid Ali, "Timeline: How Climate Change Affected Pakistan in 2024," Samaa TV, December 23, 2024.

² Jahan Zaib, "UN SDG 13: Climate Action and Pakistan," September 6, 2022.

However, a wide gap exists between policy frameworks and implementation phases. Insufficient and inadequate resources, corruption, and a total breakdown in intergovernmental coordination choke the policies' effective implementation.

This study argues that this 'implementation gap' results from a crisis of street-level governance. Using Michael Lipsky's framework, it contends that environmental success in Pakistan depends on the forest guards and local administrators, who are the frontline workers. How they cope with resource constraints and other mechanisms will determine their "street-level" choices and the fact if a policy meets success or failure.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative methodology, using a case study designed to investigate the structural and behavioral complexities of environmental governance in Pakistan. The data collection process follows a triangulation strategy to ensure that the findings are substantiated and verifiable, directly depending on reliable institutional evidence. The triangulation strategy is built on a multi-source approach that blends official state records including performance audits, with independent outside perspectives available in the form of academic literature, and media monitoring. Primary data is derived from official government publications, most notably the Pakistan Economic Survey 2023-24, performance audits from the Ministry of Climate Change (MoCC), and fiscal reports from the Auditor General of Pakistan (AGP). These are supplemented by secondary sources, including international SDG trackers, peer-reviewed literature on the 18th Amendment's impact on devolved governance, and independent media reports. The study specifically focuses on the timeframe between 2018 and 2024, providing a longitudinal view of the Clean and Green Pakistan Movement across shifting political administrations and through the prism of the 2022 climate-induced flood crisis. The analytical framework utilizes thematic content analysis to synthesize this data. Information is categorized according to Lipsky's core tenets: chronic resource scarcity, the burden of discretion, and the resulting adaptations of frontline workers.

Theoretical Framework: Street-Level Bureaucracy and Climate Policy Implementation in Pakistan

In understanding the effectiveness and more often the ineffectiveness of environmental initiatives like *Clean and Green Pakistan*, it is vital to move beyond policy documents and grand declarations. Instead, we need to look at where policies meet the public on the ground. This is where Michael Lipsky's theory of Street-Level Bureaucracy becomes deeply relevant. In the Pakistani context, the forest guards of the

Ten Billion Tree Tsunami represent Lipsky's 'street-level bureaucrats.' They operate with high discretion in remote areas with low supervision, making them the ultimate arbiters of whether a sapling is actually planted or merely recorded on paper. These individuals are not mere messengers of public policy; they are, in fact, policymakers in practice, as they shape how policies are interpreted, delivered, and experienced by the public.

Pakistan's environmental strategies-including tree-planting drives, city cleanliness competitions, and public awareness campaigns-are executed not by high-level planners, but by mid- and low-level government officials, schoolteachers, local administrators, field workers, and community volunteers. These are the people who are tasked with heavy lifting of SDG 13, which requires planting trees, monitoring forest areas, educating schoolchildren, and engaging communities. However, these front-line actors often face limited resources, bureaucratic red tape, and conflicting mandates, forcing them to make difficult choices on how to implement national-level policies in very localized, resource-starved realities.

In the Ten Billion Tree Tsunami Program, success is decentralized to local forest department officials and daily-wage laborers who operate under 'chronic resource stress'. When a forest guard is underpaid or lacks the logistical support to challenge entrenched local elites like the 'timber mafia,' they face an operational dilemma. This often results in a 'coping mechanism' where officials prioritize political harmony or personal job security over environmental enforcement. These systemic constraints, rather than 'bad policy' design, create the documented implementation gaps.

Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) Framework

This model, developed by Elinor Ostrom, is a standard for studying collective action. The IAD framework includes analyzing actors, norms, institutional settings, incentive structures, rules, and more.³ However, it has limits here. Ostrom's model assumes polycentric, self-organizing environments, but the CGPM is a top-down, state-driven mandate functioning through a rigid, patron-heavy hierarchy. Therefore, this study pivots to Lipsky for a "reality check". Where Ostrom looks for community cooperation, Lipsky allows us to see the administrative friction. Climate policy in Pakistan is a living process that "lives or dies" in the hands of the frontline. Bridging the gap requires more than money; it requires

³ Ostrom Workshop, "Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) Framework," Indiana University Bloomington, accessed February 4, 2026, <https://ostromworkshop.indiana.edu/>

empowering the bureaucrats who form the actual backbone of the nation's resilience

Application of Theories on Pakistan's Environmental Governance

The Clean Green Pakistan Index (CGPI) offers a sharp look at the "burden of discretion". Municipal officers, pressured to climb the rankings, often face a temptation to prioritize visible "beautification" in high-traffic urban centers while ignoring the systemic waste rotting in the outskirts. It is an adaptation to physical and fiscal constraints. Similarly, sanitation workers are frequently expected to meet "Total Sanitation" targets without basic protective gear or even standardized tools. This creates a massive discrepancy between the national vision of a "Clean Green" nation and the localized environmental reality.

Viewing Pakistan's climate initiatives through the lens of street-level bureaucracy offers several important insights:

1. Policy success pivots not only on vision and capital but on the empowerment of local actors, which not only requires resources, but also proper training and recognition.
2. A top down Institutional accountability mechanism that involves public feedback on the quality, effectiveness, and fairness of policy execution can prove fruitful, enabling public feedback on the quality and fairness of implementation.
3. Behavioral change campaigns are needed that should include and recognize the lived realities of implementers, ensuring that those delivering environmental services are themselves treated and paid fairly and are involved in the mission.

Pakistan Clean and Green Movement and its Principal Initiatives

Pakistan's Clean and Green initiative is aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs), especially SDG 13. It was officially launched on October 30, 2018, by the federal government as a flagship environmental program. It has also been called a "people's movement" with a goal to foster behavioral change through education and awareness campaigns about the severe effects of climate change. The program is substantial, as it is concerned with citizens' participation and a bottom-up governance system rather than relying on top-down governance approaches. The focus has been given on public awareness. The program aimed to engage community participation in addressing

environmental issues.⁴ The project is structured with specific emphasis on communities, particularly school children, to generate awareness and the need for conservation and protection of valuable natural resources. This education aspect is important as environmental literacy offers awareness for the promotion of sustainable development activities. In addition, the project underscores the fact that active citizen participation hinges on the provision of education on environment and its key roles in urban areas.

Main Pillars of Clean and Green Campaign

The campaign has five main pillars on which it sets its targets, which include safe drinking water, solid waste management, total sanitation and hygiene promotion, liquid waste management and tree plantation. All these aspect need maximum participation of the public to effectively implement this policy. The major initiatives launched under the Clean and Green Pakistan movement are, Ten Billion Tree Tsunami project and the Clean Green Pakistan Index.

Ten Billion Tree Tsunami Program

The ten billion tree tsunami, a massive reforestation program, stands on the success of the Billion Tree Afforestation Project (BTAP) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, launched in 2015 by the PTI provincial government. Operating from 2014 to 2018, BTAP became a global case study by meeting its 1.02 billion tree target in half the planned time. This wasn't merely a state-led planting drive; it was a hybrid success where 60% of the growth came from managed natural restoration. By mobilizing women-led guide teams to oversee 20% of local nurseries, the project turned impoverished households into primary 'policy carriers,' allowing Khyber Pakhtoonkhawa to become the first sub-national entity to fulfill the international Bonn Challenge⁵. According to Bloomberg estimates, Pakistan forest cover remains 5% of its total area, compared to the global average of 31%⁶. Lowest at this comparison, the country had launched this program to enhance its forest cover. The aim was to restore the forest to plant 10 billion trees, go for biodiversity, promote sustainable development and mitigate climate challenges, supported by United Nation

⁴ Muhammad Jahanzaib, "Clean and Green Pakistan: Achieving the Goal for Future," Graana, November 15, 2023

⁵ Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung Afghanistan/Pakistan, "From Grey to Green," April 5, 2022, <https://afpak.boell.org/en/2022/04/05/grey-green>.

