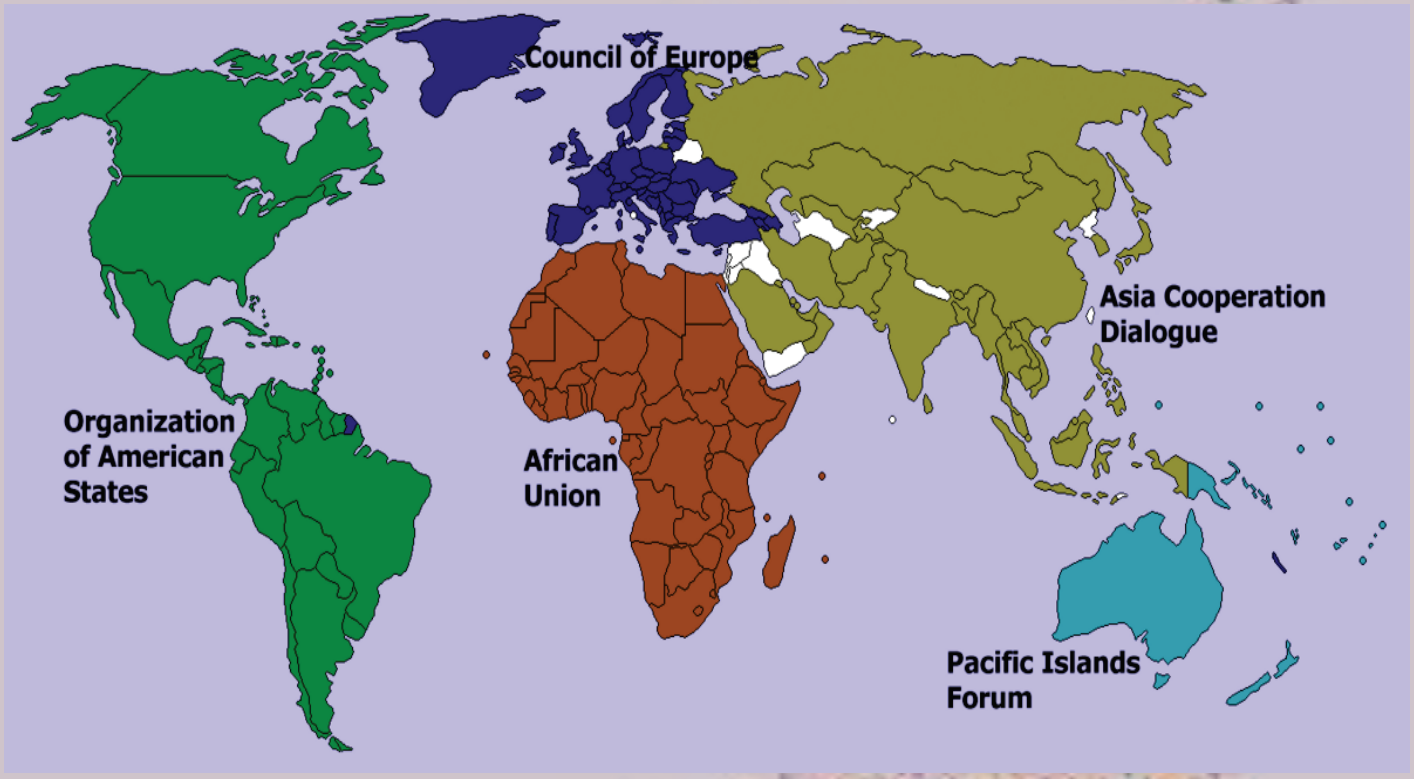
POLITICS OF SOUTH ASIA

Level: BS

Course Code: 9584



Department of Politics and International Relations
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities
ALLAMA IQBAL OPEN UNIVERSITY, ISLAMABAD

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ALLAMA IQBAL OPEN UNIVERSITY, ISLAMABAD

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FOREWARD

South Asia stands at the crossroads of history, geography, and politics. Few regions in the world carry such immense strategic weight, yet remain so deeply marked by conflict, contestation, and uneven development. The complexities of this region—ranging from historical disputes such as Kashmir, to modern challenges of terrorism, nuclear proliferation, climate change, and fragile governance structures—demand a sustained and critical academic engagement.

This book seeks to provide precisely that. By weaving together historical perspectives, contemporary developments, and policy debates, it offers readers a comprehensive account of the dynamics that continue to shape South Asia. The chapters are organized thematically and chronologically, enabling students, scholars, and policymakers alike to engage with questions of security, regional cooperation, governance failures, and the shifting triangular relations between India, China, and Pakistan.

A particular strength of this work lies in its Pakistan-centric lens, which grounds the discussion in local realities while situating them within broader regional and global contexts. This balance is essential: South Asia cannot be understood in isolation, but neither can Pakistan's central role in its security, politics, and economic future be overlooked.

In a time when narratives are often fragmented and scholarship is dispersed, this book stands as a coherent attempt to bridge knowledge gaps. It not only traces the history of wars, conflicts, and unresolved disputes, but also highlights the urgent need for new approaches to governance, cooperation, and sustainable development in the region.

I believe this volume will serve as a valuable resource for those seeking to understand the politics of South Asia with both depth and clarity. It is not just a study of the past and present, but also an invitation to reflect critically on the choices that will shape the region's future.

Prof. Dr. Nasir Mahmood

Vice Chancellor

Allama Iqbal Open University

INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Book

This book examines the politics, conflicts, and governance challenges of South Asia with a particular focus on Pakistan. Organized into thematic units, it provides both historical context and contemporary analysis, highlighting how regional rivalries, security concerns, and policy choices shape the political and economic landscape. While Pakistan remains the central reference point, the discussion extends to India, China, Afghanistan, and other regional actors, offering readers a comprehensive view of South Asia's place in global geopolitics.

Unit 1: Historical Context of South Asia

This unit explores the colonial legacy of the British Raj and its enduring impact on South Asia's political, social, and economic structures. It explains how the partition of 1947 reshaped the region and laid the foundations for continuing disputes, particularly over Kashmir. The historical overview situates current conflicts within the deeper context of colonial administration and post-independence nation-building.

Unit 2: Regional Geopolitics and Strategic Importance

South Asia's strategic location makes it a central focus of global powers. This unit discusses the region's role in Cold War rivalries, post-9/11 security arrangements, and its relevance in the emerging multipolar world. It emphasizes how geography and resources make South Asia a site of both competition and cooperation.

Unit 3: Wars and Conflict Escalations

This unit analyzes the major wars and conflicts that have shaped South Asia, from the 1965 and 1971 wars to the 1999 Kargil conflict and recent confrontations after the revocation of Article 370. It highlights the Kashmir dispute as a recurring flashpoint and explores the role of insurgency and terrorism in deepening instability. The discussion underscores how repeated cycles of conflict undermine peace-building efforts.

Unit 4: China–India–Pakistan: Regional Players

The triangular relationship among China, India, and Pakistan is a defining feature of South Asia's geopolitics. This unit traces the historical roots of India–China border disputes, Pakistan's strategic partnership with China, and India's regional ambitions. It shows how this triangular balance influences regional stability, economic projects like CPEC, and power politics in the Indo-Pacific.

Unit 5: Afghanistan–Pakistan Frontier

This unit examines the troubled history of the Afghanistan–Pakistan border, focusing on the Durand Line dispute, cross-border militancy, and refugee flows. It explores how instability in Afghanistan has directly impacted Pakistan's security and governance. The analysis also considers regional and international interventions in Afghanistan and their implications for Pakistan's frontier politics.

Unit 6: Kashmir Issue

Kashmir remains the most contentious and unresolved conflict in South Asia. This unit traces its evolution from the 1947 partition through wars, insurgencies, and recent constitutional changes by India. It also highlights Pakistan's perspective, the human rights dimension, and the international community's limited role in conflict resolution.

Unit 7: Small States in South Asia: Maldives, Nepal, and Bhutan

This unit focuses on the smaller South Asian states, analyzing how they navigate relations with larger powers like India and China. It discusses Nepal's political instability, Bhutan's cautious foreign policy, and the Maldives' struggles with climate change and governance. Their experiences highlight the diversity of challenges within South Asia beyond the major states.

Unit 8: Security Challenges in South Asia

South Asia faces complex security threats, including terrorism, nuclear proliferation, ethnic conflicts, and human rights issues. This unit explores how these challenges interlink, reinforcing cycles of violence and mistrust. It argues that sustainable peace requires not only military strategies but also governance reforms and regional cooperation.

Unit 9: Economic Development in South Asia

This unit addresses the region's economic trajectory, analyzing growth patterns, poverty reduction, trade relations, and foreign investment. It shows how economic development remains uneven, with persistent structural inequalities and governance barriers. The unit also highlights the potential of regional cooperation and integration in driving long-term prosperity.

Together, these units present a holistic view of South Asia's politics, conflicts, and governance challenges. By weaving historical legacies with contemporary issues, the book emphasizes how unresolved disputes, fragile institutions, and uneven development continue to shape the region's trajectory. At the same time, it highlights opportunities for cooperation, regional integration, and policy innovation. For students, scholars, and practitioners, the text serves as both a critical guide to understanding South Asia and a call to envision pathways toward a more peaceful and prosperous regional future.

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Unit 1

INTRODUCTION: SOUTH ASIAN POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN CONTEXT

Written by: Dr. Asif Shahzad

Reviewed by: Dr. Muhammad Fahim Khan

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INTRODUCTION

The history of South Asia is central to understanding its present political and social complexities. The colonial legacy of the British Raj left deep imprints on governance structures, economic patterns, and inter-communal relations that continue to shape the region. The partition of 1947 was a watershed moment, resulting in mass migrations, communal violence, and the creation of enduring disputes such as the Kashmir issue. These developments not only redefined the political map of the subcontinent but also laid the foundation for rivalries between India and Pakistan. The Cold War era further complicated the region's trajectory, as global powers sought influence through alliances and interventions. South Asia's colonial and post-colonial experiences created fragile states, weak institutions, and contested national identities. Understanding this background is essential to contextualize subsequent conflicts, security dilemmas, and governance challenges in the region. This unit, therefore, provides the groundwork for analyzing later developments by tracing the historical forces that continue to shape South Asia's politics today.

OBJECTIVES

Upon reviewing the unit, you will be able to:

- To examine the colonial legacies and their influence on South Asia's political, economic, and social structures.
- To analyze the partition of 1947 and its long-term consequences for regional stability and inter-state relations.
- To understand how historical developments laid the foundation for contemporary conflicts and governance challenges in South Asia.

1.1 Map

1.2 Historical Context

India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and the Maldives are all part of South Asia, a region with a complex political past that continues to influence its current state. Examining the historical factors—empires, colonialism, independence movements, and partition—that shaped South Asian states and societies is essential to comprehending the political evolution of the area. The historical context is a collection of legacies that continue to influence the region's understanding of power, identity, and governance rather than merely a chronology of past events.

1.2.1 Ancient and Medieval Foundations

The political foundations of South Asia date back to some of the oldest civilizations ever recorded. Early urban life patterns, centralized authority, and trade networks were established by the Indus Valley Civilization (c. 2500–1500 BCE). Caste hierarchies and other cultural and religious pillars were later established during the Vedic era and assimilated into the social and political structure of the area.

One of the first instances of a sizable, centralized state in the area that exercised power over a wide range of linguistic and cultural groups was the Maurya Empire under Ashoka (3rd century BCE). Later South Asian experiments with pluralism were anticipated by Ashoka's emphasis on moral governance and religious tolerance. The Gupta Empire (4th–6th century CE) represented a "golden age" centuries later, especially in the fields of administration, science, and art. South Asian rulers were still influenced by the concepts of legitimacy, kingship, and statecraft that these early polities left behind. With the advent of Islamic rule, the medieval era witnessed fresh waves of political change. New administrative structures, revenue collection techniques, and cultural synthesis were brought about by the Delhi Sultanate (13th–16th century) and the Mughal Empire (16th–18th century). For centuries, South Asian politics were influenced by the Mughal model of government, which was founded on a powerful central government, Persianate culture, and religious tolerance. Crucially, a complex tradition of pluralism was fostered by the coexistence of Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, and other communities under a single political system; however, it also left behind unresolved tensions surrounding identity and belonging.

Ancient Democracy:
Did you know that the **Magadha kingdom** (6th century BCE in India) had assemblies resembling early forms of democratic councils?

1.2.2 Colonial Transformations

The expansion of European colonialism, particularly British rule, marked a significant turning point in the political development of South Asia. The British East India Company was able to establish control by the middle of the 18th century as a result of the Mughals' waning power, which ultimately cleared the path for the official British Raj (1858–1947). South Asia's political, economic, and social landscape was significantly altered by colonial rule.

In terms of administration, the British established representative institutions, codified laws, and contemporary bureaucratic structures. The bureaucratic culture of South Asian states today is a holdover from the Indian Civil Service, which served as the foundation of colonial governance. Colonial policies promoted both political unification and division. On the one hand, pan-regional political consciousness was fostered by the establishment of all-India organizations such as the Indian National Congress. However, by instituting measures like distinct electorates and census classifications, the British also solidified religious and communal divisions, setting the stage for future hostilities.

Partition by the Pen: The **Partition of British India in 1947** was drawn almost entirely on paper by the British, and the rushed lines led to **mass**

South Asia's economy was reoriented by colonialism to meet the demands of the British Empire. The area developed into a market for British goods and a source of raw materials. Both growth and inequality resulted from this integration into the global capitalist system. Land alienation, rural debt, and famines caused severe social unrest that stoked political opposition.

1.2.3 Nationalism and the Freedom Struggle

Modern nationalism emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Motivated by European liberal and nationalist currents, educated elites started to call for increased involvement in governance. Founded in 1885, the Indian National Congress first aimed for reform within the colonial framework before progressively shifting to a more radical call for independence.

Muslim political consciousness developed independently at the same time, leading to the All-India Muslim League's founding in 1906. Eventually, the desire for a distinct Muslim homeland solidified into the concept of Pakistan, which Muhammad Ali Jinnah most eloquently outlined in the 1940s. The dual trends of Muslim separatism and Indian nationalism produced the fault lines that would characterize the subcontinent's division.

The fight for freedom was not a singular event. It blended Gandhian nonviolent resistance, mass demonstrations, revolutionary endeavors, and constitutional techniques. Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose, and Jinnah shaped competing visions of postcolonial South Asia. Jinnah demanded Muslim political autonomy, Nehru promoted socialism and modern industrialization, and Gandhi focused on moral politics and rural self-sufficiency.

Political Diversity: South Asia is home to **dozens of political systems**: from monarchies like Bhutan, to federal democracies like India

1.2.4 Partition and the creation of New States

Independence and partition in 1947 marked the pinnacle of these conflicts. One of the biggest forced migrations in history was caused by the British exit strategy, which split the subcontinent into India and Pakistan in a hasty and poorly thought-out manner. In the midst of widespread violence and bloodshed, millions of Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus crossed borders. Both India's and Pakistan's political psyches were severely damaged by the trauma of partition, which institutionalized animosity and mistrust that endures to this day.

Under the direction of the Congress Party, India started the process of establishing a democratic, secular republic. Its 1950 constitution established a parliamentary system, protected fundamental rights, and sought to use federalism to manage diversity. In contrast, Pakistan found it difficult to strike a balance between the necessity of inclusive governance and its identity as a Muslim nation. Instability, civil-military conflicts, and discussions regarding the place of Islam in the state characterized its early years.

A Tale of Two Constitutions: India's Constitution, adopted in **1950**, is the **longest written constitution in the world**, with

Different paths were also taken by other South Asian states. Ethnic conflict between Sinhalese and Tamils became a problem after Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948. Nepal alternated between democracy and monarchy. Following a brutal

liberation war, Bangladesh emerged in 1971, underscoring the region's vulnerability. Even though the Maldives and Bhutan followed more secluded routes, they were nevertheless subject to the demands of global politics and modernization.

1.2.5 Cold Power and Great Power Rivalries

It is impossible to comprehend South Asia's postcolonial history without considering the Cold War. The strategic rivalry between the US and the USSR centered on India and Pakistan. India pursued non-alignment but leaned toward the Soviet Union for economic and defense support, while Pakistan partnered with the United States through military agreements like CENTO and SEATO. The area turned into a battleground for ideological disputes, armament buildups, and proxy wars.

In addition to being bilateral disputes, the Indo-Pakistani wars of 1947, 1965, and 1971 had ties to the larger global community. The interplay of regional and global politics was reflected in the Soviet Union's support for India and the United States' 1971 tilt toward Pakistan. Following the Soviet invasion in 1979, Afghanistan also gained prominence, entangling Pakistan in a new stage of geopolitical rivalry.

1.2.6 Legacies of Contemporary Politics

The political development of South Asia is still shaped by the various legacies left by this historical trajectory. The way states operate is still influenced by colonial administrative systems. Nationalism and militarization were institutionalized by partition and the wars that followed. The conflict between religious identity and secularism is still unresolved, and colonial-era socioeconomic disparities still exist.

Caste and Politics: In India, the **caste system still influences voting patterns**, political representation, and policy-

The historical background of South Asia also emphasizes its unity and division. Common ground is created by shared cultural traditions, religious plurality, and anti-colonial struggles; however, fragmentation is fueled by borders, conflicts, and conflicting nationalisms. Understanding how these historical influences still influence decision-making, interstate relations, and the daily lives of its citizens is essential to understanding South Asian politics today.

1.3 Political system

With states ranging from massive democracies to delicate republics, monarchies, and hybrid regimes, South Asia is one of the world's most politically diverse regions. It is necessary to examine both the common colonial legacies and the

unique national paths that each state has taken since gaining independence in order to comprehend the political systems of South Asia. The political institutions of each nation are based on its own histories, social structures, and conflicts, even though the region as a whole struggles with issues of democracy, governance, and development.

1.3.1 Colonial Legacies and Institutional Framework

The majority of South Asian nations have recovered from the trials of colonial domination. The legal and administrative structures that the British left behind had a significant impact on the political systems of Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan. Westminster-style judicial institutions, civil services, and parliamentary procedures were among them. Even the less colonized nations of Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives were influenced by the colonial experience in an indirect way and later modeled some aspects of their governance after their neighbors.

Colonial Legacy in Bureaucracy: Many South Asian countries still follow British-style civil service systems, reflecting how colonial administration shaped

In order to protect imperial interests rather than local involvement, the colonial state was authoritarian and extractive. Ironically, though, it also brought about councils, elections, and contemporary bureaucracies. Postcolonial South Asia's political development has been shaped by these two legacies: centralized authority and democratic aspirations.

1.3.2 India: The World's Largest Democracy

In South Asia, India's democratic system is the most resilient and stable. Its 1950 constitution established the framework for a democratic, secular, and independent republic. With a federal structure that respects linguistic, religious, and cultural diversity, the Indian political system is parliamentary in nature. Westminster customs modified for regional requirements are reflected in India's political institutions, which include the Rajya Sabha (upper house), Lok Sabha (lower house), and a robust independent judiciary. India is the world's largest democracy, with regular multiparty elections supervised by the Election Commission of India.

World's Largest Democracy: India, with over **1.4 billion people**, holds the title of the **world's largest democracy**, conducting elections

However, there are difficulties with Indian democracy. The system's resilience is regularly put to the test by problems like caste-based

politics, intercommunal conflicts, corruption, and local insurgencies. However, the continued electoral rivalry, orderly handovers of power, and a thriving civil society highlight

1.3.3 Pakistan: A Hybrid Regime

Pakistan's political system, on the other hand, has vacillated between authoritarian control and democratic goals. The trauma of partition and the early passing of its founding leader, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, left Pakistan with a weak institutional foundation when it gained independence in 1947. Political instability resulted from the lack of a consensus constitution until 1956.

The system in Pakistan has alternated between military and civilian administrations. With the help of a robust bureaucracy, the military has dominated politics and directly intervened through coups in 1958, 1977, and 1999. The military still has a significant impact and frequently restricts civilian autonomy, even in countries with official democratic governance. Although a federal parliamentary republic is guaranteed by the 1973 constitution, its application has been uneven. Military rule and political crises have been interspersed with periods of democracy, including those under Benazir Bhutto, Nawaz Sharif, and Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto. The "doctrine of necessity" has frequently been invoked by Pakistan's judiciary to justify these interventions, undermining the consolidation of democracy.