⁶ United Nations Environment Programme, "Pakistan's Ten Billion Tree Tsunami," March 29, 2021, <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/pakistans-ten-billion-tree-tsunami>.

Environment Program (UNEP)⁷. Pakistan had lost its more than 41,100 hectares of green cover in the past few decades, and the deforestation rate had been 1.6% annually. Several other forestry-related campaigns have also been launched to tackle these issues, but have not been very effective due to different challenges. The target of the Ten Billion Tree Tsunami was to boost carbon fixation to 148 million tons of CO₂ by 2030 and to restore 350,000 hectares of damaged land into forest. Moreover, a budget of 125.18 billion⁸ for four year (2021-2023) was allocated for this project. As a result, from June 2021 approximately, 350 million trees and 814.6 million plants had been planted all over the country along with approximately 85,000 green jobs to the daily wageer.. This considerably increased the forest cover from 2% to 35% by the year 2021, and also made efforts to expand Mangrove Forest, particularly in coastal areas such as Karachi, as the main objectives of the Ten Billion Tree Tsunami.⁹

Multi-Stakeholder Participation

Stakeholders like NGOs and other institutions in Pakistan also initiated minor and major tree plantation programs, which included 20 Plants twenty numbers, A billion Tree Honey Project, and the Olive Tree Plantation Project. Al-Khidmat foundation launched a tree plantation week, dedicated to the Clean and Green Pakistan Movement along with several other projects. The purpose of all these programs was to enhance the green cover of Pakistan and to cope with climate change. A "Green Stimulus Package" was initiated in April 2019 to further expand the green cover, and create a chance for employment for the Pakistani youth, particularly during the period of pandemic COVID-19.¹⁰ According to the GHG inventory of 2022, 9% of the emissions in the forest sectors were reduced after the Ten Billion Tree Tsunami project.¹¹

⁷ Sehr Rushmeen, "Sustainable Pakistan: Climate Action Now," Green Planet, June 1, 2024

⁸ Syed Mohammad Ali, "From Grey to Green," *Dawn*, June 10, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1694025>.

⁹ Asif Kamal, Ma Yingjie, and Ahmad Ali, "Significance of Billion Tree Tsunami Afforestation Project and Legal Developments in Forest Sector of Pakistan," *International Journal of Law and Society* 1 (2019): 157.

¹⁰ Ministry of Climate Change (MOCC), "Homepage," 2021, <http://www.mocc.gov.pk/>.

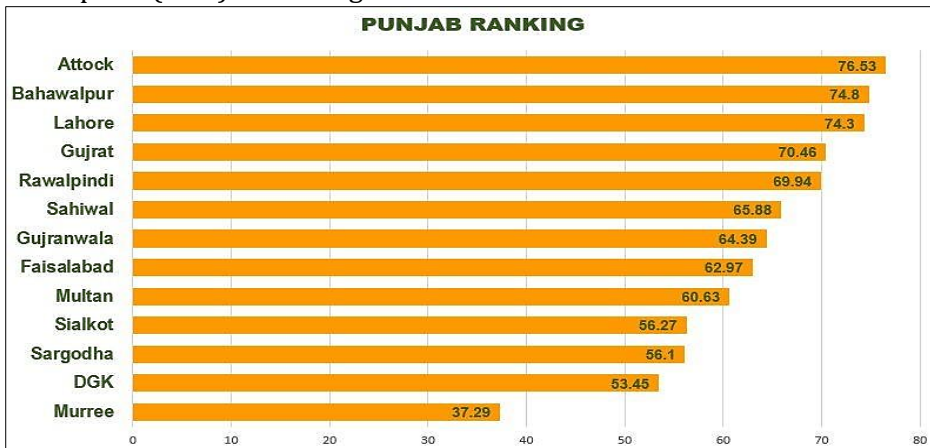
¹¹ Associated Press of Pakistan, "Pakistan's Massive Plantation Endeavours Help Emit 9 Percent Less GHG Emissions," April 12, 2021, <https://www.app.com.pk/national/>

Clean Green Pakistan Index

A Clean Green Pakistan Index has been a healthy competition among the major cities of Pakistan. The initiative ranks cities based on their cleanliness and greenery and the reason behind this competition is to improve their infrastructure and environmental sustainability. . In the first phase, it was decided to rank 19 cities from Punjab and KP, with 13 cities in Punjab and 7 cities in KP. In the first phase, cities included from Punjab were Lahore, Gujranwala, Rawalpindi, Faisalabad, Sargodha, Sahiwal, Multan, Dera Ghazi Khan, Okara, and Bahawalpur, were judged on 35 indicators, including solid waste management, safe drinking water, liquid waste management, city beautification, etc. The top-ranking cities were rewarded with special federal and provincial funds.¹² The purpose was to engage and motivate the public. Without the public involvement, the initiative was likely to remain ineffective. However, with limited resources and improper execution, the government could not effectively protect the newly developed forests from grazing and wood cutting.

The First Phase of Clean and Green Pakistan Index

The first phase of Clean and Green Pakistan Index ended in June 2020. According to the survey of the local government department, the result of the competition ranked Punjab cities as the top cleanest cities with Attock (76.5), Bahawalpur (74.8), Lahore (74.3), Gujarat (70.5), and Rawalpindi (69.9) in ranking.¹³



¹² DAWN. "PM launches Clean Green Pakistan Index, Urges Masses To Participate To Curb Pollution" (November 25, 2019). <https://www.dawn.com/news/1518776>

¹³ Nadeem Ahmad, "Clean Green Pakistan Index," *LinkedIn*, October 29, 2020, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/>

Source: Nadeem Ahmad, "Clean Green Pakistan Index," LinkedIn, October 29, 2020, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/clean-green-pakistan-index-cgpi-nadeem-ahmad>.

The result of KP cities marked Bannu at the first rank (57.5%) , then Kohat (52.97%) , followed by Abbottabad (52.71%)



Source: Nadeem Ahmad, "Clean Green Pakistan Index," LinkedIn, October 29, 2020.

2nd Phase of Clean Green Pakistan Index

The 2nd Phase of the Clean Green Pakistan Index (CGPI), launched in March 2021, expands the competition for sustainable, clean, and green urban environments from the initial 19 cities in Punjab and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa to other provinces including cities from Gilgit Baltistan, Sindh, Baluchistan, and Azad Kashmir., It was then followed by the third phase. All phases would have specific objectives to achieve with changes in attitude, behavior, awareness, and adoption of sensible practices with institutional intensification.

Clean Green Champion Program:

Besides, the Clean Green Pakistan Index, the government introduced the "Clean GreenChampion Program" to encourage high public participation. The theme of the initiative was "My City My Responsibility", which was basically a voluntary program to engage the local community in keeping their cities clean and green, and enabling a sense of ownership in them regarding their habitats and cities. The government has also set up an interactive website to facilitate its citizens, where volunteers can

become a Clean Green Champion.¹⁴ High-scoring participants earn the title of 'Champion,' moving beyond mere appreciation to receive tangible rewards and public acknowledgement. By acknowledging these individuals, the state attempts to bridge the implementation gap through social capital rather than just technical enforcement.