In spite of these obstacles, electoral politics in Pakistan have grown more resilient over the last ten years. A significant step toward democratic stability was the orderly handover of power between the governments in 2013 and 2018. However, Pakistan's government is still a hybrid, with established military and administrative authority coexisting uncomfortably with elected institutions.

Nuclear Power: Pakistan became the **world's seventh nuclear power** in 1998, changing its strategic position in South Asia forever

1.3.4 Bangladesh: Struggle with Democracy and Authoritarianism

Following a bloody war for independence from Pakistan, Bangladesh became independent in 1971. Under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the nation first adopted a parliamentary system, but it soon fell victim to authoritarian rule, military takeovers, and instability. Under Generals Ziaur Rahman and Hussain Muhammad Ershad, the military dominated the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Bangladesh: Bangladesh was the **first country to experience a cyclone warning system** in the 1970s, saving countless lives in a disaster-prone region.

With competitive elections and the emergence of two major parties, the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), democracy returned in the 1990s. However, a winner-take-all mentality, weak institutions, and extreme polarization have been hallmarks of Bangladeshi politics. Sheikh Hasina's Awami League has consolidated power since the 2000s, frequently using dubious tactics. Despite its official democratic structures, critics contend that Bangladesh has veered toward authoritarianism. Media freedoms have decreased, opposition parties are subject to restrictions, and elections are contested, but losing credibility. Bangladesh is, therefore, a prime example of a system in which authoritarian practices threaten democratic institutions that are in place on paper.

1.3.5 Sri Lanka: Democracy under Strain

Another South Asian nation with a long history of democracy is Sri Lanka. After gaining independence in 1948, it implemented a Westminster-style parliamentary system. One of the first democracies in Asia, Sri Lanka, had already implemented universal suffrage during colonial rule in the 1930s.

However, the ethnic divisions between the Tamil minority and the Sinhalese majority have had a significant impact on Sri Lankan politics. Tamils were marginalized by policies that supported Sinhalese nationalism, which fueled decades of civil war (1983–2009). As military might and emergency regulations solidified, this conflict undermined democratic institutions.

Sri Lanka: Sri Lanka was the first country in the world to elect a female Prime Minister, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, in 1960.

Power was concentrated in the executive branch when Sri Lanka switched from a parliamentary to a presidential system in 1978. Even though there are still competitive elections, the presidency has frequently eclipsed other institutions, which raises questions about authoritarian tendencies. Political crises have also occurred in recent years, such

as the constitutional impasse in 2018 and the turmoil that followed the 2022 economic crisis. Even in the face of political upheaval, Sri Lanka maintains a comparatively robust tradition of civil society activism, an independent judiciary, and electoral politics.

1.3.6 Nepal: From Monarchy to Federal Republic

Nepal, which changed from an absolute monarchy to a federal democratic republic in the twenty-first century, is a special case in South Asia. Nepal had little political participation and was ruled by monarchs for a large portion of its history. Following widespread protests, a constitutional monarchy was established in 1990, but political unrest remained.

Nepal: Nepal is the **only country in the world with Mount Everest**, and it transitioned from a **Hindu monarchy to a federal secular**

The monarchy was abolished in 2008 as a result of the state's further instability brought on by the Maoist insurgency (1996–2006). In 2015, Nepal adopted a new constitution that established a parliamentary democracy and a secular federal republic. Despite being historic, this transition has been difficult, with disagreements arising over representation, federal boundaries, and ethnic inclusion. With frequent changes of government, shoddy institutions, and disputed constitutional legitimacy, Nepal's political system is still precarious today. However, the transition from monarchy to republic shows how South Asian political development has changed significantly.

1.3.7 Bhutan and the Maldives: Gradual Change

Smaller but significant examples are Bhutan and the Maldives. Before King Jigme Singye Wangchuck started implementing democratic reforms in the early 21st century, Bhutan remained an absolute monarchy. Bhutan transitioned to a parliamentary constitutional monarchy in 2008. Since then, elections have been held on a regular basis, but the monarchy still has a big say.

In contrast, the Maldives changed from a sultanate to a republic in the middle of the 20th century. Authoritarian governance has characterized its politics, especially under President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom (1978–2008). Multiparty competition was brought about by democratic reforms in the 2000s, but instability still exists, as evidenced by the frequent political crises and charges of authoritarian reversals.

1.3.8 Common Pattern

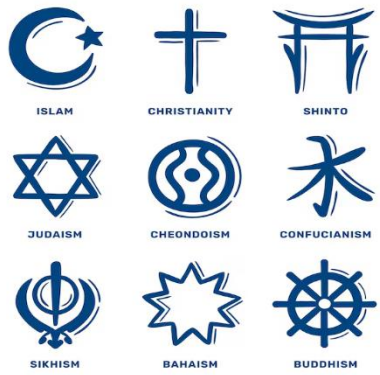
There are definite trends throughout South Asia. First, there is a general desire for democracy, but it is frequently undermined by institutional flaws and elite power.

Second, in many states, especially Bangladesh and Pakistan, the military and bureaucratic elites have a significant influence. Third, as demonstrated by the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, the communal politics in India, and the federalism debates in Nepal, ethnic and religious diversity presents obstacles to inclusive governance.

Divergences, however, are equally significant. While Pakistan has had difficulty institutionalizing democracy, India has managed to maintain a functioning democracy despite its great diversity. Bangladesh illustrates how competitive politics can turn into authoritarian consolidation, while Bhutan offers a unique example of democratization driven by the monarchy.

1.4 Religion

One of the most potent factors influencing South Asia's political, social, and cultural life has always been religion. In addition to being heavily impacted by the introduction and growth of Islam and Christianity, the area is the birthplace of the major world religions, including Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism, and Hinduism. More than 25% of the world's population now resides in South Asia, which is also one of the most religiously diverse regions of the world. Here, religion is not limited to personal beliefs; rather, it is closely related to politics, identity, and the establishment of states. Without examining the historical and current role of religion, it is impossible to comprehend South Asian political development.



1.4.1 Historical Foundations of Religion in South Asia

Although their precise religious beliefs are still unknown, the earliest South Asian civilizations, especially the Indus Valley Civilization (c. 2500–1500 BCE), demonstrated sophisticated ritual practices. The early tenets of Hinduism—ritual sacrifice, social hierarchy, and the worship of multiple deities—were introduced during the Vedic period as this civilization began to decline.

Buddhism and Jainism emerged as a result of reform movements by the first millennium BCE. Both emphasized ethical behavior and personal enlightenment while contesting ritual orthodoxy and caste hierarchy. These faiths proliferated, with Buddhism in particular spreading to Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and East

Asia in addition to South Asia. Islam arrived in South Asia through trade, migration, and conquest during the Middle Ages, bringing about a significant religious shift in the region. Centuries of Islamic rule, which brought new religious traditions, Sufi practices, and cultural synthesis, were fostered by the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire. Hindu and Muslim communities coexisted to create hybrid traditions, but this also led to conflicts that were frequently politicized by leaders.

Another layer was added during the colonial era when Christian missionaries converted marginalized groups and disseminated education, and British policies institutionalized religious identities through legal classifications, electorates, and censuses. The notion that religion was a matter of both individual faith and collective political identity was strengthened by these developments.

1.4.2 Religion and National Identity

Religion started to play a significant role in forming national identities at the time of independence. In 1947, British India was divided along religious lines, with Pakistan being created as a Muslim homeland and India as a secular state with a Hindu majority. One of the biggest forced migrations in history was brought on by the division, with Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus crossing borders amid unrest and violence.

In an effort to preserve religious freedom and keep religion apart from state authority, India enacted a secular constitution. However, given the political mobilization of religious groups, especially around Hindu nationalism, secularism in India has always been contested. Religion continues to play a significant role in political discussions regarding the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its emphasis on Hindutva ideology.

Geopolitical Position: Pakistan's location connects **South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East**, making it a strategic hub for trade, security, and diplomacy.

The connection between religion and the state has been even more obvious in Pakistan. Despite Muhammad Ali Jinnah's original vision of Pakistan as a Muslim pluralist state, later leaders shifted the country's focus toward Islam. Islam was proclaimed the official state religion in the 1973 constitution, and subsequent changes further incorporated Islam into politics and the legal system. Pakistan's political landscape is still shaped by discussions about Sharia, blasphemy laws, and the rights of religious minorities.

After gaining independence in 1971, Bangladesh first proclaimed itself to be secular, but Islam was eventually made the official state religion. Religion has been politically mobilized, particularly by Islamist parties, despite constitutional

guarantees of religious freedom. Bangladesh has, nevertheless, also preserved a strong tradition of secular activism, illustrating the conflict between pluralism and religious identity.

Another example is Sri Lanka, where politics and Buddhism have been closely entwined. Tamil Hindus and Muslims have historically been marginalized as a result of the state's historical dominance by the Sinhala-Buddhist majority. Buddhism was supported by the state, which fueled ethnic division and the protracted civil war. The influence of Buddhism on national policy is still a topic of debate in post-war politics.

Under the monarchy, which was regarded as a Hindu kingdom until 2006, Hinduism was very important in Nepal. Although some sections of the population still strongly identify as Hindu, the shift to a secular republic marked a significant shift. In contrast, Bhutan incorporates Vajrayana Buddhism into its political system, highlighting Gross National Happiness as a tenet with Buddhist roots. The Maldives is the most religiously homogeneous state in the region because it is an Islamic state by constitution and all of its citizens must be Muslims.

Youth and Politics: Over **60% of Pakistan's population is under 30**, meaning youth are an increasingly powerful force in shaping political debates, elections, and protests.

1.4.3 Religion and Political Mobilization

In South Asian politics, religion has frequently catalyzed political mobilization. Religious identity has been invoked in mass movements, political campaigns, and even violent conflicts. The strength of Hindu nationalist mobilization was exemplified in India during the Ram Janmabhoomi movement of the 1980s and 1990s, which destroyedthe Babri Masjid. Religiously charged discussions are still reflected in current policies regarding interfaith marriages, citizenship laws, and cow protection.

Religion has been used in Pakistan for both mass politics and state legitimacy. Despite not having a majority in elections, Islamist parties have a big impact on public opinion. The persistent influence of religion on law and policy

Ancient Trade, Modern Politics: The **Indus Valley Civilization (c. 2500 BCE)** had well-planned cities and trade networks, showing that organized governance and administration existed thousands of years ago.

is demonstrated by movements supporting blasphemy laws or opposing reforms pertaining to women's rights.

Islamist organizations like Jamaat-e-Islami have mobilized within Bangladesh's political system, although their official role has been curtailed by state repression. Buddhist groups and monks have frequently been directly involved in politics in Sri Lanka, supporting laws that benefit the Sinhalese majority. Hindu groups in Nepal have also opposed the secular constitution and demanded that Hindu statehood be restored.

Additionally, religion contributes to grassroots mobilization and peacebuilding. In India and Pakistan, Sufi traditions place a strong emphasis on harmony and tolerance. In Bhutan and Sri Lanka, Buddhist monks advocate for moral leadership and social welfare. In India, Sikh establishments like the langar (community kitchen) uphold the values of equality and service. These beneficial aspects demonstrate that religion is not just a cause of conflict but also of social solidarity.

1.4.4 Religion and Minority Rights

The position of religious minorities is a central issue in South Asian politics. Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, and other minorities make up a sizable portion of India's population. Although their rights are protected by the Constitution, they are frequently disputed in real life. Growing rates of discrimination and violence against communities continue to be major issues.

Non-Muslim minorities like Ahmadis, Christians, and Hindus are systematically marginalized in Pakistan, and tensions are also exacerbated by Sunni-Shia sectarian divisions among Muslims. Violence against Hindu minorities has occurred in Bangladesh, especially during times of political unrest. Despite official protections, the Tamil and Muslim minorities in Sri Lanka still fight for complete equality. Although minority rights have improved as a result of Nepal's shift to secularism, Dalits and other religiously marginalized groups still face difficulties. While the Maldives strictly enforces adherence to Islam and denies citizenship to non-Muslims, Bhutan restricts the open practice of non-Buddhist religions.

1.4.5 Globalization, Modernization, and Religious Politics

The role of religion in South Asia has changed rather than decreased as a result of modernization and globalization. Social media, satellite television, and labor migration have all contributed to the growth of transnational religious networks. For example, migration from the Gulf has boosted Islamic influence in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and the Maldives. Diaspora communities have also backed Hindu nationalism.

New discussions about gender equality, education, and secularism have been sparked by modernization and are frequently couched in religious terms. Personal law disputes (marriage, inheritance, divorce) demonstrate how religion and contemporary legal systems interact. Identity and political views are still shaped by religious education, from gurukuls in India to madrassas in Pakistan.

1.5 Cultural Diversity

One of the world's most culturally diverse regions is South Asia, which includes nations like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, the Maldives, and Afghanistan. Language, ethnicity, religion, art, music, food, festivals, and social customs are all examples of diversity. This diversity has deep roots in the history, geography, and civilization of the area; it is not just a contemporary phenomenon. South Asia, which lies between Central Asia, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia, has been a cultural melting pot for centuries due to waves of migration, trade, conquest, and religious change. Examining how geography, history, religion, language, and social institutions have shaped the region's pluralistic nature is essential to comprehending South Asia's cultural diversity.

Traditional Attire: Every country—and often every region—has distinct traditional clothing, like the Pakistani shalwar kameez, Indian sarees, Nepalese daura suruwal, and Bhutanese gho and kira, reflecting centuries of culture and climate adaptation.

1.5.1 Geographical Roots of Diversity

The topography of South Asia has been crucial in fostering diversity. The Deccan plateau, the fertile Gangetic plains, the Himalayas, the Thar Desert, and the island coasts of Sri Lanka and the Maldives all offer distinctive environments for cultural life. The customs of the Himalayan communities differed from those of the coastal communities. While plains societies absorbed Indo-Aryan, Persian, and Islamic influences, mountain societies—like those in Nepal and Bhutan—were influenced by Tibetan Buddhism and regional animistic customs. With rice predominating diets in the east, wheat in the north and west, and fish in coastal regions, geography also promoted regional differences in food, attire, and architecture.

1.5.2 Historical Influences and Cultural Syncretism

The history of the area has been characterized by ongoing interactions between various civilizations. One of the first urban cultures, the Indus Valley Civilization

(c. 2500 BCE) left behind customs in architecture, art, and urban design. Sanskrit, Vedic customs, and caste-based social structures were later introduced by Indo-Aryan migrations. In the sixth century BCE, Buddhism and Jainism became reformist religions that spread the region's values of tolerance, non-violence, and philosophical depth.

Islam arrived in South Asia as early as the 7th century through Arab traders on the western coast, but it was the Delhi Sultanate (13th–16th century) and the Mughal Empire (16th–18th century) that made it a significant cultural force. As a result, Indo-Islamic culture emerged, characterized by Persian and Indian music, architecture (such as the Taj Mahal, mosques, and forts), and literature(Urdu Poetry, Persian chronicles). English education, legal systems, modern sciences, and new forms of literature and art were all introduced during British colonial rule, which further enhanced cultural layering. Indigenous customs and outside influences coexist in the resulting composite culture.

1.5.3 Linguistic Diversity

One of the best indicators of South Asia's diversity is language. Hundreds of languages and thousands of dialects from several language families, including Indo-European, Dravidian, Tibeto-Burman, and Austro-Asiatic, are spoken in the area. There are hundreds of spoken dialects and 22 officially recognized languages in India alone. Only a small portion of the linguistic diversity is represented by Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Nepali, Sinhala, and Dzongkha. Language is closely related to politics, culture, and identity. For instance, the establishment of Bangladesh was significantly influenced by the Bengali Language Movement in East Pakistan in 1952. Tamil linguistic nationalism has also influenced politics in Sri Lanka and southern India.

Language Wonderland: South Asia is home to over 1,600 languages, ranging from widely spoken ones like Hindi, Urdu, and Bengali, to tiny tribal languages spoken by just a few thousand people.

1.5.4 Religious Pluralism

Another pillar of South Asia's cultural diversity is religion. While Islam, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism came through trade and conquest, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism were indigenous to the area. The most common religions in the region today are Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Bhutan, Islam in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and the Maldives, and Hinduism in India and

Nepal. Religious diversity has produced thriving coexistence traditions in spite of conflicts. The syncretic customs of the area are reflected in shared festivals, such as Christmas celebrations in India or Sufi Urs in Pakistan, where both Muslims and Hindus take part.

1.5.5 Ethnic and Social Diversity

Hundreds of ethnic groups make up the population of South Asia, ranging from Pashtuns and Baloch in Afghanistan and Pakistan to Tibeto-Burman groups in the Himalayan belt, Dravidians in the south, and Indo-Aryans in northern India and Pakistan. Different customs and languages are preserved by tribal groups such as the Adivasis of India, the Veddas of Sri Lanka, and the numerous indigenous groups of Nepal and Bhutan. Communities are further divided and diversified by caste, class, and clan. Cultural production, social hierarchies, and political mobilization are all influenced by this multilayered diversity.

1.5.6 Art, Literature, and Music

South Asia's literature and art reflect the region's diverse culture. While Qawwali and Ghazal music flourished under Islamic influence, Indian classical music evolved into two major traditions: Hindustani (North Indian) and Carnatic (South Indian). Folk music includes Nepali folk ballads, Bengali Baul songs, and Punjabi Bhangra. Multilingual literature has long existed; the depth of South Asian creativity is attested by works such as the Mahabharata in Sanskrit, Ghalib's poetry in Urdu, Rabindranath Tagore's Bengali works, and the Sinhala chronicles of Sri Lanka. This cultural diversity is further demonstrated by architecture, which ranges from Mughal mosques and British colonial structures to Buddhist stupas and Hindu temples.

Art and Music: The region is rich in **folk music, classical traditions, and performing arts**. For example, India has **Carnatic and Hindustani music**, while Pakistan is known for **Qawwali**, and Nepal for **folk dances like Maruni**.

1.5.7 Cuisine and Everyday Practices

Diversity is also reflected in South Asian cuisine culture. The staples are rice, lentils, wheat, dairy, and spices, but cooking methods vary greatly. South Indian dosas, Bengali fish-based dishes, Sri Lankan coconut curries, and Mughlai cuisine in North India and Pakistan all emphasize regional uniqueness. The British brought tea culture to the area, and it has since become a common daily ritual. Diversity is also reflected in clothing: dhotis, lungis, saris, shalwar kameez, and contemporary clothing coexist and represent both tradition and modernity.

1.5.8 Cultural Diversity and Politics

Cultural diversity fuels political competition in addition to being a source of richness. Federalism and state formation have been influenced by linguistic and ethnic movements. Pakistan, for instance, has experienced ethnic conflicts involving Pashtun, Sindhi, and Baloch identities. Decades of civil war in Sri Lanka were influenced by the ethnic conflict between Sinhalese and Tamils. India uses a federal system that gives linguistic states autonomy to manage diversity. The diversity of South Asia has also fueled calls for inclusive governance, rights, and recognition.

1.5.9 Globalization and Changing Identities

Globalization has both reinforced and homogenized cultural diversity in the modern era. Although technology, international trade, and Western popular culture are changing lifestyles, local cultures are enduring. Sri Lankan art, Nepali handicrafts, Bollywood movies, and Pakistani dramas are all becoming more well-known worldwide. South Asian languages, cuisine, and religious customs are preserved by diaspora communities worldwide, extending the region's cultural diversity beyond its boundaries.

Architectural Diversity: South Asia's cultural diversity is reflected in architecture—from **Mughal forts and temples in India**, to **Buddhist stupas in Nepal and Sri Lanka**, to **traditional Bhutanese dzongs** and **Maldives' coral mosques**.

Unit 2

INDIA AND PAKISTAN

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INTRODUCTION

South Asia occupies a unique position in global geopolitics due to its strategic geography, demographic weight, and economic potential. Bordered by major powers such as China and connected to the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Indian Ocean, the region has historically been a site of great power competition. During the Cold War, South Asia became a contested arena where the United States and the Soviet Union sought influence, shaping domestic and regional politics in lasting ways. In the post-9/11 era, the region once again gained global significance as a frontline in the "War on Terror." Today, South Asia remains strategically vital because of its nuclearized environment, its role in global trade routes, and its centrality in emerging power rivalries, especially between the United States and China. The geopolitics of South Asia are thus defined not only by internal rivalries but also by its importance to the wider international order. Understanding this unit is essential for grasping why South Asia continues to draw the attention of world powers and international institutions.

OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will enhance your knowledge about:

- To explain the strategic significance of South Asia's geography and resources in global politics.
- To assess the impact of Cold War and post-9/11 geopolitics on South Asian states.
- To analyze how global power rivalries shape regional security, cooperation, and conflict dynamics in South Asia.

Since 1947, when British India was divided into two major states, India and Pakistan have been at the center of South Asian politics. The two nations, which were born with the same colonial heritage but followed different paths, represent opposing political structures, economic agendas, and national identities. While Pakistan was established as a Muslim homeland in South Asia, it struggled from the beginning with issues of identity, governance, and unity, while India aimed to establish itself as a secular, democratic, and pluralist state. In addition to bilateral relations, the broader course of South Asian development has been influenced by their shared history of colonial subjugation, the trauma of partition, and the ensuing competition for territory, ideology, and regional influence. Thus, comprehending the post-colonial experiences of India and Pakistan is crucial to understanding the dynamics of conflict, collaboration, and change in the area.

2.1 Post-colonial Subcontinent

India–Pakistan Rivalry: India and Pakistan have fought **four major wars since 1947**, largely over the disputed region of Kashmir.

In 1947, British colonial rule came to an end in South Asia, and two new countries, India and Pakistan, became independent. This changed the political history of the region in a big way. The British leaving was not just a change in administration; it was the end of decades of fighting against colonialism and the rise of different nationalisms. Independence was celebrated as a victory for self-determination, but it also left behind questions about identity, governance, and territory that still affect the area today. Three connected things help us understand the post-colonial subcontinent best: the legacies of colonial rule, the process of partition, and the new states' struggles to figure out who they are and where they are going politically.

2.1.1 The colonial Legacy and its Aftermath

For almost 200 years, the British Raj dominated South Asia, bringing about significant social, political, and economic transformations. The circumstances under which the post-colonial states arose were determined by their legacy.

a. Administrative Structures

Instead of encouraging local involvement, the British left behind a centralized administrative structure intended to uphold imperial control. In terms of local development, bureaucratic institutions, policing, and civil services were weak, but they were strong at the center. This system was passed down to India and Pakistan after their independence. Since the majority of institutional headquarters and resources were in India, Pakistan had to construct a new capital and bureaucracy essentially from scratch, while India decided to keep most of it intact.

b. Economic Distortions

The colonial economy prioritized raw material extraction and the export of agricultural goods to Britain. This led to rural poverty, dependency, and slowed industrialization. These problems were made worse by partition, as India acquired the majority of manufacturing hubs while Pakistan inherited less industrial infrastructure. Both states had weak economies and high rates of poverty when they gained independence.

c. Social Divisions

Community divisions were exacerbated by the British "divide and rule" policies. Religious identities were institutionalized through census

classifications, distinct electorates, and collective representation. Deeply ingrained communal consciousness by 1947 paved the way for violence during the partition and ongoing hostilities between Muslims and Hindus.

2.1.2 Partition: Trauma and Transformation

The most defining moment of South Asia's post-colonial history was the partition of 1947. The creation of India and Pakistan was not a peaceful administrative separation but a deeply violent rupture.

Bhutan and Hydropower: Bhutan earns a significant portion of its revenue by **exporting hydropower to India**, showing how even small nations leverage natural resources strategically

a. Human Displacement

Between 14 and 16 million people crossed borders as a result of partition, making it one of the biggest migrations in human history. Muslims migrated in the other direction, while Sikhs and Hindus migrated from Pakistan to India. Both states were destabilized by the refugee crisis, which left millions in need of security, employment, and housing.

b. Violence and Massacres

An estimated one to two million people died as a result of communal riots. The partition was characterized by atrocities, massacres, and kidnappings, leaving a legacy that continues to influence relations between states and communities. A social upheaval that altered identities and fostered a great deal of mistrust between India and Pakistan, partition was more than just a political decision.

c. Kashmir Dispute

The partition did not make clear what would happen to the princely states, especially Jammu and Kashmir. The fact that the country was mostly Muslim but ruled by a Hindu led to conflict, which started the first Indo-Pakistan war in 1947–48. Kashmir became the main point of contention between the two countries, affecting their military and political plans.

2.1.3 India's Post-Colonial Path

a. Democratic Institutions

India maintained its parliamentary system and universal suffrage in spite of its diversity and poverty. Secularism, socialism, and non-alignment in foreign policy were prioritized under Jawaharlal Nehru's leadership. In the Global South, this distinguished India as a sizable democracy.

b. Economic Challenges

With state-led industrialization and planning, India sought a mixed economy. Food security was enhanced by the Green Revolution in the 1960s, but inequality and poverty remained. Nevertheless, in spite of secessionist challenges (Punjab, Nagaland, Tamil Nadu), India was able to preserve political stability.

c. Identities Politics

Despite religious conflicts, India's secular system attempted to give Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Hindus, and others equal rights. However, caste-based inequality and communal riots demonstrated that democracy did not eradicate ingrained divisions.

2.1.4 Pakistan's Post-Colonial Path

Pakistan's trajectory was more fragile due to structural imbalances and identity dilemmas.

a. Institutional Fragility

Pakistan lacked robust political and administrative institutions, in contrast to India. It experienced political instability and inherited fewer resources. Leaders like Liaquat Ali Khan (1951) and Muhammad Ali Jinnah (1948) died young, leaving a leadership void.

b. Role of the Military

The military's influence in politics was bolstered by Pakistan's insecurity in relation to India, particularly following the Kashmir dispute. Its authoritarian tendencies were shaped by repeated military coups (1958, 1977, 1999), which hindered the growth of democracy.

c. Identities Crisis

Although Pakistan was founded as a Muslim homeland, internal conflicts quickly developed between Bengalis in East Pakistan and Punjabis, Sindhis, Pashtuns, and Baloch in West Pakistan. Bangladesh was created in 1971 when East Pakistan seceded from Pakistan due to the inability to reconcile these identities.

2.1.5 Regional Consequences of Post-Colonialism

The post-colonial subcontinent was not just about India and Pakistan individually; it was also about how their rivalry shaped South Asia as a whole.

a. Wars and Militarization

Antagonism was solidified by the India-Pakistan wars of 1947–1948; 1965; and 1971 (which resulted in Bangladesh's independence). Large amounts of national budgets were devoted to defense, which hampered progress.

b. Cold War Dynamics

The region was impacted by the global Cold War. India pursued non-alignment but leaned toward the Soviet Union, while Pakistan formed military alliances with the US through CENTO and SEATO. Rivalry and militarization were strengthened by this outside intervention.

c. South Asian Regionalism

Tensions between India and Pakistan have repeatedly hampered efforts to advance regional cooperation, such as the establishment of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 1985. Thus, post-colonial rivalries kept South Asia from reaching its full potential.

2.1.6 Legacies for Today

India and Pakistan are still shaped by their post-colonial past. 1947 is the starting point for problems like Kashmir, religious nationalism, integrating refugees, and unequal development. Although independence signaled the end of colonial rule, it did not end the region's problems; rather, it reshaped them into new kinds of rivalry and conflict.

2.2 India and Pakistan's Historical Inheritance and Independence

One of the most important turning points in twentieth-century politics was the independence of India and Pakistan in 1947. The British Raj's lengthy colonial rule in South Asia resulted in the creation of two independent states, which profoundly altered the political, social, and cultural identities of the region. Understanding the historical legacies that influenced India and Pakistan's independence, the process of partition, and the political, social, and economic legacies that both countries carried into their new futures is crucial to comprehending their respective paths after 1947.

2.2.1 Colonial Inheritance and the Burden of Empire

The structures, policies, and institutions that the British colonial state left behind had a significant impact on India's and Pakistan's futures. Economic exploitation, hierarchical governance, and

Centralized authority served as the cornerstones of the colonial administration. The bureaucracies that both new states inherited were set up to uphold imperial order rather than to empower local people. Though they were infused with the authoritarian tendencies of their colonial predecessor, civil services, military establishments, and legal frameworks became the cornerstones of the post-colonial state.

Mass Migration: Partition triggered one of the **largest migrations in human history**: over **14 million people** moved across the new borders, and around **1–2 million lost their lives** in communal violence.

The inheritance was extremely problematic from an economic standpoint. Undermining native industries and encouraging dependency, the British had established India as a market for completed goods and a supplier of raw materials. India acquired a larger portion of the pre-existing industries during the partition, while Pakistan inherited primarily agricultural areas with little industrial infrastructure. The developmental challenges that both states would encounter in the ensuing decades were predicted by this unequal economic inheritance.

By supporting distinct electorates and identity-based politics, the British had institutionalized social and political divisions between communities. A fractured society where religious and communal affiliations were politically mobilized was the result of this. The legacy of "divide and rule" made sure that suspicion and hostility between communities—especially Muslims and Hindus—and consequently between the two new states would accompany independence.

2.2.2 The Road to Independence and Partition

After decades of nationalist struggle, independence was finally gained, but it was tragically and hastily obtained. The Indian National Congress had long supported independence on the grounds of inclusivity and secular nationalism, under the leadership of individuals like Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi. Muhammad Ali Jinnah's All-India Muslim League grew more and more in its demands for a Muslim homeland, claiming that a Hindu-majority India would not be able to protect Muslims' political and cultural identity.

Due to domestic pressures and economic exhaustion, the British decided to withdraw after World War II, which resulted in the subcontinent's quick and ill-planned division. The final Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten, accelerated the process of splitting British India into two independent nations. Ambiguity and discontent on both sides resulted from the Radcliffe Commission's impossible deadline to draw boundaries for India and Pakistan.

One of the biggest and bloodiest migrations in modern history was caused by partition. Between 14 and 16 million people crossed the border, with Muslims entering Pakistan and Sikhs and Hindus entering India. Massacres, forced conversions, kidnappings, and the deaths of up to two million people were all part of the unprecedented outbreak of communal violence. Independence was inextricably linked to trauma, displacement, and a sense of loss for the citizens of both countries.

Simultaneous Independence: India and Pakistan both became independent in August 1947, just three days apart: India on 15 August, Pakistan on 14 August.

2.2.3 Independence and the Birth of Two States

On August 14, 1947, Pakistan came into existence, followed by India on August 15. The two nations began their journeys with shared colonial legacies but diverging visions of statehood.

a. India's Independence Vision

Under Nehru's direction, India aimed to establish itself as a democratic and secular nation. When writing the constitution, the Constituent Assembly, under the direction of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, envisioned parliamentary democracy, universal suffrage, and fundamental rights as the cornerstones of government. India sought to maintain pluralism as its guiding principle despite the great diversity of its languages, religions, and castes.

Through the Planning Commission and Five-Year Plans, India also adopted economic planning. Nehru, who was motivated by socialist principles, advocated land reforms to alleviate rural inequality as well as state-led industrialization, heavy industries, and public sector domination. India pursued non-alignment in its foreign policy in an effort to maintain its independence from Cold War blocs and establish itself as a global leader in the developing world.

b. Pakistan's Independence Vision

Although there is uncertainty regarding its ideological and constitutional identity, Pakistan emerged as a Muslim homeland. Muhammad Ali Jinnah expressed a vision of equality for minorities while simultaneously stressing the necessity of a state in which Muslims could freely practice their faith. However, Pakistan lost its founding leadership early on due to his death in 1948 and Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan in 1951.

Pakistan had tremendous institutional difficulties. The new state had to establish institutions essentially from scratch because its capital, financial institutions, and a large portion of its bureaucracy were located in India. Inflows of refugees put a strain on its resources, and tensions arose over territorial and asset disputes with India, especially in Kashmir. The bureaucracy and military eventually came to dominate Pakistani politics, leaving the democratic developments at a stalemate.

c. The Kashmir Dispute and Immediate Rivalries



Conflicts started right away because of the princely states' unresolved status at partition. Jammu and Kashmir was the most important of these. The state's accession became contentious because of its Muslim majority and Hindu ruler. When tribal militias invaded Kashmir in 1947 with Pakistan's help, the ruler decided to join India for safety. This made Kashmir the central issue in their bilateral rivalry and precipitated the first India-Pakistan war (1947–48). Although a ceasefire was mediated by the UN in 1949, the conflict persisted and shaped the national identities and security strategies of both nations.

The tone of India-Pakistan relations was established by this early conflict. Both states placed a higher priority on defense spending and military readiness than on development and reconstruction. South Asian divisions grew wider as a result of mutual animosity undermining chances for collaboration.

2.2.4 Institutional Development and Political Divergence

In the years following independence, India and Pakistan diverged sharply in their political trajectories.

a. India's democratic consolidation

India was able to maintain democratic institutions in spite of obstacles like poverty, regional insurgencies, and linguistic diversity. Secularism, federalism, and the rule of law were made official with the 1950 adoption of the constitution. In the early decades, the Indian National Congress dominated politics, and elections became a common occurrence.

b. Pakistan's Political Instability

Pakistan, on the other hand, had trouble developing its constitution. Its first constitution was not ratified until 1956, but it was revoked in 1958 following a military takeover led by General Ayub Khan. Consolidation of democracy was hampered by weak parties, frequent political unrest, and disagreements over the place of Islam in government. Pakistan's political culture would be shaped for decades by authoritarian tendencies that were firmly established by the military and bureaucracy.

c. Social and Cultural Inheritance

Questions of social and cultural inheritance were also raised by India's and Pakistan's independence. Despite sharing centuries of history, the division caused cultural rifts in both societies.

While caste discrimination and communal tensions persisted, India celebrated its diversity by fostering a composite national identity. Pakistan, on the other hand, aimed to create a national identity based on Islam, but this goal was thwarted by linguistic and ethnic differences, especially between East and West Pakistan. In the end, East Pakistan's secession and the establishment of Bangladesh in 1971 resulted from the inability to balance Bengali identity with West Pakistan's centralizing tendencies.

2.2.5 Economic Inheritance and Developmental Paths

Both India and Pakistan inherited economies that had been decimated by colonial policies when they gained their independence. India started state-led development since it had a greater proportion of infrastructure and industries. Originally an agrarian nation that relied on agricultural exports, Pakistan progressively made investments in industry, frequently with help and support from abroad.

However, there are still significant economic wounds from the partition's resource distribution. At first, Pakistan had to rely largely on foreign assistance due to shortages of money, administrative personnel,

Pakistan inherited **17% of India's assets**, leaving it economically weaker.

and industrial assets. India struggled with poverty, food shortages, and underdevelopment despite being comparatively better off. Both states pursued modernization, but with differing emphases and outcomes.

2.2.6 Legacies of Independence

India's and Pakistan's histories and independence still influence their current paths. Both nations were born with shared colonial legacies but diverged in visions of governance, identity, and development. Independence was marred by partition violence, refugee crises, and territorial disputes, leaving scars that persist to this day.

Pakistan's first Governor-General: **Muhammad Ali Jinnah**; India's first PM: **Jawaharlal Nehru**.

While Pakistan inherited a weaker administrative structure and became susceptible to political instability and military dominance, India embraced secular democracy and inherited a relatively robust institutional framework. However, the traumatic circumstances of their birth and their colonial past continued to have a significant impact on both countries.

2.3 Rivalry and South Asia

Since 1947, the rivalry between India and Pakistan has shaped the course of South Asia and is one of the most significant and long-lasting conflicts in the modern world. Both nations had conflicting ideas of nationhood, a great deal of mistrust, and disputed identities after the bloody furnace of Partition. While Pakistan was intended to be a Muslim homeland with an Islamic identity, India saw itself as a secular, democratic, and pluralistic state. The political, social, and security ties between the two have remained vibrant due to their differing ideological underpinnings. The unresolved Kashmir dispute is at the center of the rivalry, but the hostility goes far beyond a simple territorial dispute. It includes rival regional aspirations, religious and cultural disparities, historical grievances, and military competition. In addition to being a bilateral conflict, the India-Pakistan rivalry is a regional and global concern that attracts superpowers and influences the integration, growth, and security environment of South Asia.

The partition itself gave rise to the immediate context of rivalry. One of the biggest and bloodiest forced migrations in history was brought on by the hasty and

disorganized drawing of the Radcliffe Line, which left millions stranded across new borders. Millions more were displaced and nearly a million people were killed in intercommunal violence. Both societies' collective memories are marked with animosity from the trauma of Partition. India, a bigger and more powerful neighbor that was hesitant to recognize its sovereignty, was seen by Pakistan as an existential threat. India, on the other hand, believed that Pakistan was a man-made entity that would fall apart due to its contradictions. Armed conflict swiftly resulted from this mutual suspicion, which was not merely theoretical. The two countries fought their first war over Kashmir in 1947–1948 within months of gaining independence, laying the groundwork for a rivalry that would recur in cycles of conflict, militarization, and tense ceasefires.

The conflict centered on Kashmir. Pakistan claimed that the area was rightfully its according to the logic of Partition when Maharaja Hari Singh, the Hindu ruler of a state with a majority of Muslims, acceded to India under disputed circumstances. In the meantime, India used the legal tool of accession and the never-held promise of a plebiscite to defend its authority. As a result, Kashmir was split, with Pakistan controlling Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir and India controlling Jammu, the Kashmir Valley, and Ladakh. Kashmir was an essential component of India's secular identity, while for Pakistan it represented the "unfinished business" of Partition. This conflict between religious nationalism and secular pluralism made the disagreement unwinnable. The resentment was heightened by the Line of Control (LoC) skirmishes and subsequent wars in 1965 and 1999 (Kargil).

Partition caused **14+ million people to migrate**, with 1–2 million deaths

Beyond Kashmir, the militarization of both states was an institutional manifestation of the rivalry. Sensing its vulnerability, Pakistan made significant investments in its military establishment, which grew to dominate its politics and economy. Despite being democratic and civilian-led, India placed a higher priority on defense because of its ongoing wars with China and Pakistan. The nuclearization of South Asia intensified the arms race. Under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and then General Zia-ul-Haq, Pakistan secretly pursued its own nuclear program in response to India's 1974 Smiling Buddha nuclear test. With secret help from China and purported networks like A.Q. Khan's, Pakistan developed nuclear capabilities by the 1980s, which culminated in its 1998 nuclear tests in retaliation for India's. The risk of escalation into nuclear conflict increased, but the likelihood of conventional wars decreased as a result of this nuclear parity, solidifying a risky deterrence dynamic.

In addition to being military, the rivalry has also been political and ideological. While India has accused Pakistan of encouraging terrorism and cross-border militancy, Pakistan has frequently accused India of pursuing regional hegemony and marginalizing Muslim minorities. Tensions increased with the emergence of insurgencies in Indian-administered Kashmir in the late 1980s, which were frequently attributed to Pakistan's backing. The attacks on the Indian Parliament in 2001 and the Mumbai attacks in 2008, which were attributed to Pakistani-based organizations, solidified Indian public sentiment and justified the country's move toward more forceful defenses. Pakistan, on the other hand, accused India of suppressing the Kashmiri people's right to self-determination and cited violations of human rights in Kashmir. Therefore, both countries have depended on narratives that present the other as an aggressor and support the validity of their respective positions.

South Asia as a whole has also been significantly impacted by the rivalry. Despite having a common history, culture, and economic potential, South Asia is among the least integrated regions in the world. Tensions between India and Pakistan have largely paralyzed organizations such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). South Asia is still divided, whereas regional blocs like the European Union or ASEAN have promoted trade and collaboration in other parts of the world. Due to limitations, mistrust, and ongoing political tensions, trade between India and Pakistan is minimal in comparison to its potential. For instance, following the repeal of Article 370, which revoked the special status of Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan halted trade with India in 2019. Thus, the competition directly jeopardizes regional connectivity initiatives, economic growth, and collaboration on common issues like poverty and climate change.

Pakistan inherited **less than 25% of the British Indian railways**.

The rivalry has an impact on global geopolitics in addition to bilateral or regional boundaries. India sided with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, while Pakistan joined defense pacts like CENTO and SEATO and sided with the United States. Their animosity was strengthened by this external balancing. In order to offset New Delhi's hegemony, Pakistan also made use of its connections with China, India's principal adversary. The global component is still present today: Pakistan's strong ties with China, particularly through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), contrast with India's expanding alliance with the United States, particularly in the Indo-Pacific strategy. The triangular rivalry fueled by this alignment makes South Asian security more difficult. The India-Pakistan rivalry presents a continual threat to international peace and stability, as it could escalate

into a conflict between two nuclear-armed states, which could undermine international peace as well as South Asia.