Implementation Challenges of the Clean and Green Movement

The implementation of Clean and Green initiatives is hindered by a variety of challenges, which complicate efforts to meet the targets of Sustainable Development Goal 13. The situation becomes more complex because Pakistan has been ranked at 140th out of 167 states in the 2025 SDG index¹⁵. It has also been confronted with a serious environmental crisis, so effective intervention and policy implementation are required to curb environmental issues.¹⁶ An effective and strong implementation mechanism is not a choice, but a need for this contemporary and vulnerable situation of Pakistan. Although the state has structured many institutions and made policies to address the problems of climate change, but it still, faces severe consequences of climate change, including floods, droughts, air pollution, and biodiversity loss, and many other related challenges that hinder the implementation mechanism.

Institutional Fragmentation: Centralization and the Post-18th Amendment Crisis

The major challenge that Pakistan Clean and Green Movements implementation face is centralization and lack of a coordinated mechanism. The subject of climate change is a federal subject, and Pakistan is a signatory to several International Climate Agreements. These agreements require the ministry to perform a reporting task to the secretariat about Pakistan's performance in implementing these agreements. However, many of the subjects of Greenhouse Gas emission in Pakistan, most notably energy transport and agriculture, are under the provincial governance, not under the federal government. And there is no

¹⁴ Malik Muhammad Ashraf, "Making Pakistan Clean and Green," *The Nation*, November 29, 2019, <https://nation.com.pk/29-Nov-2019/making-pakistan-clean-and-green>.

¹⁵ Jeffrey D. Sachs et al., *Sustainable Development Report 2025: Financing Sustainable Development to 2030 and Mid-Century* (Paris: SDSN; Dublin: Dublin University Press, 2025), Pakistan Country Profile, <https://dashboards.sdindex.org/profiles/pakistan/fact-sheet/>

¹⁶ S. Ahmad, M. A. Khan, and S. A. Zaidi, "Environmental Challenges in Pakistan: A Review of Policies, Laws, and Regulations," *Environmental Science and Pollution Research* 27, no. 6 (2020): 6013–6027.

effective coordination between the federal and provincial governments in making effective policies and decisions regarding environmental challenges. So, there is a need for coordination between the federal government, represented by the Ministry of Climate Change, and provincial-level departments, which are actually responsible for the implementation of environmental policies. There is no formal connection between the federating units and the federation when it comes to the implementation of international agreements, which are provincial in nature.¹⁷

After the 18th Amendment, the provinces were given the responsibility to have their climate policies, as climate change is very localized. Despite the 18th Amendment, the federal government plays a key role in the policymaking of provinces regarding foreign commitments. Without the coordination of the provincial government, ambiguity, conflicting mandates, and jurisdictional clashes between federal and provincial authorities undermine effective policy implementation. Federal government control over funds and strategic planning frequently translate to delayed or insufficient provision of resources to provincial Environmental Protection Agencies (EPAs), which are executive agencies for implementing environmental statutes.¹⁸ As the impact of climate change in KP is very different from Baluchistan, which would be different even within a province, we do not just need provincial policies, we need localized policies that provide some sort of idea about climate change and its consequences.

Local government is the third tier of government, which resolves the problems at the grassroots level. Local government plays a major role in climate governance but is dysfunctional due to various issues such as political interference, inadequate resource allocation, and lack of standard administrative practices. The local government doesn't have veritable autonomy, which limits the local government ability to address climate change and enforce policies effectively. To cope with climate changes, it is essential to address these shortcomings and undertake crucial reforms.

Fiscal Constraints and the "Economic vs. Environment" Dilemma

Pakistan is a developing country with a fragile economy. It lacks sufficient funds for essential environmental infrastructure to control pollution, treat wastewater, provide for storage of clean water, and above

¹⁷ Abdul Rehman Khan, "Clean Green Pakistan," accessed June 10, 2025, <https://www.scribd.com/document/439949768/Clean-Green-Pakistan>.

¹⁸ Maryam Umer Khayam and Iftikhar Ahmad, "Decentralization of Environment in Pakistan: Issues in Governance," accessed June 10, 2025, https://www.scienceopen.com/document_file/

all provide for policy implementation mechanisms. Pakistan's water storing capacity is 13.7 million acre-feet, although it receives annually over 145 million acre-feet water. This results in significant water loss during floods and monsoon seasons. Likewise, only around 8% of wastewater is treated primarily in a basic manner, and most cities lack adequate treatment facilities because of a lack of funding, modern technology, and expertise.¹⁹ There is incoherence between environmental objectives and economic development goals which further slows implementation. Policies that are aimed at shielding the environment often come in clash with policies focused on economic growth. This friction leads to a lack of incentives for implementing environmental policies, as economic interests always take precedence over the environment. So, to attain economic goals, compromising the environmental interests is neither recommended nor desirable, it may bring in short term boost but result in a long term devastation.

There is a persistent conflict where economic growth takes precedence over sustainability. As noted in the Pakistan Economic Survey 2023-24, the fiscal impact of the 2022 floods, totaling \$15.2 billion in GDP loss, demonstrates that neglecting the environment for short-term economic gains leads to long-term financial disaster. While international frameworks like the Green Climate Fund (GCF) were intended to support developing nations, cumbersome regulations mean that of the \$100 billion promised annually, only a fraction reaches countries like Pakistan. Currently, Pakistan has received only \$258 million for eight projects, a sum insufficient to address the scale of its industrial pollution.

Due to a lack of facilities and enforcement, Karachi, which is home to a large portion of Pakistan's industry, releases over 70% of its industrial waste into the Arabian Sea untreated because there is no proper mechanism. The Karachi Harbour, which spans over 62 sq kms, receives a diverse range of pollutants, including at least 411 million gallons per day (MGD) of liquid effluents, 122 MGD of municipal waste, and 350 MGD of industrial waste.²⁰ As a result of this, there is a severe challenge to public health, water, and air.

¹⁹ Farzana Zaheer Sayed, Muhammad Waris Awan, and Tahira Mumtaz, "Environmental Governance and Policy Implementation in Pakistan: Assessing Institutional Capacities and Challenges," *Journal of Development and Social Sciences* 5 (2024).

²⁰ "The Drowning Karachi Coast," *The Express Tribune*, May 28, 2025.

Street Level Implementation: Corruption and Lack of Enforcement Mechanism

Viewed through Michael Lipsky's framework, the failure of enforcement is often a symptom of "street-level" governance issues. Transparency International news report says that corrupt countries tend to be the ones most prone to environmental hazards. Industrialists and other businessmen in Pakistan are not following environmental laws, and they face no punishment for their activities. Lack of accountability undermines the entire system of environmental protection. Corruption distorts policy priorities by granting short-term elite interests at the expense of long-term environmental sustainability. For instance, when the catastrophic floods of 2022 swept across the country, and it was apparent how poorly decades of mismanagement had prepared Pakistan for natural disasters. The administration rushed to deploy relief operations, but corruption consumed funds, slowing down relief efforts and leaving millions without adequate assistance.²¹ Lack of transparency, improper policies, and implementation processes hamper public awareness of the environment and participation in environmental activities.

Policy Flux and Technical Capacity Gap

The uncertain nature of policymaking is a major challenge in effective policy implementation. Every government comes into power with a different priority and suspends or reverses the policies that are functional and launched by the previous government, no matter how much it costs or how beneficial it is for the country. Many of the Provincial Environmental Protection Agencies (EPAs) do not have advanced technology, such as pollution monitoring equipment and adequately trained staff members, which constrain their ability to effectively enforce environmental regulations. Currently, major metropolitan hubs like Karachi lack the advanced pollution monitoring equipment and trained staff necessary to enforce regulations. This results in severe public health crises, such as the discharge of 70% of industrial waste untreated into the Arabian Sea, purely due to the absence of sustained infrastructure and technical oversight.

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore that Pakistan's vulnerability to climate change is a structural economic threat. According to the

²¹ Hafeez Ali and Usman Mustafa, "Urbanization and Environmental Degradation in Pakistan: A Review and Research Agenda," *Sustainability* 11, no. 22 (2019): 1-16.

Pakistan Economic Survey 2023-24,²² climate-related disasters between 1980 and 2022 have caused staggering losses, with the 2022 floods alone resulting in a USD 15.2 billion loss to the GDP and affecting over 33 million people. These figures reinforce the urgency of initiatives like the Clean and Green Pakistan Movement (CGPM). While the movement was designed as a 'people's movement' to align with SDG 13, its implementation has become a battle ground between federal ambitions and provincial reality.

A central contribution of this research is the realization that underperformance in the Clean Green Pakistan Index (CGPI) was rarely a result of simple administrative oversight. When examining Ministry of Climate Change (MoCC) performance reviews, it becomes clear that 'street-level' municipal staff were forced to exercise discretion under conditions of chronic resource scarcity. These frontline workers often prioritized 'survival duties' such as immediate emergency sanitation and flood rehabilitation over the laborious reporting requirements of the federal index. As Lipsky's framework predicts, this behavioral shift explains why many cities failed to meet targets despite the availability of national policy frameworks.

Furthermore, the 'Timber Mafia' and localized corruption represent a failure of institutional oversight. While official reports from the Auditor General of Pakistan (AGP) have highlighted systemic 'irregularities' and non-compliance in environmental projects, this study frames these not just as financial lapses, but as 'coping mechanisms' of an under-supported bureaucracy. When forest department officials are complicit in illegal logging, it is often a symptom of systemic neglect where low wages and high discretion meet powerful local elites. This explains why, despite the Ten Billion Tree Tsunami successfully planting over 2 billion saplings and generating 85,000 green jobs as of March 2023, Pakistan still struggles with one of the highest annual deforestation rates globally.

Finally, the study highlights the detrimental role of 'policy flux.' For Pakistan to move from a 'responsible international actor' on paper to a resilient state in practice, climate responses must be insulated from the political volatility often noted in Planning Commission reviews. True sustainability requires anchoring environmental goals in the empowerment of the street-level bureaucrats who serve as the true backbone of the nation's climate resilience.

²² Government of Pakistan, *Pakistan Economic Survey 2023-24: Highlights* (Islamabad: Finance Division, 2024), p. 34, https://finance.gov.pk/survey/chapter_24/Highlights.pdf.

Conclusion

The Clean and Green Pakistan Movement (CGPM) represents more than a suite of environmental targets; it is a litmus test for the state's ability to translate global climate mandates into local resilience. This study has demonstrated that while initiatives like the Ten Billion Tree Tsunami and the Clean Green Pakistan Index have achieved significant milestones, such as the creation of 85,000 green jobs and the successful ranking of cities like Attock and Bannu, their ultimate success is mediated by the 'street-level' reality of implementation.

The research concludes that the 'implementation gap' is not merely a product of financial scarcity, but a result of the discretionary choices made by frontline bureaucrats who must navigate conflicting mandates with inadequate tools. As this study argues, when forest guards or municipal workers are forced to adopt 'coping mechanisms' due to resource stress, the high-level ambitions of SDG 13 are often diluted. Therefore, the 'Bannu or Attock models' should not be viewed as mere winners of a competition, but as case studies in how localized agency and street-level dedication can overcome systemic barriers.

There is a critical need to pivot from top-down directives to an inclusive governance model that integrates indigenous knowledge. Local communities are not just passive beneficiaries; they are the primary observers of shifting climate patterns. To move from a 'news report' style of governance to a sustainable institutional framework, Pakistan must insulate its climate policies from the 'policy flux' of changing administrations. Ensuring transparency, strengthening the institutional capacity of frontline actors, and fostering a culture of accountability are not secondary goals; they are the prerequisites for survival. Ultimately, Pakistan's journey toward a clean and green future depends on bridging the distance between the policymaker and street-level field of action.

INDIA'S OVERTURES IN THE MIDDLE EAST: HEDGING OR BALANCING AMID PARTNERSHIPS

Ali Hamza*

Abstract

This paper examines India's evolving foreign policy goals in the Middle East, focusing on its economic, political, and strategic dimensions. Historically shaped by the principles of non-alignment, India's contemporary engagements reflect a pragmatic pursuit of strategic autonomy through issue-based partnerships with diverse actors, including Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Iran. While economics remains the key driver, India's outreach reflects broader strategic considerations. This paper argues that India is positioning itself as a middle power, leveraging strategic hedging to advance its global standing without becoming entrenched in the region's complex conflicts. By examining economic interdependence, humanitarian actions, and diplomatic maneuverability, the paper illustrates how India's role in the Middle East not only furthers its national interests but also preserves its strategic autonomy. The paper examines what factors are expanding India's engagement with the Middle East, how New Delhi manages competing regional actors while upholding strategic autonomy, and its role as a middle power.

Keywords: *Strategic Autonomy, Middle East Geopolitics, Power Transition Theory, Economic Interdependence, Strategic Hedging, Energy Security*

Introduction

Since its independence in 1947, Indian foreign policy makers have tried to project an exclusively "Indian" shade to their worldview, thus, not buying the ready-made templates for how a state must act in the international arena. This was manifest in India's insistence on "non-alignment" during the intense pulling of superpowers during the Cold War. The pioneers of Indian foreign policy managed to leverage their position as

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a non-aligned state to exact benefits from both the United States and the Soviet Union. Although the shifting currents of international politics have upended the notions about international relations since the end of Cold War, India has maintained that its major foreign policy objective is to act as an independent state, dubbing this objective as its “strategic autonomy.” Although India liberalized and opened up to the world in the 90s, leaving the mantra of a “socialist model” behind, and enjoying an unprecedented proximity of relationships with the United States, it nevertheless tried to maintain a semblance of non-alignment.

India’s relationship with the Middle Eastern states is of significance as both sides mutually benefit from trade and workforce exchange, and have become highly dependent on each other over the years. Leaving aside the troubled neighborhood, India has been primarily focused on its relationship with the Middle Eastern states.¹ The relationship has a historical as well as cultural significance. India and the Middle East are in close geographical proximity and have been engaged in trade and cultural exchanges historically.² Keeping aside the “saffronization” drive of the incumbent Indian regime, New Delhi has much in common with the Middle East religiously and culturally than any other region. The cultural influences of the Gulf are visible all across India and the presence of such a large number of Muslims is a testament to the historical relationship between the two. India has managed to engage with the Middle East at all times in history. India’s relationship with the Middle East, particularly Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE, and even Iran (before the sanctions became too strict) has been based on two factors traditionally. The first one is the oil trade and the second is Indian workforce. India’s foreign policy for the Middle East is underlined by its energy and economic interests, along with the smooth flow of remittances from its large diaspora. India heavily relies on Middle Eastern oil for its booming economy and has been obtaining smooth supplies of crude oil from the region.³ The Indian workers in the Middle East, specifically in Saudi Arabia and UAE, are a very important pillar of Indian economy, as their consistent remittances provide India with

¹ Prithvi Ram Mudiam, *Indian Power Projection in the Greater Middle East: Tools and Objectives*, January 1, 2007, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156914907X207810>.

² *India in the Middle East* | The National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), n.d., accessed August 21, 2024, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/india-in-the-middle-east/>.