The rivalry has significant social and human costs. Massive resources are diverted from social development by militarization. Despite their struggles with poverty, inequality, health crises, and inadequate education, India and Pakistan continue to have substantial military budgets. Decades of militarization, insurgency, and counterinsurgency have caused immense suffering for civilians in the Kashmir Valley. People-to-people contact has been hindered by border-separated families, limited mobility, and propaganda-fueled animosity between populations. State narratives of hostility eclipse historical and cultural connections, including shared languages, cuisines, and customs. As a result, the rivalry has strengthened psychological barriers and sustained intergenerational cycles of mistrust.

There have been many but brittle attempts at peace. Attempts at rapprochement by leaders on both sides have occasionally been thwarted by later acts of violence or political changes, such as the Lahore Declaration of 1999 or the Agra Summit of 2001. Although they haven't resulted in long-lasting progress, confidence-boosting initiatives like cricket diplomacy or bus services throughout the LoC have occasionally reduced tensions. Domestic politics also come into play; leaders frequently use nationalist rhetoric to bolster their authority and paint compromise as a sign of weakness.

The rivalry's future is uncertain despite these obstacles. Both countries may be forced to reconsider their priorities as a result of the changing regional and global dynamics. Climate change, water scarcity, pandemics, and economic underdevelopment are urgent transnational issues facing South Asia that require collaboration to effectively address. The Indus Waters Treaty, for instance, has endured since 1960 in spite of disputes, proving that workable agreements are achievable. In a similar vein, opportunities for cooperation arise from the shared risks of climate-related disasters like heat waves and floods. Although these opportunities are still shaky due to past hostilities, the development of new economic corridors, energy pipelines, and digital connectivity may encourage both sides to seek practical engagement.

The rivalry between India and Pakistan is essentially a complicated tapestry made from the strands of identity, security, ideology, and history. For over 70 years, it has shaped South Asian politics, impeding regional integration and sustaining insecurity. Although Kashmir continues to be the most prominent flashpoint, the rivalry's reach encompasses all facets of both bilateral and regional life. The rivalry is a lived reality that impedes growth, peace, and prosperity for the people of South Asia; it is more than just a geopolitical abstraction. The way forward necessitates visionary leadership on both sides, the guts to abandon zero-sum mentality, and an

understanding that the only sustainable path forward is collaboration rather than ongoing conflict. However, the path to reconciliation is still unclear because of the deep-rooted mistrust. The rivalry thus continues to cast a long shadow over South Asia, shaping its present and determining its future.

2.4 Future

The legacy of Partition, the ongoing rivalry, and the goals of the more than 1.7 billion people who live in this region continue to have a significant impact on the future of India and Pakistan, and consequently, of South Asia. After more than 75 years of independence, both nations have followed different political, economic, and social paths, but their destiny is still intertwined. Whether South Asia remains characterized by conflict and mistrust or if it can become a region of peace, cooperation, and shared prosperity will depend on the choices it makes over the next few decades. The opportunities are as great as the challenges. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the "future" of India and Pakistan in the context of their political systems, economic aspirations, demographic realities, global alignments, and the urgent, cross-border issues they face.

The continuation or resolution of the conflict in Kashmir is one of the most significant factors that will determine the future. As long as the problem is not solved, it will be a material and a symbol of animosity. A significant turning point was reached in August 2019 when India decided to repeal Article 370, which gave Jammu and Kashmir special status. Pakistan fiercely objected to the action, which resulted in the suspension of bilateral trade and the downgrading of diplomatic relations. Pakistan saw the revocation as a betrayal of the Kashmiri right to self-determination, while India saw it as a declaration of sovereignty and a step toward integration. The future course of Kashmir will influence regional stability as well as bilateral ties. There are two possible paths for the future: either gradual normalization through autonomy, dialogue, or negotiated settlements, or ongoing militarization, alienation, and violent cycles. The first scenario appears more likely in the absence of political will and consistent confidence-building, but the human cost will keep rising.

The economic aspect is equally important to the future. With less than 1% of their total trade coming from India and Pakistan, South Asia continues to be one of the least integrated regions in the world. Millions of opportunities for employment and growth are lost as a result of this economic estrangement. However, there is a great deal of potential for economic cooperation. The growth of trade, tourism, and connectivity may be made possible by shared borders, cultural proximity, and complementary industries. Political disagreements have caused projects like the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) to stall, but their resuscitation could

revolutionize the region. Looking ahead, both nations could unlock a "peace dividend" that would lift millions out of poverty if they put economic pragmatism ahead of political animosity. However, if hostility continues, defense budgets will continue to consume resources, leaving social development with insufficient funding. The decision between "guns" and "butter" will determine both countries' future course.

The future will also be shaped by demographics. With a median age of about 27, the populations of both India and Pakistan are young. Opportunities for innovation, entrepreneurship, and labor productivity are presented by this "youth bulge," but only if education, healthcare, and job creation are also prioritized. If not, demographic potential might become a liability, fostering discontent, radicalism, and instability. Addressing unemployment and underinvestment in human capital will be crucial for Pakistan, while maintaining inclusive growth and preventing the widening of caste, regional, and religious disparities will be important for India. Using young people's energy for positive ends rather than allowing them to be enlisted in militant or nationalist causes is a problem that both face.

Youth Majority: Over **64% of Pakistan's population is under 30**, making it one of the youngest countries in the world.

The influence of identity and religion will also influence the future. India took on a secular identity, while Pakistan was created as a Muslim homeland. However, religion remains a major political factor in both nations. In India, the rise of Hindu nationalism under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has sparked worries about the erosion of secularism, while in Pakistan, the relationship between Islamic identity and democratic governance is still up for debate. The rivalry between India and Pakistan is fueled by these identity-based politics. Antagonism will increase if both states keep defining themselves largely in opposition to one another's religious identities. However, it might create new opportunities for coexistence if they can shift toward more pluralistic and inclusive conceptions of identity.

Therefore, how both countries strike a balance between nationalism, religion, and democracy will determine their future.

Global powers will continue to play a vital role. India supported the Soviet Union during the Cold War, while Pakistan supported the US and then China. The geopolitical chessboard has changed in the modern day. India is now a strategic ally of the United States, especially when it comes to the Indo-Pacific region and China containment. Through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a centerpiece of the Belt and Road Initiative, Pakistan has strengthened its ties with

China. In addition to strengthening rivalry, this triangular alignment—India with the United States, Pakistan with China—complicates it by tying it to the struggle for dominance in the world. Therefore, how these superpowers interact with South Asia will also determine the future of India-Pakistan relations. Tensions may decrease if they promote communication and stability; they may widen rifts if they take advantage of the rivalry for tactical gain.

Another defining issue for the future is environmental stress and climate change. India and Pakistan are two of the nations most susceptible to climate-related disasters, including heat waves, droughts, floods, and glacial melt. These issues transcend national boundaries and call for regional collaboration in the areas of sustainable development, disaster relief, and water sharing. One of the few long-lasting instances of collaboration, even during conflicts, is the 1960 Indus Waters Treaty.

South Asia is the birthplace of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, with large Muslim and Christian populations.

In the future, expanding upon such frameworks will be crucial. However, the escalating climate crisis also increases the likelihood of new conflicts, especially those involving water scarcity. Political leadership and vision will determine whether South Asia experiences "climate wars" or "climate cooperation" in the future.

Additionally, the nuclear factor will remain a significant concern. India and Pakistan both possess highly advanced nuclear weapons. Since 1971, nuclear deterrence may have avoided full-scale conflicts, but it hasn't completely removed the possibility of escalation. The region was on the verge of nuclear conflict at the time of the 1999 Kargil conflict, the 2001 Parliament attack, the 2008 Mumbai attacks, and the 2019 Pulwama-Balakot crisis. Maintaining credible deterrence while simultaneously putting in place systems for de-escalation and crisis management will be essential to South Asia's future stability. Although mistrust is still high, risks could be decreased by track-II diplomacy, hotlines, and arms control agreements. The nuclear dimension has the potential to have disastrous effects on the world and the region if it is not controlled.

In addition to these structural elements, leadership will also influence the future. Periodically, individual leaders in both nations have changed the course of events to either conflict or peace. Change is achievable, as evidenced by Manmohan Singh's focus on trade, Pervez Musharraf's backchannel discussions, and Atal Bihari Vajpayee's bus diplomacy. On the other hand, tensions have frequently been heightened by leaders' nationalist rhetoric. Therefore, whether or not leaders in Islamabad and New Delhi can put long-term peacebuilding ahead of immediate

political gains will determine the future. If South Asia is to break free from the cycle of rivalry, statesmanship, bravery, and vision will be essential.

Crucially, both countries' citizens are becoming more aware of the costs of war. The common history and goals of Indians and Pakistanis are frequently emphasized through civil society projects, cultural exchanges, scholarly partnerships, and diaspora networks. Despite serving as venues for hate speech, social media and the internet have also made it possible for young people from different countries to communicate with one another. Whether or not these bottom-up efforts can create peace constituencies powerful enough to shape policy may determine the future.

Geopolitical Position: Pakistan connects South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, making it strategically important.

All things considered, India and Pakistan's futures lie somewhere between continuity and change. Continuity would lock South Asia into an unstable future by ensuring that animosity, militarization, and lost opportunities would continue. But change is possible: collaboration on trade, health, climate change, and technology could make the area a center of global development. Political will, visionary leadership, and the capacity to put the welfare of the populace ahead of partisan nationalist agendas will be necessary for the future. The future of India and Pakistan will depend on their ability to rewrite history. For far too long, history has shaped their relationship. The stakes are not just bilateral but regional and global. South Asia’s ability to overcome its past will determine whether it continues to be a region of conflict or emerges as a zone of peace and prosperity.

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Unit 3

INDIA, PAKISTAN & INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

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INTRODUCTION

Conflict has been a defining feature of South Asia's post-independence history, with wars and recurring crises shaping both regional politics and international perceptions of the region. The wars of 1965 and 1971 left lasting marks, not only on India–Pakistan relations but also on the broader strategic environment of South Asia. The insurgency in Kashmir from 1989 onwards, the 1999 Kargil conflict, and recent crises such as the 2016 Uri attack and 2019 Pulwama-Balakot strikes demonstrate the persistence of militarized rivalries. Each escalation has deepened mistrust, reinforced national security narratives, and complicated peace-building efforts. These conflicts also reveal how domestic politics and unresolved territorial disputes intersect with regional security dilemmas. Moreover, the repeated resort to military solutions has limited opportunities for dialogue and cooperation, leaving South Asia trapped in cycles of confrontation. This unit traces the major wars and conflicts in the region, emphasizing their causes, trajectories, and long-term consequences for stability and governance.

OBJECTIVES

Going through this unit, you will be able to:

- To study the major wars and military confrontations in South Asia and their historical contexts.
- To analyze the role of territorial disputes, nationalism, and insurgencies in driving conflict.
- To assess the long-term political and security consequences of repeated conflict escalations in the region.

3.1 Kashmir Issue

3.1.1 Introduction

The Kashmir issue stands as one of the most enduring and volatile disputes in international politics, shaping the trajectory of India–Pakistan relations since their independence in 1947. Located in the northwestern corner of the Indian subcontinent, the territory of Jammu and Kashmir is not merely a geographical unit but a symbol of contested sovereignty, national identity, and competing political visions. Its significance lies not only in its strategic location, sharing borders with China, Afghanistan, and Central Asia, but also in its cultural and religious diversity that has historically defied simplistic categorization. The unresolved nature of the Kashmir question has ensured that it remains at the heart of South Asian politics, contributing to repeated wars, crises, and cycles of mistrust between India and Pakistan.

For India, Kashmir represents an integral part of its secular and federal union. The decision of the last Dogra ruler, Maharaja Hari Singh, to accede to India in 1947 provided the legal basis, in New Delhi's eyes, for Kashmir's inclusion in the Indian Union. In contrast, for Pakistan, Kashmir is seen as the unfinished agenda of Partition, where a Muslim-majority region was denied its right to self-determination. This divergence of narratives has created a conflict that is simultaneously territorial, ideological, and deeply emotional for both states.

First War After Independence:
The very first war between India and Pakistan broke out in **1947–48**, just months after Partition, over the princely state of **Jammu and Kashmir**.

The international dimension further complicates the issue. The United Nations, shortly after the first war in 1947–48, called for a plebiscite to determine the wishes of the Kashmiri people. While this resolution remains unimplemented, it has provided Pakistan with a legal and moral claim on Kashmir, while India argues that subsequent agreements, such as the 1972 Simla Accord, render the issue a bilateral matter. Beyond the UN, global powers like the United States, China, and Russia have each engaged with the Kashmir issue in ways that reflect their strategic interests in South Asia.

The Kashmir conflict is not only about borders but also about people. The political aspirations of the Kashmiri population, which range from full integration with India to independence or accession to Pakistan, have often been sidelined in the high

politics of interstate rivalry. Since the 1989 insurgency, Kashmir has also become a site of internal conflict within India, marked by militarization, human rights concerns, and cycles of violence. The abrogation of Article 370 by the Indian government in August 2019 further altered the dynamics, transforming the constitutional status of Jammu and Kashmir and intensifying Pakistan's diplomatic opposition.

In the broader context of international politics, Kashmir serves as a testing ground for concepts of sovereignty, self-determination, and international mediation. It highlights the limitations of the United Nations system in resolving protracted disputes and exposes how great power politics often trumps normative commitments to peace and justice. Moreover, the presence of nuclear weapons in both India and Pakistan raises the stakes, making Kashmir a potential flashpoint for global security. The crises of 1999 (Kargil), 2001–02 (Parliament attack), 2008 (Mumbai attacks), and 2019 (Pulwama-Balakot strikes) underscore how quickly localized tensions in Kashmir can escalate into confrontations with international implications.

UN's Role in Kashmir: The **United Nations** first intervened in South Asia in **1948**, calling for a plebiscite in Kashmir — a promise still unfulfilled.

The introduction of Kashmir into the global discourse on human rights, climate change, and transboundary water sharing has added new dimensions to an old conflict. Climate-induced challenges, particularly the melting of Himalayan glaciers that feed rivers essential to both India and Pakistan, make cooperation in the region more urgent than ever. Yet, political deadlock continues to overshadow these imperatives.

In sum, the Kashmir issue is more than a bilateral dispute between India and Pakistan. It is a complex, multi-layered conflict involving questions of law, identity, democracy, human rights, and international order. Its persistence highlights both the fragility of South Asian politics and the inability of international institutions to resolve disputes when great powers are reluctant to act. The following sections will trace the historical origins of the Kashmir issue, the wars and crises it has sparked, its role in domestic politics, the international interventions it has attracted, and the possibilities—however remote—for a peaceful future.

3.1.2 Historical Background

The historical roots of the Kashmir issue are deeply entangled with the colonial

experience of the Indian subcontinent, the trauma of Partition in 1947, and the competing national projects of India and Pakistan. To understand why Kashmir remains such a contentious issue, it is essential to trace its pre-colonial and colonial history, the circumstances of its accession, the wars that followed, and the international interventions that shaped its trajectory. This history demonstrates how decisions made at moments of political upheaval have left a legacy that continues to haunt South Asia.

1. Kashmir before 1947: A Princely State in Transition

At the time of British rule, the Indian subcontinent was divided into directly governed provinces and indirectly ruled princely states. Jammu and Kashmir fell into the latter category. It was one of the largest princely states, ruled by the Dogra dynasty since the mid-19th century, with Maharaja Hari Singh as its ruler in 1947. The state was unique for its demographic composition: a Muslim-majority population (about 77% according to the 1941 census) ruled by a Hindu monarch. This created an underlying tension that would later feed into larger disputes.

"Jugular Vein": Pakistan's founder, **Muhammad Ali Jinnah**, famously called Kashmir Pakistan's **"jugular vein"** due to its strategic and water importance.

Kashmir's strategic location further heightened its importance. Bordered by China, Afghanistan, and what would become Pakistan, as well as India, it was a geopolitically sensitive region. The British recognized its strategic value, especially as a buffer against Russian advances into Central Asia, but refrained from directly annexing it, preferring indirect rule through the Dogras. By the early 20th century, Kashmiri Muslims had begun mobilizing against Dogra rule, demanding political representation and greater rights. Organizations like the Muslim Conference (later transformed into the National Conference under Sheikh Abdullah) gave voice to these aspirations, setting the stage for political contestation at the time of Partition.

2. Partition of 1947 and Kashmir's Accession

When Britain announced its intention to leave India, the future of over 560 princely states became a pressing question. The Indian Independence Act of 1947 gave them the option to accede to either India or Pakistan, or theoretically to remain independent, though independence was considered impractical. The general principle was that states would join the country to which they were geographically

contiguous and with which they shared demographic and economic ties.

Kashmir, however, presented a complex case. Geographically, it shared borders with both India and the new state of Pakistan. Demographically, it was Muslim-majority, suggesting affinity with Pakistan, but politically, the Maharaja hesitated. Hari Singh initially attempted to remain independent, signing standstill agreements with both India and Pakistan to maintain existing arrangements until a decision was reached. Pakistan quickly agreed to the standstill agreement, while India sought further negotiations.

Support for Self-Determination: Pakistan observes February 5th as "Kashmir Solidarity Day" every year, showing support for the Kashmiri people.

The situation escalated in October 1947 when tribal militias from Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province, allegedly backed by the Pakistani state, invaded Kashmir. The Maharaja, unable to resist the incursion, sought military assistance from India. India agreed to send troops on the condition that Kashmir formally accede to the Indian Union. On 26 October 1947, Hari Singh signed the Instrument of Accession, granting India control over defense, foreign affairs, and communications, while internal autonomy was preserved. Indian troops were airlifted into Kashmir, repelling the invaders and securing Srinagar, but fighting continued.

3. The First Kashmir War and UN Involvement (1947–48)

The tribal invasion and subsequent Indian intervention triggered the first India–Pakistan war over Kashmir. Fighting spread across the state, with both sides making gains and losses. As the conflict escalated, India referred the issue to the United Nations in January 1948, seeking international mediation.

The UN Security Council passed Resolution 47 in April 1948, which called for an immediate ceasefire, the withdrawal of Pakistani tribesmen and troops, and a subsequent plebiscite to determine Kashmir's future. While both India and Pakistan accepted the principle of a plebiscite, disagreement arose over its conditions. India insisted that Pakistan withdraw all its forces before a plebiscite could be held, while Pakistan demanded simultaneous withdrawal and Indian troop reduction. The lack of agreement meant that the plebiscite never took place.

First Kashmir War: Pakistan fought its **first war with India (1947–48)** over Kashmir, leading to the creation of the **Line of Control (LoC)**.

By the time a UN-brokered ceasefire came into effect on 1 January 1949, Kashmir was divided along the Ceasefire Line (later called the Line of Control, or LoC). India retained about two-thirds of the territory, including the populous Kashmir Valley, Jammu, and Ladakh, while Pakistan controlled the remainder, which it termed "Azad Jammu and Kashmir" (AJK) and the Northern Areas (later reorganized as Gilgit-Baltistan). This division became the de facto boundary, though neither side recognized it as permanent.

4. Early International Involvement

In the early years, the Kashmir dispute was firmly embedded in international politics. The UN remained seized of the issue, appointing mediators and commissions to work out terms for a plebiscite, though without success. The United States and Britain generally favored a negotiated settlement and pressed India to fulfill its promise of a plebiscite, while the Soviet Union gradually moved closer to India, shielding it from pressure in the Security Council.

For Pakistan, international involvement was essential, as it lacked the capacity to alter the situation militarily. For India, however, internationalization became increasingly unwelcome. Over time, India argued that the UN's involvement had been overtaken by bilateral agreements and insisted that Kashmir was an internal matter. This divergence over the role of external actors remains a recurring theme in the dispute.

5. The Erosion of Autonomy

Within Indian-administered Kashmir, the period after accession saw political developments that would profoundly affect the conflict. Sheikh Abdullah, the leader of the National Conference, supported accession to India under the promise of autonomy and democratic reforms. Initially installed as the head of the state government, Abdullah's relationship with New Delhi soured as he began advocating greater independence. In 1953, he was dismissed and imprisoned, and the central government increasingly tightened control over Jammu and Kashmir.

Pakistan strongly opposed India's **revocation of Article 370 in 2019**, downgrading diplomatic ties and launching global awareness campaigns.

The state's special status, enshrined in Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, provided a legal framework for autonomy. However, over the decades, successive governments in New Delhi eroded this autonomy by extending central laws and institutions to the state. Many Kashmiris came to feel betrayed, fueling alienation and resentment. For Pakistan, these developments were evidence that India never intended to allow genuine self-determination.

6. Legacy of the Historical Background

The historical background of the Kashmir conflict reveals a number of enduring legacies. First, the ambiguous accession of 1947 and the failure to hold a plebiscite created a dispute with no agreed basis for resolution. Second, the wars and ceasefire of 1947–48 institutionalized the territorial division of Kashmir, setting a precedent for subsequent conflicts. Third, the involvement of international actors highlighted both the potential and the limitations of external mediation in South Asia. Finally, the erosion of autonomy within Indian-administered Kashmir entrenched mistrust and set the stage for future insurgency.

This historical foundation continues to shape the dispute today. For India, the Instrument of Accession remains the legal basis for sovereignty over Kashmir. For Pakistan, the unfulfilled plebiscite represents an injustice that must be corrected. For Kashmiris themselves, the failure to realize political aspirations has produced a legacy of disillusionment and resistance. The next sections will show how this historical inheritance fueled subsequent wars, domestic upheavals, and the embedding of Kashmir into both regional rivalry and international politics.

7. Wars and Conflict Escalations

The Kashmir dispute has repeatedly escalated into violent conflict between India and Pakistan, making it one of the most militarized and dangerous flashpoints in modern international politics. Since 1947, the two countries have fought multiple wars and engaged in limited conflicts, each of which reinforced the centrality of Kashmir in their strategic and political narratives. These confrontations have been shaped not only by territorial claims but also by the larger questions of identity, sovereignty, and ideology. From full-scale wars in the mid-20th century to insurgencies and cross-border strikes in more recent decades, the Kashmir front has remained the primary driver of hostility.

8. The 1965 War and the Kashmir Front

The first major war directly centered on Kashmir erupted in 1965. While the 1947–48 conflict following Partition had already divided the territory into Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir and Pakistani-administered areas, the ceasefire line left both sides dissatisfied. Pakistan, under the leadership of President Ayub Khan, believed India was vulnerable following its defeat in the 1962 Sino-Indian War and sought to exploit Kashmiri discontent. The conflict began with "Operation Gibraltar," a Pakistani attempt to infiltrate armed men into Indian-controlled Kashmir to incite an uprising against Indian authority.

The plan backfired. Instead of sparking rebellion, the infiltration provoked a strong Indian military response, leading to escalation along the international border. The war spread beyond Kashmir into Punjab and Rajasthan, resulting in heavy casualties and destruction. Both sides claimed victory, but the outcome was essentially a stalemate. The war ended after Soviet mediation produced the Tashkent Agreement in January 1966.

For Pakistan, Kashmir is not just a territorial dispute — it is seen as a matter of **national security, ideology, and unfinished Partition agenda**.

For Pakistan, the failure to achieve its objectives in Kashmir was a major blow, leading to internal political unrest. For India, the war reinforced its commitment to defend Kashmir at all costs. The 1965 war thus hardened positions and deepened mistrust, ensuring that Kashmir remained at the forefront of bilateral hostility.

9. The 1971 War and Changing Dynamics

While the 1971 war was primarily fought over East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), its consequences profoundly shaped the Kashmir dispute. The secession of East Pakistan was a traumatic experience for Pakistan, reinforcing its sense of

vulnerability and intensifying its dependence on the military as the guardian of national integrity. The war culminated in the Simla Agreement of 1972, under which India and Pakistan agreed to respect the Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir and resolve disputes bilaterally.

Although the Simla Agreement seemed to provide a framework for peace, it altered the dynamics of the Kashmir issue. By accepting the LoC, Pakistan was seen by India as tacitly recognizing the territorial status quo, while Pakistan continued to emphasize the need for a final settlement. For India, the agreement was a diplomatic victory, as it reduced the scope for third-party involvement. Yet for Pakistan, the loss of Bangladesh heightened the symbolic importance of Kashmir, which became central to its narrative of unfinished Partition. Thus, while the 1971 war was not directly about Kashmir, its aftermath entrenched opposing positions and ensured that Kashmir would remain unresolved.

After losing East Pakistan in 1971, Islamabad renewed its **focus on Kashmir** as central to national identity and foreign policy.

10. The 1989 Insurgency and Its Implications

The late 1980s marked a new and volatile phase in the Kashmir conflict with the eruption of an armed insurgency in Indian-administered Kashmir. Sparked by discontent over political repression, electoral malpractice, and unfulfilled promises of autonomy, the insurgency quickly gained momentum. Pakistan's support for militant groups, training camps, and arms flows further fueled the conflict, transforming it into a violent struggle that has claimed tens of thousands of lives.

The insurgency dramatically altered the nature of the Kashmir issue. Unlike earlier wars, which were interstate conflicts, this was an internal uprising with cross-border dimensions. For India, it became a matter of combating terrorism and defending territorial sovereignty. For Pakistan, it was framed as a legitimate struggle for self-determination. The insurgency internationalized the dispute once more, with global attention drawn to human rights violations, militant violence, and the heavy militarization of the valley. The 1989 uprising also intensified the alienation of Kashmiri civilians, many of whom felt caught between Indian security forces and militant groups. This period solidified the image of Kashmir as both a security challenge and a humanitarian crisis.

11. The 1999 Kargil Conflict

The Kargil War of 1999 marked the most serious direct military confrontation between India and Pakistan after their nuclear tests of 1998. Pakistani forces and Kashmiri militants infiltrated Indian positions in the Kargil sector of Jammu and Kashmir, aiming to cut off Indian supply lines and internationalize the dispute. India responded with massive military operations to regain the occupied heights.

The conflict, which lasted from May to July 1999, was fought in treacherous high-altitude conditions and caused heavy casualties on both sides. India eventually regained control of most of the lost territory, while Pakistan faced significant diplomatic isolation. The United States and other international actors pressured Pakistan to withdraw, underscoring the dangers of a nuclearized conflict. The Kargil War further strained relations, ending hopes raised by the Lahore Declaration earlier that year. For India, Kargil demonstrated Pakistan's duplicity and reinforced its stance against dialogue under the shadow of terrorism. For Pakistan, the conflict reaffirmed Kashmir as a priority despite international criticism. Kargil thus highlighted how quickly the dispute could spiral into a wider war, even in the nuclear age.

12. The 2016 Uri Attack, 2019 Pulwama-Balakot Strikes, and Post-370 Developments

In recent years, the Kashmir issue has continued to generate violent escalations, often triggered by high-profile militant attacks. In September 2016, four militants attacked an Indian Army base in Uri, killing 19 soldiers. India responded with what it termed "surgical strikes" across the Line of Control, claiming to have destroyed militant launch pads. While Pakistan denied the strikes, the episode marked a shift in India's willingness to use overt military action in response to cross-border terrorism.

The situation escalated further in February 2019, when a suicide bombing in Pulwama killed more than 40 Indian paramilitary personnel. The attack, claimed by the Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed group, provoked Indian airstrikes in Balakot, deep inside Pakistani territory. Pakistan retaliated with its own strikes, and the two sides engaged in aerial dogfights, raising fears of a wider conflict. The Pulwama-Balakot crisis underscored the volatility of the Kashmir dispute in the nuclear era, with both sides demonstrating a readiness to escalate.

In August 2019, the Indian government revoked Article 370 of its Constitution, stripping Jammu and Kashmir of its special status and reorganizing it into two Union Territories. This move was celebrated in India as an assertion of sovereignty but condemned by Pakistan as a violation of international law and the rights of Kashmiris. The abrogation of Article 370 transformed the nature of the dispute, shifting it from questions of autonomy to outright integration. Pakistan downgraded diplomatic ties, suspended trade, and intensified international lobbying, while India increased its military presence and restricted communication in the region. The post-370 environment has made the dispute even more contentious, with both domestic and international implications.

On **August 5, 2019**, India revoked **Article 370** and **35A**, removing Jammu & Kashmir's special autonomous status

13. Domestic Politics and Kashmir

The Kashmir dispute is not only a matter of international concern but also deeply rooted in the domestic politics of both India and Pakistan. Far from being a marginal territorial issue, Kashmir has become intertwined with questions of sovereignty, national identity, ideology, and political legitimacy in both states. Domestic political considerations often drive the hardening of positions, making compromise extremely difficult. At the same time, Kashmiri voices and aspirations remain crucial yet frequently marginalized in the political discourse. Examining how India and Pakistan perceive Kashmir internally provides insight into why the conflict persists despite repeated attempts at negotiation.

14. How India Views Kashmir: Sovereignty and Nationalism

For India, Kashmir represents an essential test of its secular and federal identity. Since independence, India has defined itself as a democratic republic in which diverse religions, languages, and cultures coexist under a constitutional framework. The accession of Jammu and Kashmir in 1947, a Muslim-majority region choosing to join India, has been celebrated in New Delhi as a validation of this vision. Thus, Kashmir is not simply a territory but a symbolic cornerstone of India's secular nationalism.

This framing explains why successive Indian governments, regardless of political orientation, have resisted any suggestion of compromise on Kashmir's territorial status. The defense of Kashmir is equated with the defense of India's unity and sovereignty. Political leaders frequently invoke Kashmir in domestic campaigns to reinforce nationalist credentials. For instance, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has long championed the abrogation of Article 370, portraying it as necessary for the

complete integration of Kashmir into the Indian Union. The 2019 revocation of Kashmir's special status was presented domestically as a decisive act of sovereignty and a fulfillment of nationalist promises.

At the same time, India's internal narrative frames dissent in Kashmir primarily through the lens of security. Separatism and militancy are often portrayed not as expressions of political discontent but as externally driven terrorism backed by Pakistan. This approach legitimizes a strong security presence and frequent restrictions on civil liberties in the region. While such policies consolidate political support among the wider Indian electorate, they contribute to alienation among Kashmiri civilians, creating a cycle of resistance and repression that sustains the conflict.

15. How Pakistan Views Kashmir: The Unfinished Agenda of Partition

For Pakistan, Kashmir embodies the ideological rationale of its very creation. Pakistan was established as a homeland for Muslims of South Asia under the two-nation theory, and the accession of a Muslim-majority state to India has been regarded as a betrayal of this principle. As a result, Kashmir is framed domestically as the "unfinished agenda of Partition."

Kashmir plays a central role in Pakistan's national identity, political rhetoric, and foreign policy. Leaders across the political spectrum—from civilian governments to military regimes—have invoked the cause of Kashmiri self-determination to consolidate legitimacy. The annual observance of "Kashmir Solidarity Day," speeches at domestic rallies, and parliamentary resolutions all reinforce the narrative that Pakistan's destiny is tied to the fate of Kashmir.



Domestically, the Kashmir issue has also served as a tool for unifying Pakistan's diverse and sometimes divided population. By presenting Kashmir as a sacred cause, governments and military institutions have sought to rally public opinion, justify security expenditures, and counter criticism of internal governance. However, this emphasis has often come at the expense of economic development and democratization, as resources are diverted toward maintaining a robust defense posture.

The Pakistani state's narrative also stresses the right of Kashmiris to self-determination, as outlined in United Nations resolutions. Unlike India's

sovereignty-driven discourse, Pakistan frames the issue as a matter of justice and international law. Yet, critics argue that Pakistan's support for militant groups in the region has undermined its claims and fueled international skepticism. Nevertheless, within domestic politics, Kashmir remains a powerful and emotionally charged issue, making concessions politically costly.

16. Role of Religion, Ideology, and National Identity

Religion and ideology are central to the domestic political constructions of Kashmir in both countries. For India, retaining Kashmir underscores its claim of being a secular, inclusive state, while for Pakistan, Kashmir's Muslim majority aligns with its Islamic identity. The dispute, therefore, transcends territorial calculations and taps into existential questions about national identity.

In India, Hindu nationalist forces have increasingly framed Kashmir in terms of religious symbolism. For right-wing groups, the integration of Kashmir is not only about sovereignty but also about asserting Hindu dominance within the political framework. This has intensified domestic polarization, as debates over autonomy and rights for Kashmiris are cast against the backdrop of a broader struggle over India's secular character.

In Pakistan, Kashmir resonates with the Islamic identity that underpins the state. Political and religious leaders invoke religious solidarity with Kashmiri Muslims, often presenting the conflict as a jihad or sacred duty. This ideological framing reinforces public support for the cause but also limits political flexibility. Any compromise on Kashmir risks being perceived as betrayal of Pakistan's foundational principles.

17. Kashmiri People's Political Aspirations

Lost amid these competing state narratives are the voices and aspirations of the Kashmiri people themselves. Within Kashmir, political opinions are far from monolithic. Some groups advocate for full independence, others favor accession to Pakistan, and still others demand genuine autonomy within the Indian Union. However, the political space for expressing these aspirations has often been restricted by both India and Pakistan.

In Indian-administered Kashmir, electoral politics have been undermined by allegations of rigging and heavy militarization. Separatist groups, including the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, have articulated demands for self-determination, while mainstream parties such as the National Conference and the Peoples Democratic Party have historically sought greater autonomy within India. The abrogation of Article 370 in 2019, however, has significantly altered the landscape, leaving many Kashmiris disillusioned about the prospects for meaningful political participation.

In Pakistan-administered Kashmir, institutions exist under the banner of autonomy, but in practice, Islamabad maintains significant influence over decision-making. While pro-Pakistan sentiment is strong among sections of the population, calls for genuine independence have also been voiced, though these are often suppressed.

For ordinary Kashmiris, the ongoing conflict has meant decades of violence, displacement, and economic hardship. The militarization of daily life, restrictions on movement, and cycles of insurgency and repression have fostered a pervasive sense of disenfranchisement. While India and Pakistan frame Kashmir in terms of sovereignty and ideology, for many Kashmiris, the struggle is fundamentally about dignity, rights, and the ability to shape their own future.

3.1.3 International Dimensions of the Kashmir Conflict

The Kashmir conflict has never remained a purely bilateral dispute between India and Pakistan. Since its very inception in 1947, the issue has carried significant international dimensions, drawing in the United Nations, global and regional powers, and multilateral organizations. The evolution of these external influences has shaped not only the trajectory of the conflict but also the strategies adopted by both India and Pakistan in advancing their claims. Understanding the international dimensions is thus central to grasping the broader geopolitical stakes of the Kashmir issue.

a. The Role of the United Nations

The earliest international intervention came through the United Nations. Following the first India–Pakistan war in 1947–48, the matter was referred to the UN Security Council (UNSC). The Council passed a series of resolutions, most notably Resolution 47 of April 1948, which called for a ceasefire, withdrawal of Pakistani forces, reduction of Indian troops, and the holding of a plebiscite under UN auspices to determine the will of the Kashmiri people. While the ceasefire took hold, the subsequent steps of demilitarization and plebiscite never materialized, largely because of mutual distrust and disputes over sequencing.

Pakistan has consistently demanded implementation of **UN Security Council resolutions (1948–49)** that called for a **plebiscite** in Kashmir.

In the following decades, the UN retained Kashmir on its agenda, but its effectiveness dwindled. India, after signing the Simla Agreement with Pakistan in 1972, insisted that Kashmir was now a bilateral matter, reducing the UN's practical role to symbolic references. While the UN Military Observer Group in India and

Pakistan (UNMOGIP) still operates, its role is largely ceremonial. Over time, as Cold War alignments and major power interests shifted, the UN's influence on Kashmir diminished substantially, leaving the conflict unresolved but internationally acknowledged.

b. Major Power Politics: U.S., USSR/Russia, and China

Great power politics have been pivotal in shaping the Kashmir dispute. During the Cold War, the United States initially leaned toward Pakistan, which had joined Western security alliances such as SEATO and CENTO. This relationship translated into diplomatic and military support, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s. However, Washington also sought to maintain ties with India, recognizing its size and leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement. The U.S. role during the 1965 war was cautious, calling for restraint but imposing arms embargoes that disproportionately affected Pakistan. After the 1971 war and the creation of Bangladesh, U.S. policy tilted toward India, especially as Pakistan drew closer to China.

The Soviet Union, meanwhile, consistently supported India. Moscow exercised its veto power at the UNSC to block resolutions critical of India's stance on Kashmir, most notably during the 1950s and 1960s. The Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation (1971) further consolidated this support, ensuring that India's position was shielded from international pressure. After the Cold War, Russia continued this tradition, backing India in multilateral forums and opposing external mediation on Kashmir.

China emerged as a crucial player from the 1960s onward. After its border war with India in 1962, Beijing developed close ties with Pakistan, which included military cooperation and strategic alignment. China's control of Aksai Chin, claimed by India, and its role in the construction of the Karakoram Highway through Gilgit-Baltistan further linked it to the Kashmir issue. In the contemporary era, China's strong strategic partnership with Pakistan under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has reinforced its opposition to India's unilateral actions in Jammu and Kashmir, particularly after the revocation of Article 370 in 2019. Thus, major power politics have consistently influenced the contours of the Kashmir dispute, with shifting alliances shaping the balance of diplomatic support.

c. OIC and Muslim World Perspectives

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has been among the most vocal multilateral forums advocating for the rights of Kashmiris. Since the 1990s, OIC summits and resolutions have consistently condemned human rights abuses in Indian-administered Kashmir and reiterated support for self-determination. The OIC Contact Group on Kashmir was established in 1994, reflecting the organization's recognition of the issue as central to Muslim solidarity.

However, the practical impact of the OIC's support has been limited. Many of its influential members, particularly Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and other Gulf states, have deepened their economic and strategic ties with India, diluting their willingness to challenge New Delhi beyond rhetorical statements. This divergence has often frustrated Pakistan, which expected more concrete diplomatic or economic pressure on India from fellow Muslim countries. Thus, while the OIC provides Pakistan with a moral platform, its influence on the ground remains constrained.

3.1.4 Regional Dynamics: Afghanistan and South Asia

The broader regional environment of South Asia has deeply affected Kashmir. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the subsequent Afghan jihad had profound spillover effects. The proliferation of militant groups, arms, and radical ideologies across the region blurred the lines between the Afghan and Kashmiri struggles. India has consistently accused Pakistan of channeling militant infrastructure from Afghanistan into Kashmir during the late 1980s and 1990s, a claim Pakistan denies but which reshaped global perceptions of the insurgency.

At the regional institutional level, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has failed to address Kashmir due to persistent India–Pakistan hostility. Every attempt at fostering regional cooperation has been undermined by the dispute, making Kashmir not only a bilateral issue but also a regional obstacle to integration and collective development.

a. Post-9/11 Global War on Terror and Kashmir

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, marked a decisive turning point in how the international community perceived Kashmir. The global discourse on militancy shifted sharply toward counterterrorism, and Kashmiri militant groups were increasingly framed within this lens. Pakistan, under U.S. pressure, banned several organizations operating in Kashmir, including Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, though concerns about their re-emergence persisted.

This securitization of the issue weakened international sympathy for the Kashmiri struggle. Where it was once seen as a movement for self-determination, it increasingly came to be associated with terrorism in global forums. India capitalized on this shift, presenting itself as a victim of cross-border terrorism and securing broader international support for its counterinsurgency measures. For Pakistan, this meant a narrowing of diplomatic space, as its advocacy for Kashmiri rights was frequently overshadowed by allegations of supporting militancy.

b. Revocation of Article 370 (2019) and International Reactions

India's unilateral decision in August 2019 to revoke Article 370 and Article 35A, thereby ending Jammu and Kashmir's special constitutional status, once again internationalized the dispute. Pakistan launched an extensive diplomatic campaign, approaching the UN Security Council, OIC, and friendly states to denounce the move. China backed Pakistan's call for UNSC deliberations, though the outcome was limited to closed-door discussions without binding resolutions.

> Despite Pakistan's efforts, India maintained its control, while Pakistan kept the **Kashmir issue alive diplomatically** on global forums.

The international reactions were mixed. While some countries expressed concern over human rights violations and restrictions on communication in Kashmir, most major powers avoided direct criticism of India, framing the matter as an "internal issue." The United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union emphasized restraint and human rights but stopped short of endorsing Pakistan's position. At the same time, reports from Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) documented serious abuses, keeping the issue alive in global civil society even if governments refrained from strong diplomatic action.

c. Geopolitical Stakes in the 21st Century

In the contemporary era, Kashmir remains an unresolved flashpoint with significant geopolitical stakes. India's rising global profile as an economic and strategic power has constrained international criticism, particularly from Western states eager to cultivate New Delhi as a counterweight to China. Pakistan, by contrast, leverages its geographic location, role in Afghanistan, and strategic partnership with China to maintain relevance. The Kashmir dispute now intersects with the larger triangular competition between India, China, and Pakistan, making it not only a bilateral dispute but also a regional security dilemma with nuclear overtones.