³ Tiziano Marino and Giuseppe Dentice, “Looks West While the MENA Region Turns Eastwards Implications of India’s Relations with Israel and the UAE,” in *India-Middle East Relations: Opportunities and Challenges* (Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore, 2024).

essential foreign exchange reserves.⁴ India has a historically significant relationship with Egypt also, as both states were members of the non-aligned movement during the Cold War.⁵

The uniqueness of India's engagement with the Middle East is that Indian relationship is not only limited to the Arab states and Iran, but their arch-rival Israel as well. Under the influence of stalwarts like Gandhi and Nehru, India opposed Israel's existence and the subsequent events.⁶ Although India recognized Israel in 1950,⁷ the relationship did not usher into an active engagement till 1990s. However, secret exchanges of important nature continued even before as Israel provided military assistance to India during the Sino-Indian War (1962) as well as Indo-Pakistan wars of 1965 and 1971, and India assisted Israel with spare parts for its aircraft during the Arab-Israel War (1967).⁸ The BJP-led Hindu nationalist government has found unprecedented warmth and affinity with Israel, most importantly as both have a common ground against the Muslims.⁹

Middle East is a region subject to internecine conflicts and contradictions running along the lines of state, religion, civilization, sect, and race. The Zionist Israeli state, ostensibly opposed by the majority of Arab population still has not been accepted and recognized by the majority of Muslim states. The civilizational and sect-based strife between Saudi Arabia and Iran is also a dominant strain that colors the dynamics of the Middle East. India has carefully tread the path between all these rifts and has ensured that it does not take sides. However, it is not the historical continuity of India's relationship with the Middle East today. India has begun to assert itself as an important global player. Therefore, its relationship with the Middle East has also seen an upward trajectory, as its economic interdependence with the region has increased as a consequence of its booming economy. Today Indian nationals are the largest foreign owners of real estate in UAE, both in terms of worth and quantity.¹⁰ Indian

⁴ Marino and Dentice, "Looks West While the MENA Region Turns Eastwards Implications of India's Relations with Israel and the UAE."

⁵ India in the Middle East | The National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR).

⁶ Efraim Inbar and Alvite Singh Ningthoujam, *Indo-Israeli Defense Cooperation in the Twenty-First Century*, n.d.

⁷ "Welcome to Embassy of India, Tel Aviv, Israel," accessed August 21, 2024, <https://www.indembassyisrael.gov.in/pages?id=mbk5e&subid=lejRe>.

⁸ Mudiam, *Indian Power Projection in the Greater Middle East*.

⁹ Inbar and Ningthoujam, *Indo-Israeli Defense Cooperation in the Twenty-First Century*.

¹⁰ "12 Reasons Why Indians Should Buy Property in Dubai," DAMAC Properties, accessed August 21, 2024, <https://www.damacproperties.com/en/>.

investments in Saudi Arabia have also multiplied recently, reaching a whopping US\$ 3 billion as of August 2023.¹¹

India's overtures in the Middle East are not an isolated phenomenon, but a case in point of the larger projection of its status as an important player in the world. This behavior is better understood through India's pursuit of strategic autonomy and strategic hedging. India acts as a classical middle power in the context of its take on the issues globally, and treads delicately in-between the gaps left by the major powers competing with each other. Most importantly, as the United States has shown intent and action to support India as a counterweight to China, Indian maneuvers have been focused on benefitting from its relationship with the United States while keeping its much celebrated "strategic autonomy."

This paper analyses India's foreign policy in the Middle East aligned with the above mentioned general strategic goals of the state. It analyzes the economic and political dynamics of Indian relationship with the Middle Eastern states and the extent to which India continues to hedge behind competing regional and extra-regional actors. The paper argues that India's increasing role in the Middle East, evident from its foreign policy trajectory, elucidates its aspirations for expanding regional and global influence, while retaining strategic autonomy.

The paper focuses on the following questions: a) what factors shape India's increasing engagement in the Middle East; and, b) how does New Delhi manage its relations with competing regional actors while maintaining strategic autonomy? A related inquiry concerns how this evolving pattern of engagement reflects India's emerging role as a middle power within the broader context of global power transition. These questions frame India's foreign policy behavior in the region to wider debates on strategic hedging, power politics, and shifting geopolitical alignments.

Theoretical Framework

This paper examines India's foreign policy conduct in the Middle East through the lenses of strategic autonomy and hedging. Within broader debates on global power hierarchies, Power Transition Theory differentiates between hegemon, rising power, and middle powers by focusing on their respective roles. The hegemon, as outlined by Gilpin, dominates the international system by shaping global norms and

¹¹ "Beyond Dubai: Indian Investments Are Finding A New Home In Saudi Arabia," The Secretariat, accessed August 21, 2024, <https://thesecretariat.in/article/>.

maintaining stability, often seeking to preserve the status quo.¹² Rising powers challenge this dominance as their economic, military, or technological capacities grow, striving to reshape the global order in ways that better reflect their interests. For example, China is often cited as a rising power using global innovation to position itself for greater global influence.¹³ In contrast, middle powers like India or Australia do not aim to overturn the hegemonic order but act as stabilizers. These states, often with strong diplomatic ties and multilateral engagements, use soft power to mediate between great powers and contribute to regional stability. Middle powers navigate the international system by leveraging alliances and diplomatic engagements, playing a more flexible role than either hegemon or rising power.¹⁴

The role of middle powers in power transition is particularly crucial. Middle powers are states that leverage their relative wealth, administrative expertise, and global standing to uphold international order and promote peace. Middle powers refrain from challenging the existing order in the international system; they are not states that seek to revise or transform the established status quo. While the term "middle power" may have some conceptual ambiguity, it is often defined by their diplomatic behavior, known as 'middle power diplomacy.'¹⁵ Middle powers typically seek to maximise their net advantages through selective cooperation and calibrated engagement rather than fixed alignment. This approach helps explain India's strategy in the Middle East, where it hedges between competing regional and extra-regional actors to maximise economic, political, and strategic benefits while preserving autonomy.

India's foreign policy, rooted in a historical preference for non-alignment and strategic autonomy, diverges from rigid alliance structures and reflects a hedging strategy based on issue-specific partnerships, including selective convergence with the United States.

India has demonstrated its influence in the region in the economic realm mostly, but its rescue operations in the regional conflict zone were a

¹² Takashi Inoguchi and Lien Thi Quynh Le, "Theory of Power Transition," in *The Development of Global Legislative Politics: Rousseau and Locke Writ Global* (Springer Singapore, 2020), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-32-9389-2_11.

¹³ Ida Bastiaens and Nita Rudra, *Democracies in Peril: Taxation and Redistribution in Globalizing Economies* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), Cambridge Core, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108556668>.

¹⁴ Tanguy Struye de Swielande, "Middle Powers in the Indo-Pacific: Potential Pacifiers Guaranteeing Stability in the Indo-Pacific?," *Asian Politics & Policy* 11, no. 2 (2019): 190–207, <https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12457>.

¹⁵ Linda S. Bishai, "From Recognition to Intervention: The Shift from Traditional to Liberal International Law," paper presented at International Studies Association, Los Angeles, CA, *41st Annual Convention*, March 14, 2000.

testament of India's type of deeper engagement in the region. Such actions illustrate India's preference for autonomous, non-military instruments of engagement, consistent with a hedging strategy that avoids entanglement while maintaining regional presence. In 2015, Air India flights evacuated 1,000 nationals of 41 countries from warring Yemen.¹⁶ Comparable efforts had been undertaken during earlier crises, including the Iraq-Kuwait conflict, and reflect a longstanding priority within India's external policy framework: the protection of its overseas population during periods of regional volatility. While such actions are humanitarian and consular in nature rather than indicative of strategic influence, they nonetheless highlight the scale and relevance of India's diaspora in shaping aspects of its engagement with the Middle East.

India's Expanding Engagement with the Middle East

Economic Engagement and Energy Interdependence

India's economic cooperation is inextricably linked with the Middle East as a relationship of mutual economic interdependence, primarily, in the spheres of energy and labor migration. Among the important features of this relationship is the fact that India's major oil import destination has been the Middle East, which has been key to her economic growth trajectory. In 2022-23, bilateral trade between India and Saudi Arabia stood at US\$ 52.76 billion while bilateral trade with UAE amounted US\$ 84.84 billion.¹⁷ Being one of the fastest-growing economies worldwide, the energy demand in India is high, and a significant proportion of the crude oil consumed by the country are imported from the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and UAE. India is the world's third largest importer of crude oil and 51% of the crude oil is imported by India from the Middle East.¹⁸ This level of dependence has made energy security a central constraint shaping India's policy choices toward the region. From Jan-Sep 2024, India imported 615.2 thousands of barrels per day of crude oil from

¹⁶ "India Ends Yemen Evacuation, Rescues People from 41 Countries," *World, Reuters*, April 10, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/india-ends-yemen-evacuation-rescues-people-from-41-countries-idUSKBN0N10PU/>.

¹⁷ "Exploring India UAE Trade and Economic Relations | IBEF," India Brand Equity Foundation, accessed October 17, 2024, <https://www.ibef.org/indian-exports/india-uae-trade>.

¹⁸ "India, UAE Relations Move from Crude Oil Imports to Nuclear Cooperation - Al-Monitor: The Middle East's Leading Independent News Source since 2012," accessed October 17, 2024, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/09/india-uae-relations-move-crude-oil-imports-nuclear-cooperation>.

Saudi Arabia and 400.1 thousands of barrels per day from UAE.¹⁹ Middle Eastern countries ensure the provision of energy that is the core of Industrial and domestic energy imports by India. This guarantees that the manufacturing sectors in India, power generation, as well as the transport sector keep on functioning to foster the growth of the economy. The importance of the Middle East's oil exports to India to support the country's economic development cannot be overemphasized, even though it is a two-way business. For India, the region is a source of its energy requirement while the GCC countries especially Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Qatar, rely on skilled and semi-skilled manpower from India. There are millions of Indians residing in the GCC countries and they have made significant input in the growth of these countries especially in the fields of construction, health, and service sectors. These countries have also used Indian manpower to lay the foundations of towering skyscrapers to implement transport systems.

Another form of foreign exchange earnings is the remittances that Indian employees send back home to India. Cash inflow from the Gulf region can considerably support the foreign exchange earnings, balance their current account, and strengthen the foreign reserves of India. This exchange of labor and capital shows how India and the Middle Eastern countries have started depending on each other in terms of economic growth, thus leading to a symbiotic relationship in the economic realm. In addition to energy and manpower, India has taken a more diversified strategic economic cooperation with the Middle East into infrastructure, technology, and investment. A key policy shift that facilitated this widening engagement has been India's Look West Policy in 2005 under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. The policy marked a conscious move from a predominantly economic relationship, centered on energy dependence and diaspora links, toward a broader strategic vision encompassing defence cooperation, technology partnerships, and long-term institutional engagement with the Gulf states. Over time, this framework has evolved into a central pillar of India's Middle East outreach, shaping contemporary diplomatic, commercial, and security alignments in the region.²⁰

There is a growing trend, especially in Middle Eastern countries, of investing on new infrastructural developments and in India's burgeoning technology markets. For instance, sovereign wealth funds from the UAE and KSA have invested massively in infrastructure, logistics, and Indian

¹⁹ Eva Levesque, "UAE Oil Exports to India Rise, Squeezing out GCC Neighbours," AGBI, October 16, 2024, <https://www.agbi.com/oil-and-gas/2024/10/uae-oil-exports-india-rise-gcc-neighbours-squeezed-out/>.

²⁰ "English Releases," accessed November 26, 2025, <https://www.pib.gov.in/newsite/erecontent.aspx?reid=10534>.

renewable energy. These investments have created better economic cooperation, where Middle Eastern nations got opportunities to diversify their economies and India got the capital it needed for its rapid development. Such diversification of economic partnerships enables India to expand engagement without becoming economically dependent on any single regional actor.

India and Middle Eastern countries therefore are engaged in a relationship of mutual dependence, where they need each other. India ensures its energy requirements and foreign exchange while the Middle Eastern nations get cheap human resources and the scope of trade/investment with the rapidly emerging Indian market. With the growing economic interaction, this partnership appears set to grow as both sides stand to gain more strategic and economic advantages.

This interest has been reflected in rising capital flows from the Gulf into India. By the end of 2022, the United Arab Emirates' cumulative FDI stock in India stood at around AED 56.5 billion, while Saudi investors, including the Public Investment Fund and Saudi-backed funds, had invested roughly USD 10 billion in sectors such as telecommunications, retail, agri-business, and energy infrastructure.²¹ In addition, a dedicated High-Level Task Force on Investment has been established to fast-track a proposed Saudi investment pipeline of up to USD 100 billion in Indian energy, technology, and infrastructure projects.²²

Political Diplomacy and Managing Regional Dynamics

As much as India's engagement with the Middle East is determined by economic interests, it is equally colored by the politics of powers in the region. The region remains saddled with sectarian, ideological, and geopolitical tension. Saudi Arabia and Iran – both of which are oil-rich nations – are Sunni and Shia respectively. Moreover, the current wars in such countries as Yemen, Syria, and Iraq make this rivalry even more persistent. Nevertheless, India has been able to maintain working relationship with multiple sides and it does not allow itself to be involved in the internal conflicts of the region²³. India's approach is the same in its relations with Israel and the Arab states. In the past, India was against the creation of Israel and upheld its support towards Palestinians while

²¹ "UAE and India Explore Investment Opportunities in New Economy and Tourism Sectors," Ministry of Economy and Tourism UAE, accessed November 26, 2025, <https://www.moet.gov.ae/>.

²² VisionIAS, "India-Saudi Arabia Relations," Current Affairs | Vision IAS, May 17, 2025, <https://visionias.in/current-affairs/>.

²³ Laraib Farhat, "India's Inroads into the Middle East: Implications for Pakistan," *Institute Of Regional Studies Islamabad* 39, no. 4 (2021): 83-100.

avoiding direct involvement in regional disputes. On the other hand, India had low-level diplomatic relations with Israel until the 1992 but presented a strategic partnership in defense and technology.

As a strategic move, it also holds strong diplomatic and economic ties with most major Arab countries especially in the Persian Gulf region²⁴. This approach reflects India's effort to preserve diplomatic flexibility in a region shaped by overlapping great-power interests. It could be said that India is in a state of rather delicate political and economic interdependence with the Middle East. Thus, both by making friendly relations with Arab states and recognizing Israel and by interacting with the main Middle Eastern industries, including energy and labor, India has established itself as a valuable Middle Eastern partner.

Middle East as a Workforce Destination

India's workforce in the Middle East has grown considerably in recent years, becoming a vital component of both India's economic strategy and its diplomatic engagement with the region. This surge in labor migration is rooted in the Middle East's demand for skilled and semi-skilled workers, driven by infrastructural developments, economic diversification efforts, and the needs of booming sectors like construction, healthcare, and services. The Indian workforce in the Middle East has steadily expanded over the past decade, making the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries home to one of the largest Indian expatriate population globally. As of 2023, nearly 9 million Indians were estimated to be working in the Gulf, particularly in countries like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, and Oman.²⁵ Data from the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs indicate on an average 6-7 lakh Indians migrate every year under the Emigration Clearance Required (ECR) category, with as many as 7.47 lakh migrating during 2012.²⁶ According to the United Nations Migration Agency, India received \$111 billion in remittances in 2022, out of which the top destination from which these remittances were sent were UAE, US, and Saudi Arabia respectively.