The risk of escalation, as seen in the 2019 Pulwama–Balakot crisis, keeps the conflict on the radar of global powers who fear the consequences of miscalculation between two nuclear-armed neighbors. Thus, while international mediation remains minimal, global concern persists, ensuring that Kashmir continues to be a matter of international significance despite India's insistence on its internal character.

3.1.5 Human Rights and Human Security in Kashmir

The Kashmir conflict is not only a matter of territorial dispute between India and Pakistan but also one of the gravest human rights and human security crises in

South Asia. For decades, the civilian population of Jammu and Kashmir has borne the brunt of militarization, insurgency, counterinsurgency, and political repression. The struggle for control has translated into a prolonged state of insecurity where ordinary lives are continuously shaped by violence, surveillance, and deprivation. Examining this dimension reveals that the conflict is more than a geopolitical contest; it is also a humanitarian tragedy that affects millions of people on a daily basis.

1. Militarization and Civilian Life

Since the outbreak of insurgency in 1989, Jammu and Kashmir has become one of the most militarized zones in the world. Estimates suggest that several hundred thousand Indian troops are stationed in the region, resulting in an environment of pervasive militarization. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) grants sweeping powers to the military, including the authority to arrest without warrant and to use lethal force. For many Kashmiris, this has translated into a climate of fear and impunity, where encounters, cordon-and-search operations, and curfews disrupt normal life.

The omnipresence of armed personnel in streets, schools, and public places has deeply impacted everyday routines, social interactions, and the psychological well-being of civilians. For the younger generation in particular, growing up under militarized conditions has fostered a sense of alienation and mistrust toward state institutions.

2. Human Rights Violations

Reports from international human rights organizations and local groups have consistently documented widespread abuses in the region. These include extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, custodial torture, sexual violence, and arbitrary detentions. Mass graves discovered in various districts have fueled demands for accountability, but investigations rarely proceed due to the shield of legal immunity enjoyed by security forces.

One of the most controversial practices has been the use of pellet-firing shotguns for crowd control since 2010. Marketed as “non-lethal,” these weapons have caused thousands of injuries, including permanent blindness, particularly among young protesters. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have condemned their use as disproportionate and inhumane. For many Kashmiris, these practices symbolize not only the loss of physical security but also the denial of dignity and justice.

3. Human Security and Daily Insecurities

Beyond the visible violence, the conflict undermines multiple dimensions of human security. Frequent curfews, shutdowns, and internet blackouts paralyze economic activity, education, and healthcare access. Businesses struggle to function under the unpredictability of restrictions, contributing to chronic unemployment and poverty. Students lose months of schooling during prolonged shutdowns, further deepening generational inequalities.

Healthcare access is another casualty. During lockdowns, ambulances are often delayed or denied passage, while hospitals face shortages of essential medicines. Mental health challenges have also escalated, with high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression reported among the population. The absence of reliable mental health infrastructure compounds the crisis, leaving trauma largely unaddressed.



4. Gendered Dimensions of the Conflict

Women in Kashmir experience the conflict in ways that are both direct and indirect. Instances of sexual violence by security personnel, though underreported due to stigma and fear, remain a disturbing reality. The most infamous cases, such as the Kunan-Poshpora incident of 1991, continue to haunt collective memory, highlighting the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war.

In addition, women often shoulder the burden of households disrupted by the disappearance, detention, or death of male family members. The “half-widows” of Kashmir—women whose husbands went missing but whose deaths are unconfirmed—face immense social, legal, and economic hardships. The conflict has thus feminized poverty and insecurity, exposing women to compounded vulnerabilities.

5. Youth and Radicalization

The Kashmiri youth have been at the forefront of both protest movements and militancy. Decades of political repression, lack of opportunities, and exposure to violence have fostered disillusionment with both local governance and the Indian state. Stone-pelting protests, participation in street demonstrations, and even

recruitment into armed groups are expressions of frustration against systemic denial of political voice.

Social media has become a new battleground for radicalization, mobilization, and propaganda. The state frequently responds with communication blackouts, but these measures only deepen the sense of isolation. For many young Kashmiris, the absence of constructive political dialogue leaves militancy and resistance as perceived avenues of expression, perpetuating cycles of violence.

6. Post-2019 Human Rights Situation

The revocation of Article 370 in August 2019 marked a dramatic escalation in human rights concerns. The region was placed under a security lockdown with thousands of additional troops deployed, political leaders detained, and communications cut off for months. Internet restrictions, at times limited to 2G speeds, crippled education, healthcare, and business operations. Families were unable to communicate, students could not access online resources, and journalists found it nearly impossible to report freely.

International human rights bodies, including the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, expressed alarm over arbitrary detentions, restrictions on press freedom, and denial of basic liberties. Yet India maintained that these measures were necessary to prevent unrest and integrate the region more fully. The result has been a widening gulf between official narratives and the lived experiences of Kashmiris.

7. Humanitarian and Civil Society Responses

Despite the challenging environment, local civil society organizations, journalists, and activists continue to document abuses and provide humanitarian support. These groups play a crucial role in giving voice to the voiceless, though they often face harassment, surveillance, and criminal charges. International NGOs also attempt to highlight the crisis, but their access to the region is tightly controlled by the Indian state.

Diaspora communities have amplified the issue abroad through lobbying, protests, and awareness campaigns. While these efforts keep Kashmir on the global humanitarian agenda, their tangible impact on policy remains limited due to geopolitical constraints.

8. Human Rights vs. National Security Narratives

At the heart of the human rights debate in Kashmir is the clash between national security and human security. India frames its policies as necessary to combat cross-border terrorism and maintain sovereignty. Pakistan emphasizes the denial of Kashmiri self-determination and accuses India of systemic repression. In between,

ordinary Kashmiris are caught in a cycle where their dignity, freedoms, and opportunities are subordinated to competing nationalist projects.

This tension has made accountability elusive. Investigations into abuses rarely advance, and demands for truth and reconciliation are sidelined in favor of securitized approaches. The result is a protracted humanitarian crisis that remains unresolved even as the conflict enters its eighth decade.

3.1.6 Prospects for Peace and Conflict Resolution

The Kashmir conflict has endured for over seven decades, resisting various diplomatic initiatives, peace processes, and international appeals. Its persistence stems from a combination of hardened national positions, regional geopolitics, and deep-seated mistrust. Yet, despite repeated breakdowns, the quest for peace has remained a central part of the discourse, both within South Asia and in global forums. Exploring the prospects for peace requires analyzing past attempts at resolution, the current obstacles that prevent progress, and potential pathways toward a sustainable settlement.

1. Historical Attempts at Mediation and Settlement

Since 1947, several mediation and negotiation efforts have been undertaken with mixed results. The UN-sponsored resolutions of the late 1940s and early 1950s set the stage for a plebiscite, but disagreements over demilitarization and sequencing doomed the initiative. The Tashkent Agreement (1966), mediated by the Soviet Union after the 1965 war, restored peace but left Kashmir unresolved.



The Simla Agreement of 1972, following the Bangladesh war, was a critical milestone, as India and Pakistan agreed to resolve issues bilaterally. While this framework helped prevent immediate escalation, it also marginalized international mediation. Over time, the Simla framework became a point of contention: India cited it to reject external involvement, while Pakistan argued that bilateral talks had yielded little progress.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, more substantive efforts emerged. The Lahore Declaration (1999) reflected optimism, but the Kargil War the same year quickly undermined trust. Later, the backchannel talks between 2004 and 2007—during the Musharraf-Manmohan Singh era—came closest to producing a potential

framework, often referred to as the "four-point formula." This included demilitarization of certain areas, maximum autonomy for Kashmiris, joint management by India and Pakistan, and softening of borders to allow free movement. Although never formally finalized, these talks remain a benchmark for what pragmatic compromise might look like.

2. Obstacles to Peace

Despite these efforts, several obstacles have consistently blocked meaningful progress.

- Sovereignty and Nationalism: For India, Kashmir is integral to its sovereignty and nationhood, and any concession is perceived as a threat to territorial integrity. For Pakistan, Kashmir embodies the unfinished agenda of Partition and the principle of Muslim self-determination. These national narratives leave little room for compromise.
- Mistrust and Betrayals: Episodes such as Kargil (1999) and Mumbai attacks (2008) eroded trust between leaderships, undermining dialogue. Each side questions the other's sincerity, making sustained engagement fragile.
- Militancy and Violence: Cross-border militancy and domestic insurgency fuel India's security concerns, while Pakistan denies direct involvement but supports Kashmiri groups politically. This dynamic perpetuates a cycle of violence and recrimination.
- Domestic Politics: Political leaders in both countries face domestic constituencies that penalize compromise. In India, strong nationalist sentiment, particularly under the BJP, has hardened positions. In Pakistan, the military's influence over Kashmir policy constrains civilian flexibility.
- International Environment: While the global community expresses concern, major powers prioritize strategic partnerships with India, limiting their willingness to exert pressure. Pakistan's declining leverage, particularly post-9/11, has further weakened prospects for external mediation.

3. The Role of Kashmiri Voices

One of the greatest shortcomings of past peace processes has been the marginalization of Kashmiri voices themselves. Negotiations have largely occurred between India and Pakistan, treating Kashmir as an object of dispute rather than a community of people with agency. Kashmiri political parties, civil society groups, and separatist movements have often been excluded from official dialogues.

For any durable peace, the inclusion of Kashmiri perspectives is indispensable. Their aspirations are diverse—ranging from independence to greater autonomy to integration with one of the two states—but their absence from negotiations perpetuates alienation. Empowering local voices would not only enhance

legitimacy but also ensure that peace efforts address the lived realities of those most affected.

4. Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs)

Despite setbacks, several confidence-building measures have shown potential. These include ceasefire agreements along the Line of Control (LoC), which reduce civilian casualties and foster an environment conducive to dialogue. Cross-LoC trade and bus services, introduced in the 2000s, built connections between divided families and communities. People-to-people exchanges, sports diplomacy, and cultural interactions have also provided openings for de-escalation.

While these CBMs often collapse during periods of heightened tension, they illustrate that incremental trust-building is possible. Expanding such measures, particularly those that improve the daily lives of Kashmiris—such as easing restrictions on trade, travel, and communication—could lay the groundwork for broader dialogue.

5. The 2019 Turning Point and Its Impact on Peace Prospects

The revocation of Article 370 in August 2019 represents a major turning point. India's unilateral move to strip Jammu and Kashmir of its special status has hardened positions and significantly narrowed the space for negotiation. Pakistan has rejected any talks until Article 370 is restored, while India has categorically refused to reverse its decision or engage on Kashmir beyond counterterrorism discussions.

This stalemate has pushed the peace process into an unprecedented deadlock. International concern remains muted, with most countries viewing the matter through the lens of human rights rather than territorial dispute. For many analysts, the post-2019 environment represents one of the bleakest moments for peace prospects in decades.

6. Potential Pathways to Resolution

Despite these challenges, certain pathways remain conceivable, though each is fraught with difficulty.

- Revival of Backchannel Talks: Quiet diplomacy, shielded from political pressures, may allow both sides to explore compromises without public backlash. The 2004–07 model demonstrates that pragmatic solutions are possible if trust can be rebuilt.
- Incremental Autonomy: While independence remains unlikely, expanding local autonomy within Indian-administered Kashmir—particularly restoring statehood and political participation—could ease grievances.

- Cross-Border Integration: Easing restrictions on movement and trade across the LoC could transform the border from a dividing line into a bridge, reducing hostility.
- International Facilitation: Although India resists mediation, facilitation by neutral states or organizations could provide channels for dialogue, even if discreet.
- Humanitarian Approaches: Prioritizing human rights, economic development, and disaster cooperation can depoliticize some aspects of the conflict and improve the human security situation, creating a foundation for peace.

7. The Future of Peace in a Nuclear South Asia

The stakes of peace in Kashmir are particularly high given the nuclear capabilities of both India and Pakistan. The 2019 Pulwama–Balakot crisis illustrated how quickly localized violence can escalate into a near-war scenario. The possibility of miscalculation or escalation keeps global attention alive, even if active mediation remains absent.

For South Asia, the cost of continued hostility is immense: stunted regional integration, militarized budgets at the expense of development, and recurrent crises that destabilize broader geopolitics. Conversely, even modest steps toward peace could unlock transformative benefits, from trade and connectivity to improved human development.

3.1.7 Conclusion and Final Analysis

The Kashmir conflict stands as one of the world's longest-running disputes, its persistence reflecting the deep entanglement of history, identity, sovereignty, and geopolitics. What began as an unresolved question of accession in 1947 has evolved into a multidimensional crisis that encompasses wars, insurgency, terrorism, human rights abuses, and international diplomacy. In drawing this study to a close, it is necessary to synthesize the historical trajectory, the dynamics of domestic and international politics, and the lived realities of the Kashmiri people to assess both the causes of protraction and the prospects for resolution.

Historical Continuities and Change

From the outset, Kashmir became a victim of Partition's unfinished business. The choice of accession, contested between India and Pakistan, set the stage for the first war of 1947–48 and the subsequent UN resolutions. Over time, the conflict passed through different phases: conventional wars in 1965 and 1971, insurgency from 1989 onward, and localized escalations such as Kargil (1999) and Pulwama–Balakot (2019). These episodes demonstrate both continuity and change: continuity

in the intractability of positions, but change in the modalities of conflict, shifting from interstate wars to insurgencies and counterinsurgency.

What remains constant is the centrality of Kashmir to the national narratives of both India and Pakistan. For India, Kashmir is a symbol of secularism and sovereignty; for Pakistan, it is the embodiment of self-determination for Muslims left behind in 1947. This clash of ideologies has entrenched irreconcilable claims, leaving little room for compromise.

Domestic Politics and the Entrenchment of the Conflict

Domestic politics within both India and Pakistan have consistently reinforced rather than softened these rigid positions. In India, electoral politics often instrumentalize Kashmir to project strength and nationalism, as evidenced by the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019 under the BJP government. In Pakistan, Kashmir has historically been a central rallying cry for both civilian leaders and the military establishment, often used to justify foreign policy stances and defense expenditures.

This domestic entrenchment makes policy flexibility costly. Any leader who signals willingness to compromise risks being portrayed as betraying the national cause. Thus, while dialogue may be attempted at the leadership level, public opinion—shaped by decades of nationalist rhetoric—creates structural barriers to peace.

Human Rights and Human Security as the Central Crisis

Amid high politics, the greatest tragedy lies in the human dimension. The Kashmir conflict has systematically undermined human rights and human security. Militarization, arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances, restrictions on media, and economic dislocations have become daily realities for millions of Kashmiris. The humanitarian costs—psychological trauma, lost educational opportunities, gendered insecurities, and stunted economic potential—extend far beyond immediate violence.

This dimension underscores why the conflict cannot be understood merely as a bilateral territorial dispute. It is, at its core, a human security crisis where the dignity, rights, and future of an entire population remain hostage to unresolved geopolitics. Unless the human dimension is centered in any resolution, even political or diplomatic settlements risk being hollow.

International Dimensions and Their Limits

The international community has played an important but limited role. The UN laid down the early framework but has since receded into the background, constrained by India's insistence on bilateralism. Major powers have treated the issue through the lens of broader strategic interests—Pakistan benefiting from U.S. alignment

during the Cold War and China's partnership more recently, while India has secured long-standing support from Russia and, increasingly, the West.

The OIC and Muslim world have consistently expressed solidarity with Kashmiris, yet their actions have rarely gone beyond rhetoric due to economic and strategic ties with India. Post-9/11, the global war on terror further eroded international sympathy for Kashmiri militancy, with the struggle reframed as terrorism rather than self-determination.

The mixed international responses to India's 2019 constitutional changes illustrate the limits of external influence. While human rights concerns were raised, major powers largely deferred to India's narrative of sovereignty, underscoring the asymmetry of power in global diplomacy.

The Deadlock of 2019 and Beyond

The abrogation of Article 370 represents a watershed moment. By revoking Jammu and Kashmir's autonomy, India unilaterally altered the constitutional and political status of the region. Pakistan's strong opposition, including the downgrading of diplomatic ties, has not reversed the decision. For India, the move is presented as an internal matter; for Pakistan, it marks the final betrayal of Kashmiri rights.

Pakistani diaspora staged large-scale protests in London, New York, and Washington, bringing Kashmir back into international spotlight.

This moment has closed many avenues for dialogue, with Pakistan refusing talks under the new framework and India insisting on its irreversibility. For Kashmiris, the post-2019 years have meant heightened militarization, prolonged communication blackouts, and diminished political space. The deadlock thus deepens alienation and hardens positions, pushing peace further out of reach.

Prospects for Peace

Despite bleak realities, the possibility of peace cannot be dismissed. Past experiences—such as the Musharraf-Manmohan Singh backchannel talks—demonstrate that pragmatic compromises are possible if political will converges. Incremental measures, including ceasefires, cross-LoC exchanges, and restoration of political space, could serve as building blocks.

However, genuine resolution will require several shifts:

- Acknowledgment of the human security crisis at the core of the conflict.
- Inclusion of Kashmiri voices in any dialogue.
- De-escalation of nationalist rhetoric to allow room for compromise.
- External facilitation, if not formal mediation, to bridge gaps in trust.
- Absent these shifts, peace will remain elusive, and the conflict will persist as a recurring flashpoint with nuclear overtones.

Final Analysis

The Kashmir conflict is simultaneously local, national, regional, and global. Locally, it is about the rights and aspirations of Kashmiris. Nationally, it is about the competing visions of India and Pakistan. Regionally, it destabilizes South Asia and obstructs integration. Globally, it represents a nuclear flashpoint that unsettles international security.

The resilience of the conflict lies in this multi-layered character, where no single dimension can be disentangled from the others. Attempts at resolution have often failed because they privileged state sovereignty over human security, or geopolitics over local agency.

In the final analysis, any sustainable solution must bridge these divides: addressing sovereignty concerns while ensuring self-determination, balancing national security with human rights, and situating the dispute within broader regional cooperation rather than zero-sum rivalry. Such a solution remains distant, but its pursuit is necessary—not only for India and Pakistan but for the millions of Kashmiris whose lives remain suspended between conflict and uncertainty.

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Unit 4

CHINA, INDIA, PAKISTAN, REGIONAL PLAYERS

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INTRODUCTION

The triangular relationship between China, India, and Pakistan is one of the most decisive factors shaping South Asia's geopolitics. Historical rivalries, unresolved border disputes, and competing strategic interests have created both cooperation and confrontation among these three states. India and China, as rising global powers, often clash over territorial claims and regional influence, while Pakistan's close partnership with China—exemplified by projects like the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—is seen as a counterbalance to India's dominance. The United States' Indo-Pacific strategy, China's Belt and Road Initiative, and India's growing ties with the West further complicate this triangle, giving it global significance. This unit examines how the India–China–Pakistan dynamic has influenced regional security, economic initiatives, and strategic alignments, shaping the future of South Asia.

OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, the readers will be able to:

- To understand the historical roots and evolution of the India–China–Pakistan triangular relationship.
- To analyze how strategic partnerships and rivalries affect regional stability and security.
- To evaluate the implications of global power competition for South Asia through the lens of this triangular dynamic.

INTRODUCTION

The triangular relationship between China, India, and Pakistan lies at the heart of South Asia's security dynamics. Each of these three states carries historical grievances, strategic ambitions, and overlapping spheres of influence that have shaped not only regional stability but also global geopolitics. To understand this triangular rivalry, one must first appreciate South Asia's unique position in world politics. It is home to nearly two billion people, two nuclear-armed rivals, and a rapidly growing economy in the form of India. At the same time, it is a region fraught with unresolved border disputes, fragile domestic politics, and external great-power interventions.

The origins of this triangular relationship are rooted in both colonial legacies and Cold War alignments. The partition of British India in 1947 gave birth to Pakistan, immediately setting the stage for competition with India. The unresolved question of Kashmir intensified the rivalry, making Pakistan seek partners that could offset India's conventional superiority. China emerged as a natural ally in this regard, particularly after the Sino-Indian war of 1962, which left New Delhi militarily weakened and strategically humiliated. Pakistan's early boundary agreement with China in 1963 further cemented this alignment, drawing Beijing and Islamabad into a partnership that has since grown in both scope and depth.