Remittances from Indian expatriates contribute significantly to India's foreign exchange reserves. Moreover, the influx of Indian laborers

²⁴ Prithvi Raj Mudiam, "Indian Power Projection in the Greater Middle East: Tools and Objectives," *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology* 6, no. 4 (2007): 417-39.

²⁵ "With 9m in Gulf Countries, GCC Makes Top Destination for Indian Expats | Arab News," accessed October 17, 2024, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2346486/world>.

²⁶ T L S Bhaskar, *Background Paper On Remittances From The Gcc To India: Trends, Challenges And Way Forward*, n.d., 8/26.

facilitate trade ties, as Indian businesses expand to meet the needs of the diaspora community in the Middle East. This economic interdependence has led to deeper bilateral cooperation between India and Middle Eastern countries, enhancing sectors such as energy, trade, and infrastructure development. The scale and geographic concentration of the Indian workforce in the Middle East also provide New Delhi with a degree of policy flexibility, as diaspora presence enhances consular leverage and crisis-response capacity without necessitating deeper political or security commitments.

Strategic Hedging in India's Relations with Israel and Arab States

Strategic Partnership with Israel

One of the notable features of India's foreign policy in the Middle East is its relationship with the State of Israel, which underwent a significant shift in the early 1990s as New Delhi adopted a more pragmatic and strategically oriented outlook toward the external environment. Stimuli for this paradigm transition include restructuring of the global economy, dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. India, being in a state of economic liberalisation and need for global integration, planned for economic reforms. India also desired to expand the categories of its friends and allies in order to tackle its emergent security threats including tensions with Pakistan and newly assertive China. Israel was considered useful as a strategic partner for India, particularly in defense and security as well as cooperation in hi-tech.²⁷ India, as a strategic partner, started extending recognition to Israel by opening an embassy in 1992, beginning the course of cooperation for two nations that realized the benefits they both could gain from each other.²⁸ Defense cooperation emerged as the very starting point of the partnership since it was only apparent that both sides will surely gain much from cooperation within the sector. This was because Israel being a high tech nation specializing in defence technologies, counter-terrorism, Intelligence and cyber security came to act as a supplier of defence equipment to India.²⁹ This partnership fulfilled several gaps that India required to modernize its force and improve its defense capabilities especially in the light of threats coming

²⁷ Saddam Sultaana, "India-Israel Defence Cooperation: Security Implications for Pakistan," *Journal of Security & Strategic Analyses* VII, no. 1 (n.d.): 134–60.

²⁸ R.K. Srivastava, "India-Israel Relations," *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 31, no. 3 (n.d.): 238–64, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41854384>.

²⁹ Farah Naz, "Indo-Israel Military Cooperation," *Strategic Analysis*, August 2000, https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/sa/sa_aug00naf01.html.

from neighboring states . India and Israel have a very strong defense relationship where both countries have been working together in several broad sectors such as defense electronics, missile systems, security and surveillance systems. For instance, Israel has sold radar systems, drones, and air defense systems to India which have helped improve Indian defense capabilities.³⁰ Efforts in defense research and development cooperation are also raised to a higher level because through research and development India can come up with its own technology with the help of Israel.

Whereas defense cooperation has attracted much attention, diplomatic and commercial relations between India and Israel have mobilized cooperation in other fields like farming, water resources, and information technology.³¹ Israel follows excellent knowledge in the cultivation of agricultural production from arid areas, drip irrigation systems, and water management that have played significant roles in the enhancement of Indian agriculture production and water resource utilization. Projects like the IIAP has helped the Israeli agricultural techniques to be applied in some of the Indian states to assist the local growers and improve food production.³² Other sector that Israel has a strong technology base is IT and cyber security, where the two countries increased cooperation. Since both countries undergo similar experiences in terms of cyber threats, efforts in cooperation in the sector of the current levels of capacity building have occurred along with sharing knowledge. Nevertheless, in the recent past, New Delhi has made efforts not to offend Arab nations as it has expanded its relationship with Israel.³³ While enhancing cooperation with Israel, India continues insisting on the preservation of peace in the Middle East and a peaceful resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in the form of two states. Although India-Israel partnership has deepened since the 1990s, India still exercises cautious diplomacy in its relations with Israel. This calibrated diplomatic approach is typical of India's, generally more broadly oriented foreign policy aimed at maintaining friendly and mutually beneficial relations with a number of often politically sensitive countries.

³⁰ Seth J. Frantzman, "Israel Records \$12.5 Billion in Defense Exports, Led by Drones, Air Defense," *Breaking Defense*, June 14, 2023, <https://breakingdefense.com/2023/06/>.

³¹ Naz, "Indo-Israel Military Cooperation."

³² "Indo-Israel Agriculture Project (IIAP) | Ministry of Foreign Affairs," accessed November 26, 2025, <https://embassies.gov.il/india/en/mashav/iiap>.

³³ Gopi Krishna Bhamidipati, "India's Balancing Act in the Middle East," AGSI, accessed November 26, 2025, <https://agsi.org/analysis/indias-balancing-act-in-the-middle-east/>.

Hedging Between Iran and the Arab States

India has emerged as a significant strategic partner of Israel although Indian focus of interest has been the GCC states in the region. Security of energy supplies defines the main framework of the relations between India and the GCC since Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Qatar supply a third of Indian oil imports³⁴ India has ensured that it has excellent diplomatic and economic relations with the regional states while it seeks to compartmentalize its expanding ties with Israel. India's diplomacy is again under pressure in the way it deals with Iran, which is a neighbor of significance. Iran has been an important partner for India. Iran's geopolitical and strategic location along with energy resources endow the country the ability to access the Central Asian markets and regulate exports through the Chabahar port³⁵. However, following the US sanctions on Iran and the US' withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), India stopped buying Iranian oil while seeking to preserve strategic space in non-sanctioned areas of cooperation. . This was reflected in India's effort to ring-fence connectivity and infrastructure projects, particularly the Chabahar port, from the sanctions regime, allowing cooperation with Iran to continue in areas not subject to direct restrictions. India has, however, managed to continue its cooperation with Iran on Chabahar port project to bypass Pakistan for its trade with Afghanistan and Central Asia.³⁶ In conclusion, India's success in developing a strategic partnership with Israel along with keeping good relations with Iran and Arab nations demonstrate that India's foreign policy approach in the Middle East is strategic and diversified reflecting a deliberate effort to maintain flexibility across competing regional alignments.

Strategic Hedging in the Middle East

Strategic hedging refers to a foreign policy approach in which a state simultaneously engages multiple competing actors while avoiding formal alignment with any single power.³⁷ In the case of India, this strategy

³⁴ Prithvi Raj Mudiam, "Indian Power Projection in the Greater Middle East: Tools and Objectives." *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology* 6, no. 4 (2007): 417–39.

³⁵ C. Christine Fair, "India and Iran: New Delhi's Balancing Act," *The Washington Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (2007): 145–59. <https://doi.org/10.1162/wash.2007.30.3.145>.

³⁶ "US Threatens India with Sanctions over Trade Ties with Iran," IRNA English, May 14, 2024, <https://en.irna.ir/news/85476169>.