India, on the other hand, views both Pakistan and China as challenges to its sovereignty and regional dominance. Its primary security dilemma is that of a "two-front threat"—the possibility of simultaneous conflict with both adversaries along its western and northern borders. This has forced India to divide its military resources and pursue external partnerships, most notably with the United States and other Indo-Pacific powers, in order to balance against China's rise.

The Himalayan Triangle: The borders of China, India, and Pakistan converge in the Himalayas, making this region one of the world's most contested and militarized high-altitude zones.

China's strategic interest in this triangle is guided by a broader geopolitical calculus. Its ambitions under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), its rivalry with the United States, and its concerns about stability in Xinjiang all intersect with South Asia. Through its partnership with Pakistan and its competition with India, Beijing positions itself as a decisive regional actor capable of shaping outcomes far beyond the subcontinent.

The triangular dynamics between these three players have global implications. The nuclearization of South Asia, the rise of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic theatre, and the growing interdependence of global trade routes all make this rivalry more than a regional issue. Any escalation—whether in Kashmir, at the Line of Actual Control (LAC), or through proxy conflicts—has the potential to draw in external powers and destabilize international security.

This chapter explores the triangular relationship in detail. It begins by analyzing the India–China conflict, tracing its historical roots, contemporary flashpoints, and strategic implications. It then turns to the China–Pakistan partnership, a cornerstone of Beijing's South Asia policy and Islamabad's survival strategy. Finally, it assesses the triangular interplay, highlighting how this dynamic affects regional security, nuclear deterrence, and great-power politics. By unpacking these interlinked relationships, the chapter aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how South Asia's future will be shaped by the evolving roles of China, India, and Pakistan.

4.1 India-China Conflict

4.1.1 Historical Roots of the Rivalry

The India–China conflict is one of the most enduring rivalries in Asia, rooted not only in territorial disputes but also in clashing national identities and visions of regional leadership. The seeds of mistrust were sown in the colonial era, when the British drew ambiguous frontiers in the Himalayas. India inherited these unsettled boundaries at independence in 1947, while China, after its communist revolution in 1949, began asserting sovereignty over Tibet, a region historically functioning as a buffer between the two civilizations.

The McMahon Line, drawn in 1914 as part of the Simla Agreement between British India and Tibet, became a major bone of contention. India recognizes the McMahon Line as its northeastern boundary, while China has never accepted it, viewing it as an imperialist imposition. In the west, the dispute centers on Aksai Chin, a high-altitude desert claimed by India as part of Ladakh but controlled by China. This territory holds particular significance for Beijing, as it provides a crucial corridor linking Tibet with Xinjiang.

India–China Border Disputes: The two countries fought a war in **1962**, and the border, known as the **Line of Actual Control (LAC),** remains unresolved to this day.

In the 1950s, relations initially appeared promising under the banner of "Hindi-Chini bhai bhai" (Indians and Chinese are brothers). However, India's decision to

grant asylum to the Dalai Lama in 1959, after the failed Tibetan uprising, deeply angered Beijing. China perceived this as interference in its internal affairs and a challenge to its sovereignty over Tibet. The rift widened as border skirmishes increased, culminating in the Sino-Indian war of 1962.

The 1962 war was short but decisive. Chinese forces quickly overran Indian positions in both the western and eastern sectors, exposing New Delhi's unpreparedness. India suffered heavy losses, and the psychological shock of defeat left a deep scar on its strategic outlook. Although China unilaterally declared a ceasefire and withdrew in the east, it retained control of Aksai Chin in the west, solidifying the territorial status quo that persists today.

This war cemented mutual suspicion. For India, China became a long-term security threat, second only to Pakistan. For China, India's growing ties with the Soviet Union and later the United States marked it as a rival regional power aligned with external forces. The legacy of 1962 continues to shape Indian defense planning, political discourse, and public opinion, where China is often portrayed as a duplicitous and aggressive neighbor.

1. Border Disputes and Military Standoffs

- Since 1962, the border has remained unsettled, with the Line of Actual Control (LAC) serving as the de facto boundary. However, the LAC is not mutually agreed upon or clearly demarcated, leading to frequent incursions, patrol confrontations, and military standoffs.
- 1967 Skirmishes at Nathu La and Cho La: Indian and Chinese troops clashed in Sikkim, resulting in significant Chinese casualties and demonstrating India's improved military resolve compared to 1962.
- 1987 Sumdorong Chu Standoff: India mobilized large forces in Arunachal Pradesh after Chinese troops established a post in disputed territory. Though resolved diplomatically, it highlighted the fragility of peace.
- Doklam Crisis (2017): A 73-day standoff occurred when India opposed China's road construction in Doklam, a plateau claimed by Bhutan but strategically significant for India. The crisis ended with disengagement, but it reinforced perceptions of Chinese assertiveness.
- Galwan Valley Clash (2020): For the first time in decades, soldiers died in combat along the LAC. Hand-to-hand fighting with clubs and stones led to 20 Indian and at least 4 Chinese deaths. This incident marked a watershed, hardening Indian attitudes and prompting calls for greater military readiness.
- These flashpoints reveal the paradox of the India–China border: while both sides seek to avoid large-scale war, the absence of a mutually recognized boundary ensures recurrent crises. Each confrontation chips away at trust and increases the risk of miscalculation.

2. Political and Diplomatic Dimensions

Several agreements were signed in the 1990s and 2000s to manage the border dispute, including the 1993 Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the LAC and the 1996 Agreement on Confidence-Building Measures. These pacts committed both sides to limit troop deployments and resolve disputes through dialogue. Yet, their effectiveness has been limited, as demonstrated by the repeated standoffs.

In **2017**, Indian and Chinese troops faced off for over **70 days** in Doklam, a plateau claimed by both China and Bhutan, drawing global attention.

Diplomatically, India and China maintain a façade of cooperation in forums like BRICS, SCO, and the G20, but their bilateral relations remain adversarial. India accuses China of shielding Pakistan at the United Nations, particularly by blocking designations of Pakistani militants as global terrorists. China, meanwhile, views India's growing strategic alignment with the United States as a direct threat to its rise.

The Galwan incident accelerated India's strategic shift. Since 2020, India has taken stronger positions against China, including banning hundreds of Chinese apps, restricting Huawei from its 5G rollout, and increasing scrutiny of Chinese investments. New Delhi has also emphasized closer defense cooperation with the U.S., Japan, and Australia through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad).

3. Economic Interdependence and Competition

Despite political tensions, economic ties between India and China have grown dramatically. By the 2010s, China had become one of India's largest trading partners, with bilateral trade surpassing $100 billion annually. However, the relationship is highly asymmetric: India exports mostly raw materials while importing finished goods, creating a large trade deficit in China's favor.

India, Pakistan, and China are all **nuclear powers**, making South Asia one of the most heavily armed regions globally.

India's dependence on Chinese imports—particularly in pharmaceuticals, electronics, and infrastructure—poses a strategic vulnerability. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed this reliance, with disruptions in Chinese supply chains affecting Indian industries. In response,

India launched the "Atmanirbhar Bharat" (self-reliant India) initiative to reduce dependence on China.

At the same time, the two countries compete for influence in South Asia. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and especially the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), is viewed by India as encircling it strategically, a concern often described as the "String of Pearls" strategy. India, refusing to join the BRI, instead promotes alternative connectivity initiatives with Japan, the U.S., and Europe.

4. Strategic Implications

The India–China conflict has reshaped the regional security landscape in multiple ways:

a) Military Modernization: Both sides are investing heavily in military infrastructure along the LAC. India has ramped up road and airstrip construction in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh, while China has established permanent facilities in Tibet.

b) Two-Front Challenge for India: China's close ties with Pakistan force India to consider simultaneous threats on both its northern and western borders.

c) Indo-Pacific Strategy: India has embraced the Indo-Pacific concept as a framework for countering Chinese influence, working with the U.S. and other regional powers.

d) Regional Polarization: Smaller South Asian states, such as Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, are drawn into the rivalry as both India and China compete for influence through aid, investment, and infrastructure projects.

The rivalry is no longer limited to territory; it is about competing visions of leadership in Asia. China seeks to secure its periphery and expand its global reach, while India aspires to be a balancing power in the Indo-Pacific. As both countries rise, their competition will intensify, and the possibility of conflict—whether accidental or deliberate—will remain a constant shadow over South Asia.

4.2 China - Pakistan Regional Players

4.2.1 Historical Foundations

The origins of the China–Pakistan partnership are deeply rooted in the shifting power politics of South Asia. The 1963 Sino–Pakistan boundary agreement was a landmark, settling border disputes between the two countries at a time when India and China were adversaries following the 1962 border war. The agreement not only established trust but also laid the foundation for long-term cooperation. For Pakistan, cultivating China as an ally helped counterbalance India's superior conventional strength, while for Beijing, Islamabad became a key partner in

weakening Indian influence in the region.

The 1971 Indo–Pakistan war further demonstrated the alignment of interests. While Pakistan lost East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), China extended diplomatic support to Islamabad and opposed Indian military actions. This period cemented Pakistan's role as China's "all-weather friend," particularly as both countries shared a common opposition to Indian regional hegemony. The triangular Cold War dynamics also brought China, Pakistan, and the United States closer—most notably, Pakistan facilitated the historic U.S.–China rapprochement in the early 1970s, strengthening its position as Beijing's trusted intermediary.

Sino-Pak "Iron Brothers": China and Pakistan describe their relationship as **"higher than the Himalayas, deeper than the oceans, and sweeter than honey."**

Shared hostility toward India has remained a constant in their bilateral ties. From the 1960s to the present, both countries have perceived New Delhi as a strategic rival. China has consistently supported Pakistan diplomatically in forums like the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), especially on the Kashmir dispute, while Pakistan has, in turn, backed China's positions on Taiwan, Xinjiang, Tibet, and the South China Sea. This mutual reinforcement of each other's "core concerns" has provided stability to the relationship despite regional and global transformations.

4.2.2 Triangular Dynamics: India–China–Pakistan

1. The Strategic Triangle

The India–China–Pakistan triangle is one of the most complex and volatile strategic configurations in international politics. Each bilateral relationship—India–Pakistan, India–China, and China–Pakistan—feeds into the triangular balance, creating both alignments and tensions that reverberate across South Asia.

For India, the prospect of facing a two-front challenge has long been a central security concern. Since the 1962 war with China and the repeated conflicts with Pakistan, New Delhi has feared simultaneous pressure from both its northern and western neighbors. The Ladakh standoff in 2020, coupled with continued militancy in Kashmir, has reinforced this anxiety.

China leverages Pakistan as a strategic counterweight to India. By maintaining close ties with Islamabad, Beijing ensures that India's strategic focus is divided, complicating New Delhi's ability to concentrate its military and diplomatic energies solely on China. The deepening of the China–Pakistan partnership, especially through CPEC and defense cooperation, strengthens this balancing act.

China's Mediator Role: Beijing occasionally offers to mediate between India and Pakistan, but New Delhi rejects it, insisting disputes are bilateral.

For Pakistan, China serves as a force multiplier against India. By aligning with Beijing, Islamabad gains advanced military technology, diplomatic cover at the United Nations, and crucial economic assistance. Pakistan views this triangular dynamic as a way to offset India's demographic and economic advantages, ensuring that New Delhi cannot unilaterally dominate South Asia.

Thus, the triangle is defined not by equilibrium but by asymmetry—where India sees itself encircled, China sees opportunity, and Pakistan sees survival.

2. Impact on Regional Security

The triangular relationship has direct implications for regional security and stability. The most visible outcome is an ongoing arms buildup. India, China, and Pakistan all invest heavily in modernizing their militaries, leading to a regional arms race that diverts resources from development to defense.

Border disputes exacerbate these tensions. The Line of Actual Control (LAC) between India and China remains contested, with violent clashes like the 2020 Galwan Valley incident reminding the world of how fragile the situation is. Similarly, the Line of Control (LoC) between India and Pakistan continues to witness skirmishes and artillery exchanges. These unresolved frontiers make the risk of escalation ever-present.

The triangular dynamic also paralyzes regional cooperation frameworks. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which could have been a vehicle for economic integration, remains moribund due to India–Pakistan hostility. China's growing role in South Asia through alternative platforms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) further sidelines SAARC, creating fragmented regional architectures.

From a broader perspective, the security implications extend beyond the subcontinent. The presence of three nuclear powers in proximity, two of which

(India and Pakistan) have fought multiple wars, makes South Asia one of the most dangerous flashpoints in the world. Any miscalculation—whether at the LAC or LoC—could spiral into wider conflict, with catastrophic consequences.

3. Global Power Involvement

The triangular dynamics are further complicated by the involvement of external powers, particularly the United States and Russia.

The United States has increasingly tilted toward India, especially since the 2000s. Strategic convergence in the Indo-Pacific, shared concerns about China's rise, and growing economic ties have brought Washington and New Delhi closer. The U.S.–India nuclear deal of 2008, defense agreements, and participation in the Quad (with Japan and Australia) signal a long-term American commitment to strengthening India as a counterbalance to China. This alignment, however, deepens Pakistan's dependence on China, reinforcing the triangular imbalance.

CPEC – Game Changer: The **China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)** is a multi-billion-dollar project linking Gwadar Port to Xinjiang, symbolizing China's Belt and Road vision.

Russia, historically an ally of India during the Cold War, has sought to maintain balanced ties in the new century. While Moscow continues to supply arms to India, it has also deepened engagement with Pakistan, particularly in counterterrorism and energy projects. Russia's partnership with China through the SCO further complicates its role, making it less predictable as a balancing actor.

For China, global stakes are rising. Through initiatives like the BRI and forums such as the SCO, Beijing positions itself as a leader of the Global South. Its alignment with Pakistan enhances its regional leverage, while its rivalry with the U.S. ensures that the triangular dynamic is embedded in the wider great-power competition.

Thus, the India–China–Pakistan triangle cannot be viewed in isolation—it is increasingly entangled with global power shifts, particularly the U.S.–China rivalry, making it a key node in international politics.

4. Nuclear Deterrence

Perhaps the most critical aspect of the triangular relationship is nuclear deterrence. India and Pakistan became overt nuclear powers in 1998, formalizing a deterrent relationship that has since shaped their strategic calculus. China, a nuclear power since 1964, indirectly influences this dyad by strengthening Pakistan's capabilities and complicating India's deterrence posture.

Pakistan's nuclear strategy is India-centric, designed to offset New Delhi's conventional superiority. India's doctrine of "credible minimum deterrence" and its development of ballistic missile defense systems seek to neutralize Pakistan's capabilities, triggering further responses from Islamabad.

The Karakoram Highway: Often called the **"Eighth Wonder of the World,"** this road connects Pakistan with China and is the highest paved international road in the world.

China's role is more subtle but equally important. By providing missile and nuclear technology assistance to Pakistan in earlier decades, Beijing helped ensure that India faces a two-front nuclear challenge. Today, China's own nuclear modernization and its "nuclear umbrella" indirectly reinforce Pakistan's deterrent posture, creating a triangular nuclear environment with high risks of misperception.

The risk of escalation is real. The 2019 Pulwama–Balakot crisis demonstrated how quickly conventional skirmishes can escalate in a nuclearized environment. With three nuclear-armed states in close geographic proximity, any miscalculation along contested borders could trigger a chain reaction beyond the control of political leaders.

5. Conclusion of Triangular Dynamics

The India–China–Pakistan triangle is a defining feature of South Asia's strategic landscape. It is marked by asymmetry, mistrust, and competing alignments that perpetuate instability. For India, the triangle represents encirclement; for China, it provides leverage; and for Pakistan, it offers survival and balance.

The triangular dynamics intensify regional militarization, hinder economic integration, and draw in external powers, embedding South Asia within the wider great-power rivalry between the United States and China. The nuclear dimension amplifies the stakes, making miscalculation a persistent danger.

Looking ahead, the future of the triangle will hinge on several factors: India's rise as a global power, China's pursuit of regional dominance, Pakistan's ability to

stabilize internally, and the evolving U.S.–China rivalry. Whether this triangle moves toward cooperation or remains locked in confrontation will have profound implications not just for South Asia, but for global peace and security.

4.2.3 Military Cooperation

Military cooperation has been one of the strongest pillars of the China–Pakistan partnership, shaping their bilateral relationship far beyond conventional diplomacy. Since the 1960s, when Pakistan first began receiving defense equipment from Beijing, the military-to-military relationship has steadily deepened, developing into a strategic axis that continues to define South Asia's security architecture. This cooperation is motivated by shared strategic interests: China's desire to counterbalance India and extend its influence in the Indian Ocean, and Pakistan's need for reliable defense supplies and technological support in the face of recurring conflicts with India.

1. Defense Supplies and Training

China became a key defense supplier to Pakistan at a time when Islamabad faced international sanctions and restrictions on arms imports. In the aftermath of the 1965 and 1971 wars with India, when Western support diminished, Beijing stepped in to provide Pakistan with tanks, aircraft, artillery, and small arms. Chinese weapons systems, though often less sophisticated than Western equivalents, were affordable, reliable, and, most importantly, accessible without the political conditionalities that characterized U.S. assistance. Beyond hardware, Chinese training programs for Pakistani military personnel created institutional bonds and enabled doctrinal alignment between the two armed forces.

2. Joint Exercises and Technology Transfer

In subsequent decades, the partnership evolved from a buyer–seller model to one of joint development and co-production. Regular joint exercises across land, air, and sea forces have enhanced interoperability and mutual trust. These exercises, such as "Warrior" and "Shaheen," demonstrate growing coordination in counterterrorism, high-altitude warfare, and maritime security. Technology transfer has further strengthened Pakistan's indigenous defense capabilities, allowing the country to reduce dependence on Western suppliers.

3. Development of the JF-17 Thunder and Missile Cooperation

A landmark achievement in Sino-Pakistani defense collaboration is the co-production of the JF-17 Thunder fighter aircraft, developed jointly by Pakistan Aeronautical Complex (PAC) and China's Chengdu Aircraft Corporation. The project, launched in the 1990s and operationalized in the 2000s, provided Pakistan with a cost-effective, multirole combat aircraft, while also creating a platform for domestic industry development. Beyond aviation, China has assisted Pakistan in

advancing its missile program, particularly through technical cooperation on short- and medium-range ballistic missiles. While Beijing has often denied direct assistance, evidence suggests that Chinese expertise has played a critical role in strengthening Pakistan's strategic deterrent.

4. Naval Cooperation and Gwadar's Strategic Role

The maritime dimension of the partnership has expanded significantly with the development of the Gwadar port under the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Strategically located near the Strait of Hormuz, Gwadar offers China access to the Arabian Sea and provides Pakistan with modern port infrastructure. Though officially presented as a commercial project, Gwadar carries clear military and strategic implications, with potential use for Chinese naval vessels. Alongside port development, China has supplied Pakistan with modern frigates, submarines, and naval equipment, enhancing the Pakistan Navy's ability to secure sea lanes and counterbalance India's growing maritime power.

In sum, military cooperation between China and Pakistan has evolved from basic arms transfers to an integrated strategic partnership encompassing co-production, joint training, and maritime security. This axis not only reinforces Pakistan's defense posture against India but also enables China to expand its geopolitical reach into South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. The military relationship, therefore, remains a cornerstone of their "all-weather" friendship, shaping both countries' security strategies in a rapidly changing regional environment.

4.2.4 Economic Dimensions

While military cooperation has traditionally anchored the China–Pakistan relationship, economic ties have increasingly assumed center stage in the twenty-first century. From modest trade exchanges in the early decades to the ambitious China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) launched in 2015, the economic dimension has become the most visible manifestation of the "all-weather" partnership. This trajectory reflects not only the deepening interdependence between the two states but also China's broader ambitions to integrate South Asia into its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

1. From Trade Relations to CPEC

China and Pakistan began cultivating trade ties soon after establishing diplomatic relations in the 1950s. For decades, however, the economic relationship remained limited, with Pakistan relying heavily on Western markets and Chinese goods perceived as low quality. The dynamics shifted in the early 2000s with the signing of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in 2006, which expanded bilateral trade significantly. Yet the real turning point came with the formal launch of CPEC in 2015, which envisioned over $60 billion worth of Chinese investments in

infrastructure, energy, and industrial development across Pakistan. Branded as the "flagship" of the BRI, CPEC symbolized Beijing's trust in Pakistan as a gateway to the Middle East and Central Asia.