³⁷ Kuik Cheng-Chwee, "The Essence of Hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's Response to a Rising China," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 30, no. 2 (2008): 159–85, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41220503>.

is observable in its relations with both regional and international players in the Middle East as demonstrated by its concurrent engagement with Israel, the Gulf states, and Iran. The GCC nations are vital to India's economic stability, as most of the latter's energy needs are met by the oil-exporting nations of the GCC. On the same note, New Delhi continues to foster relations with Iran regardless of the latter's various interferences and political tensions with the GCC. Thus, by maintaining relationships with GCC and Iran, India can guarantee its supply chains with provisions of necessary resources, via seaports and routes, bypassing local conflicts.

This hedging strategy is also evident in Indian relationship with dominant world partners such as the United States. Despite having strengthened Indian strategic cooperation with the United States in defense and nuclear cooperation, India has refused to abide by the U.S' directions at times even in Iranian and many sensitive regional affairs³⁸. This pattern illustrates how India combines cooperation with restraint, preserving decision-making autonomy while sustaining functional ties across rival power centres. For instance, while the U.S. has been uncompromising on the resolution for tighter sanctions on Iran, India has remained diplomatically active with Iran to realize its broader end of strategic opportunism dubbed as its strategic autonomy. In this way, India has tried to maintain its relations with the Arab countries one hand, and Iran on the other.

Indian Strategy in the Middle East

India's approach to the Middle East reflects a deliberate and increasingly structured strategic orientation rather than a series of ad hoc bilateral engagements. Instead of anchoring itself to any single regional bloc or external power, New Delhi has pursued a pattern of selective and compartmentalised engagement that allows it to operate across competing political, ideological, and strategic alignments. This approach is shaped by the region's centrality to India's energy security, trade routes, diaspora interests, and access to critical connectivity corridors, all of which impose constraints on rigid alignment choices.

The preceding analysis demonstrates that India's engagement with Israel, the Gulf states, and Iran does not follow a traditional balance-of-power logic, nor does it suggest ideological neutrality. Rather, India has consistently sought to preserve room for manoeuvre by deepening cooperation in specific sectors while avoiding binding political or security commitments that could restrict its autonomy. Defence and technological

³⁸ Ronald L Tammen, Jacek Kugler, and Ronald L Douglas Lemke, *Power Transition Theory*, Transresearch Consortium, Work Paper No. 1, December 2011.

cooperation with Israel, sustained energy and investment ties with the Gulf monarchies, and continued engagement with Iran through the Chabahar port project illustrate how India manages overlapping partnerships without allowing one relationship to undermine another.

This pattern of behaviour underscores India's preference for strategic autonomy as an organising principle of its Middle East policy. Autonomy, in this context, does not imply disengagement or equidistance but the capacity to adjust policy choices in response to shifting regional and global conditions. India's willingness to comply selectively with international constraints, such as sanctions regimes, while simultaneously safeguarding long-term strategic interests reflects an effort to minimise vulnerability and maximise flexibility in a volatile regional environment.

Viewed through this lens, India's Middle East policy is best understood as a form of strategic hedging undertaken by a middle power operating under conditions of uncertainty. By engaging multiple actors simultaneously and compartmentalising its partnerships, India seeks to secure economic and strategic gains while insulating itself from the risks associated with regional rivalries and great-power competition. This approach allows New Delhi to remain an active and credible regional partner without assuming the costs or obligations associated with formal alliances.

Navigating Regional Conflicts through Diplomatic Flexibility

Sectarian and Geopolitical Rivalries in the Middle East

With ongoing sectarian conflict and geopolitical tensions, the Middle East remains in steep political instability and conflict with actors such as Saudi Arabia, a dominant Sunni power, and Iran, a Shia power. This sectarian division combined with rivalry due to their leadership's aspirations for regional dominance poses daunting diplomatic dilemmas for a third party like India. Unlike the United States, other important actors have avoided putting their weight behind one actor and antagonizing the other. China mediated the rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran in March 2023.³⁹ Since then the two countries have avoided indulging in diatribe working against each other.

Nevertheless, against these odds, India has adeptly pulled off not getting directly embroiled in the internal quarrels of the region. India has avoided formal alignment in the sectarian power struggle between Saudi

³⁹ "China-Brokered Saudi-Iran Deal Driving 'Wave of Reconciliation', Says Wang | Politics News | Al Jazeera," accessed October 17, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/>.

Arabia and Iran. India has instead prioritized sustained economic engagement and diplomatic flexibility while remaining outside regional rivalries.

Flexibility and Issue-Based Diplomatic Engagement

Unlike other international actors, India does not factor itself into regional and sectarian conflicts, rather, it prefers to maintain a policy of issue-based engagement and strategic autonomy in its dealings with the Middle Eastern states. This policy has effectively allowed New Delhi the flexibility of engaging the Middle East without getting entangled in the internal issues that always characterize the region. India's policy of selective engagement proved to count for a lot. Even with such rival powers as Israel or Iran, India has had friendly relations thus ensuring that it gains strategic and economic advantages over them without compromising the two powers. This policy of delicate pragmatism has helped India acquire energy resources from the Middle Eastern nations, increase commerce, and extend its sphere of influence but without getting dragged into the Sunni-Shia conflict or other sovereignty issues. India's joining of I2U2 (also known as Middle Eastern QUAD), which is meant to be the part of a pro-Israel alliance, while simultaneously trying to please Iran will be a litmus test for Indian diplomacy.

India has strived to manage its relations through calibrated diplomatic engagement by emphasizing neutrality and cooperation despite contradictions. For example, India has developed its partnership with Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Israel on one side while, at the same time, has maintained its relationship with Iran. This skill in diplomacy consolidates the image of the country and turns it into a positively perceived partner by all the participants of the new world order, thereby strengthening India's roles on the regional and international levels. This hedging approach has not only saved India's long-term interest in energy security and trade relationship but has also made India a more important player in Middle Eastern geopolitical dynamics. So, unlike those powers that extend direct support to warring factions, India has not provoked the same kind of reactions. Thus, New Delhi has strengthened its position of a flexible and pragmatic regional partner, which possesses the capacity to contribute to stabilization of the Middle East as well as protect its own economic and strategic interests. This might prove to be less viable in practice as India gets pulled from its Western partners due to its participation in QUAD and I2U2, but it has managed to present an image of an independent actor, following in its own concept of strategic autonomy.

Conclusion

The Middle East remains a critical arena in which India's role as a middle power is most visible. India has carefully managed relationships with key actors, including Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Israel, primarily through economic, technological, and defence cooperation. This hedging strategy reflects India's attempt to secure its national interests without being drawn into regional rivalries, aligning with its longstanding pursuit of strategic autonomy. As India expands its ambitions globally, its presence in the region is likely to grow, particularly in infrastructure, power, and security cooperation, reinforcing its position as a responsible and pragmatic actor.

The analysis demonstrates that India's expanding engagement with the Middle East is driven primarily by energy security, diaspora interests, and access to investment and connectivity corridors. It further shows that New Delhi manages relations with competing regional actors through a strategy of hedging that preserves strategic autonomy rather than through formal alignment or traditional balancing.

However, India's strategy faces increasing constraints. Its efforts to maintain autonomy are complicated by growing strategic convergence with the United States, evident in its cessation of Iranian oil imports after Washington's withdrawal from the JCPOA and its reluctance to openly criticize Israeli actions in Gaza. These shifts illustrate the pressures shaping India's foreign policy as it seeks to balance regional antagonisms while consolidating its role as a middle power. Although India has demonstrated the capacity to sustain flexible engagement among competing regional actors, the volatile dynamics of the Middle East will continue to test the resilience of this approach. Taken together, India's Middle East policy illustrates how a middle power can employ strategic hedging to navigate regional instability while safeguarding autonomy in an increasingly fragmented international order.

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