2. Infrastructure Development

One of the key components of CPEC is the modernization of Pakistan's infrastructure. Projects such as highways, railways, and the expansion of Gwadar port have been designed to improve connectivity between western China's Xinjiang province and the Arabian Sea. These investments address Pakistan's longstanding infrastructure deficit, while simultaneously offering China a shorter and more secure trade route bypassing the Malacca Strait. For Islamabad, infrastructure upgrades not only enhance mobility but also hold the potential to stimulate regional trade integration.

3. Energy Cooperation

Perhaps the most transformative aspect of CPEC has been the focus on Pakistan's chronic energy shortages. China has financed and constructed coal-fired power plants, hydroelectric projects, wind farms, and solar parks to reduce Pakistan's electricity deficit, which historically has hampered economic growth. Flagship projects such as the Sahiwal coal plant and the Quaid-e-Azam Solar Park have added thousands of megawatts to the national grid. While these projects have alleviated power shortages, critics argue that the reliance on coal undermines Pakistan's climate commitments and contributes to environmental degradation.

4. Industrial Zones and Special Economic Zones (SEZs)

CPEC also envisions the creation of Special Economic Zones across Pakistan, aimed at boosting manufacturing, technology transfer, and job creation. These SEZs are intended to replicate China's successful development model, integrating Pakistan into global value chains. However, progress on SEZs has been uneven, with bureaucratic delays, political instability, and security threats slowing implementation. Nevertheless, the promise of industrialization under CPEC continues to drive optimism within policy circles.

5. Debt Sustainability and Economic Concerns

Despite its transformative potential, CPEC has sparked heated debates about Pakistan's debt sustainability and economic sovereignty. Critics argue that heavy reliance on Chinese loans exposes Islamabad to a "debt trap," similar to concerns raised in Sri Lanka with the Hambantota port project. Supporters counter that Pakistan's debt to China constitutes only a fraction of its total external liabilities, and that Chinese investments are necessary for long-term growth. Still, issues of transparency, governance, and equitable distribution of benefits remain pressing

challenges. Public discontent in some regions, particularly in Balochistan, reflects fears of economic marginalization despite large-scale investments.

In summary, the economic dimension of the China–Pakistan partnership has expanded from modest trade to the transformative CPEC framework. While the initiative offers Pakistan opportunities for infrastructure development, energy security, and industrialization, it also raises critical questions regarding debt sustainability, environmental impacts, and local inclusivity. For China, Pakistan is not merely an economic partner but a strategic hub linking the Belt and Road Initiative to the Indian Ocean and beyond, underscoring the deep interconnection between economics and geopolitics in their bilateral relationship

4.2.5 Diplomatic and Strategic Cooperation

Beyond economic and military linkages, the China–Pakistan partnership is underpinned by robust diplomatic and strategic cooperation. Both states view each other as indispensable allies in a volatile regional environment, where mutual support on core issues has become a defining feature of their relationship. This dimension is not merely symbolic but has tangible consequences for regional geopolitics, as it strengthens Pakistan's bargaining power vis-à-vis India while simultaneously reinforcing China's influence in South Asia and beyond.

1. China's Support for Pakistan on Kashmir

One of the most visible aspects of diplomatic cooperation is China's consistent support for Pakistan on the Kashmir dispute. Since the 1960s, Beijing has advocated for the issue to be resolved according to United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions. Although China has at times adopted a cautious approach to avoid alienating India, it has nonetheless provided Pakistan with diplomatic backing during critical moments. After India revoked Article 370 in August 2019, ending the special status of Jammu and Kashmir, Beijing supported Pakistan's request to discuss the matter at the UNSC. While such sessions did not produce binding outcomes, they signaled China's willingness to challenge India's unilateral moves and highlight the dispute at international forums.

2. Pakistan's Support for China's Core Interests

In return, Pakistan has consistently endorsed China's core national interests, including sensitive issues such as Taiwan, Xinjiang, Tibet, and the South China Sea. Islamabad adheres firmly to the "One China" policy, refusing to establish any diplomatic or defense ties with Taipei. It has also defended Beijing against international criticism over its policies in Xinjiang, often framing them as internal matters. On the South China Sea disputes, Pakistan has repeatedly backed China's position, underlining its broader alignment with Beijing's strategic outlook. This

reciprocal diplomatic support underscores the transactional yet deeply aligned nature of the relationship.

3. Strategic Coordination in Multilateral Forums

China and Pakistan have cooperated closely in multilateral organizations, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), where Pakistan's entry in 2017 strengthened China's position by adding another trusted partner to the bloc. Within the United Nations, the two states often coordinate voting positions, particularly on issues of counterterrorism, human rights, and development financing. Their collaboration extends to the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), where China has sought support from Muslim-majority states, often facilitated by Pakistan's diplomatic mediation.

4. Counterterrorism Cooperation

Strategic cooperation also encompasses counterterrorism efforts. Both countries face security challenges from militant groups, including those operating in Pakistan's borderlands and extremist elements targeting Chinese nationals. Beijing has pressed Islamabad to ensure the safety of its workers involved in CPEC projects, especially in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Joint mechanisms have been established to improve intelligence-sharing and coordinate responses to such threats. Additionally, Pakistan has supported China's narrative on counterterrorism in Xinjiang, framing it as a fight against separatism and extremism rather than a human rights concern.

5. Regional Security and Strategic Balancing

At the strategic level, China views Pakistan as a counterweight to India, while Pakistan sees China as its most reliable partner in an otherwise hostile neighborhood. This alignment extends to regional flashpoints, including Afghanistan, where both sides advocate for stability and oppose the return of extremist safe havens. China's willingness to shield Pakistan from international isolation, including blocking attempts by India to designate certain Pakistani individuals at the UNSC as terrorists, further demonstrates the depth of its strategic commitment.

In sum, diplomatic and strategic cooperation forms the backbone of the China–Pakistan relationship, complementing the military and economic dimensions. By backing each other's positions on sensitive issues, engaging in multilateral diplomacy, and coordinating on regional security, both states reinforce their "iron brotherhood." However, this cooperation also entrenches divisions in South Asia, exacerbating India's concerns of encirclement and contributing to the persistence of a security dilemma in the region.

4.2.6 Challenges and Limitations

Despite the oft-celebrated "all-weather friendship," the China–Pakistan partnership is not without frictions. Beneath the rhetoric of brotherhood, several structural, political, and security-related challenges complicate the relationship. These limitations demonstrate that while the partnership is strategic and enduring, it is neither immune to strain nor devoid of vulnerabilities.

1. Local Opposition in Balochistan

A major challenge arises from local opposition to Chinese-led projects in Pakistan, particularly in Balochistan. Many residents view the development of Gwadar port and associated infrastructure under the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as exploitative, benefiting outsiders more than locals. Baloch nationalist groups argue that the projects displace communities without providing adequate compensation or economic benefits. Protests against the lack of access to jobs, basic utilities, and revenue-sharing mechanisms highlight the perception that CPEC has failed to address local grievances. This discontent undermines the legitimacy of Chinese investments and complicates Pakistan's ability to present CPEC as an inclusive national project.

2. Terrorist Attacks on Chinese Nationals and Assets

Security concerns are another serious obstacle. Chinese engineers, workers, and projects in Pakistan have been targeted repeatedly by militant groups, including Baloch separatists and Islamist militants. Attacks on buses carrying Chinese workers, assaults on the Chinese consulate in Karachi (2018), and strikes on CPEC infrastructure have raised alarm in Beijing. Such incidents not only endanger Chinese lives but also threaten the long-term viability of economic cooperation. They force Pakistan to divert significant security resources to protect CPEC projects, raising costs and complicating local governance.

3. Pakistan's Political Instability

Pakistan's volatile political environment adds another layer of uncertainty. Frequent changes in government, civil–military tensions, and inconsistent policy frameworks make long-term project implementation difficult. While the military has generally ensured continuity in relations with China, civilian governments have at times shifted priorities, leading to delays or renegotiations of agreements. Beijing's frustration with slow progress on certain CPEC components reflects its concern over Pakistan's inability to deliver consistently.

4. Economic Crises and Debt Sustainability

Pakistan's recurring balance-of-payments crises and reliance on external bailouts (particularly from the International Monetary Fund) pose another limitation.

Although China has extended loans and emergency support, Islamabad's fragile economy raises questions about its capacity to absorb and sustain large-scale Chinese investments. The debate over whether CPEC creates a debt trap continues to shadow the relationship, with critics warning of unsustainable liabilities and Beijing facing reputational risks. This economic vulnerability makes Pakistan a less stable partner than China might prefer.

5. Geopolitical Pressures

Finally, the China–Pakistan partnership is constrained by external geopolitical dynamics. India's opposition to CPEC, particularly because projects pass through Gilgit-Baltistan (a territory it claims), has intensified regional rivalries. Similarly, the growing alignment between India and the United States under the Indo-Pacific strategy places Pakistan and China in a more adversarial position vis-à-vis Washington. This geopolitical polarization narrows Pakistan's strategic options and increases the likelihood that its relationship with China will be perceived as part of a broader anti-Western bloc, complicating Islamabad's diplomacy.

In short, while the China–Pakistan relationship is often portrayed as unshakable, it faces significant challenges in practice. Local opposition, security threats, political instability, economic fragility, and geopolitical rivalries expose its limitations. These challenges do not undermine the core of the partnership but highlight its contested and fragile dimensions, suggesting that the "iron brotherhood" requires constant management and adaptation to endure in the face of changing regional dynamics.

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Unit 5

THE AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN FRONTIER

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INTRODUCTION

The Afghanistan–Pakistan frontier has long been a focal point of instability in South Asia. Rooted in the unresolved Durand Line dispute, this border has been a site of tension, mistrust, and cross-border movements since 1947. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the subsequent rise of mujahideen groups, and later the U.S.-led intervention after 9/11 turned the frontier into a global security concern. Refugee flows, cross-border militancy, and the presence of extremist networks have deeply affected Pakistan's internal security and governance. The Taliban's return to power in 2021 has once again reshaped regional politics, raising questions about the future of Afghanistan–Pakistan relations. This unit explores the historical, political, and security dimensions of the frontier, highlighting how developments in Afghanistan directly influence Pakistan and broader regional stability.

OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, the readers will be able to understand:

- To trace the historical origins and disputes surrounding the Afghanistan–Pakistan frontier.
- To analyze the impact of wars, militancy, and refugee movements on Pakistan's security and governance.
- To assess the regional and international implications of Afghanistan's instability for South Asia.

5.1 Soviet Afghan War (1979-89)

5.1.1 Introduction

The Afghanistan–Pakistan frontier has historically been one of the most volatile regions of South and Central Asia, serving as a meeting point of civilizations, empires, and ideologies. Among the many defining episodes that shaped this frontier, the Soviet–Afghan War (1979–1989) stands out as a watershed event with profound consequences for both Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as for international politics. The Soviet invasion transformed Afghanistan into a Cold War battlefield, drew Pakistan into the heart of global geopolitics, and set in motion legacies of militancy, refugee displacement, and regional insecurity that continue to haunt the region to this day.

5.1.2 Historical Background

Before delving into the war itself, it is important to understand Afghanistan's political trajectory leading up to the Soviet invasion. Afghanistan had long been

considered a buffer state between the British and Russian empires during the 19th-century "Great Game." In the 20th century, Afghanistan pursued a path of relative neutrality but was also drawn into ideological rivalries.

In 1973, King Zahir Shah was overthrown in a coup led by his cousin, Mohammad Daoud Khan, who abolished the monarchy and declared a republic. Daoud initially aligned himself with the Soviet Union but later attempted to reduce Moscow's influence, reaching out to Pakistan, Iran, and Western powers. His regime, however, was plagued by internal dissent, particularly from the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), a Marxist-Leninist party that had gained influence within the Afghan military.

The Durand Line: The 2,640-km border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, known as the **Durand Line**, was drawn in 1893 and is still disputed by Kabul.

In April 1978, the PDPA launched the Saur Revolution, overthrowing and killing Daoud Khan. The new communist regime, led by Nur Mohammad Taraki and later Hafizullah Amin, implemented radical reforms such as land redistribution, modernization of family laws, and secularization policies. These reforms clashed with Afghanistan's deeply traditional and religious society, sparking resistance across the countryside.

By 1979, the PDPA regime was facing widespread rebellion, factional infighting, and declining legitimacy. Fearing the collapse of a communist ally and the spread of Islamist insurgency near its borders, the Soviet Union intervened in December 1979, assassinating Amin and installing Babrak Karmal as leader.

5.1.3 Pakistan's Strategic Calculus

For Pakistan, the Soviet invasion was nothing short of an existential threat. Islamabad perceived it as Moscow's attempt to secure warm-water access through Pakistan to the Arabian Sea. The invasion also raised concerns about encirclement, since Pakistan was already facing hostility from India in the east and a pro-Soviet Afghanistan in the west.

General Zia-ul-Haq, Pakistan's military ruler, quickly aligned with the United States, which saw the invasion as a grave expansion of Soviet influence in the Cold War. Thus began a strategic partnership between Pakistan, the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and China, all supporting the Afghan Mujahideen against the Soviets. Pakistan became the frontline state in the anti-Soviet struggle, hosting training camps, supply lines, and millions of Afghan refugees.

5.1.4 The Mujahideen and Insurgency

The Afghan Mujahideen, composed of various Islamist and tribal groups, emerged as the main resistance force against the Soviet-backed PDPA regime. Their movement was rooted in both religious ideology and opposition to foreign occupation.

Key Mujahideen leaders included Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (Hezb-e Islami), Burhanuddin Rabbani (Jamiat-e Islami), Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, Jalaluddin Haqqani, and Ahmad Shah Massoud. These leaders operated from bases in Pakistan's tribal areas, particularly in Peshawar, and received financial and logistical support from the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).

> Pakistan became a UN member in **1947**, but Afghanistan was the only country to vote against its admission due to the Durand Line issue.

The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), under Operation Cyclone, funneled billions of dollars' worth of weapons and equipment to the Mujahideen through Pakistan. Saudi Arabia matched American funding, often directing resources toward groups with strong Islamist credentials, thereby amplifying the role of political Islam in the insurgency.

5.1.5 The Nature of the Conflict

The war was brutal and protracted. Soviet forces, numbering up to 115,000 at their peak, relied heavily on mechanized units, helicopters, and aerial bombardments to crush the insurgency. Mujahideen fighters, however, excelled in guerrilla warfare, exploiting Afghanistan's rugged terrain and local support networks.

The turning point came in the mid-1980s when the U.S. supplied Stinger missiles to the Mujahideen, allowing them to shoot down Soviet helicopters and planes. This development severely undermined Soviet air superiority and boosted Mujahideen morale.

The conflict devastated Afghanistan's social fabric. Villages were destroyed, crops burned, and millions displaced. By the end of the war, nearly 1.5 million Afghans were dead, and countless others were wounded.

5.1.6 Global Implications

The Soviet–Afghan War had global repercussions. It became a symbol of Cold War rivalry, with Afghanistan serving as the battleground where the U.S. and USSR tested their influence. For Washington, the war was an opportunity to "bleed" the Soviets

militarily and economically. For Moscow, the war turned into a quagmire, draining resources and contributing to the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The war also facilitated the rise of transnational jihadism. Thousands of foreign fighters, including Arabs such as Osama bin Laden, traveled to Afghanistan to join the struggle, framing it as a jihad against an infidel superpower. This laid the ideological groundwork for al-Qaeda and the global jihadist networks that emerged in the 1990s.

5.1.7 Pakistan's Internal Impact

While Pakistan gained strategic importance and billions in aid, the consequences of the war were profound. The influx of weapons and radical ideologies fueled the militarization of Pakistani society. Refugee camps became breeding grounds for militant recruitment, and the Afghan jihad provided a template for Islamist militancy within Pakistan.

The ISI's empowerment through its central role in managing the jihad also altered Pakistan's civil–military balance, strengthening the military establishment's hold over policymaking. Moreover, the heroin trade flourished, as Afghan opium funded the war effort and spread addiction across Pakistan.

5.1.8 The Soviet Withdrawal

By the late 1980s, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev recognized the futility of the war. Facing domestic economic crises and international pressure, he sought an exit. In 1988, the Geneva Accords were signed between Afghanistan, Pakistan, the U.S., and the Soviet Union, paving the way for Soviet withdrawal.

The last Soviet troops departed Afghanistan in February 1989. However, the war was far from over. The PDPA regime under Najibullah remained in power for several years, supported by Soviet aid, until its eventual collapse in 1992. The Mujahideen then turned against each other, plunging Afghanistan into civil war—a conflict that would eventually pave the way for the rise of the Taliban.

5.1.9 Conclusion

The Soviet–Afghan War was a defining moment in the history of the Afghanistan–Pakistan frontier. For Afghanistan, it meant devastation, displacement, and a fractured society. For Pakistan, it meant newfound geopolitical significance but also the importation of militancy and instability. Globally, the war altered the Cold War balance and set the stage for the rise of global jihadism. Its legacies are still visible today in the geopolitics of South and Central Asia.

5.2 US-Afghan War

5.2.1 Introduction

The events of September 11, 2001, dramatically reshaped global politics and redefined the role of the Afghanistan–Pakistan frontier in world affairs. The United States, responding to the deadliest terrorist attack on its soil, declared a "Global War on Terror," identifying Afghanistan as the primary battleground. The U.S.–led intervention in Afghanistan was aimed at dismantling al-Qaeda, removing the Taliban regime that harbored it, and preventing Afghanistan from being used as a terrorist safe haven.

Pakistan, once again, became the critical frontline state, much like during the Soviet–Afghan War. However, this new conflict proved longer, bloodier, and more complex, dragging on for two decades before culminating in the U.S. withdrawal in 2021 and the Taliban's return to power.

This section examines the trajectory of the U.S.–Afghan War, its impact on Pakistan, and its global consequences.

5.2.2 Origins of the War

After 9/11, the U.S. presented the Taliban regime with an ultimatum: hand over Osama bin Laden and dismantle al-Qaeda's infrastructure. The Taliban, led by Mullah Omar, refused to extradite bin Laden without evidence of his involvement. This defiance led to Operation Enduring Freedom, launched on October 7, 2001.

Pakistan still hosts around **1.7 million registered Afghan refugees**, making it one of the largest refugee-hosting countries in the world.

The initial phase of the war was swift. With U.S. airpower, Special Forces, and assistance from the Northern Alliance (an anti-Taliban coalition), Kabul fell within weeks, and the Taliban regime collapsed by December 2001. However, rather than being eliminated, the Taliban leadership dispersed into Pakistan's tribal areas, regrouping and launching an insurgency that would sustain the war for two decades.

5.2.3 U.S. Objectives and Shifting Strategies

The U.S. intervention initially had three main goals:

- Destroy al-Qaeda and capture or kill Osama bin Laden.
- Overthrow the Taliban regime and prevent its return.
- Rebuild Afghanistan as a stable democracy that would not harbor terrorists.

- Over time, these objectives shifted and expanded. Nation-building became a central component, with the U.S. and its NATO allies investing billions in reconstruction, governance, and security. However, efforts at building a centralized Afghan state clashed with local realities of tribalism, corruption, and warlordism.

The U.S. military strategy also shifted repeatedly:

- 2001–2006: Counterterrorism focus—small U.S. footprint, reliance on local allies.
- 2006–2009: Insurgency grows—Taliban resurgence, NATO expansion.
- 2009–2011: Obama's surge—100,000 U.S. troops deployed to conduct counterinsurgency.
- 2014: Transition—Afghan forces assume security lead, U.S. combat role ends.
- 2015–2021: Counterterrorism and support—U.S. focuses on training, drone strikes, and peace talks.

5.2.4 Pakistan's Role and Dilemmas

Pakistan became a pivotal player in the U.S.–Afghan War. Under President Pervez Musharraf, Islamabad quickly aligned with Washington, officially abandoning its support for the Taliban. Pakistan provided the U.S. with airbases, intelligence cooperation, and logistics routes through Karachi and the Khyber Pass. In return, it received billions in aid, debt relief, and a renewed strategic partnership with the West.

However, Pakistan's cooperation was riddled with contradictions:

- Safe havens for Taliban: While publicly allied with the U.S., Pakistan's security establishment allowed Taliban leaders, including the Quetta Shura, to operate from its territory. This "double game" stemmed from Islamabad's fear of Indian influence in Afghanistan and its desire to maintain leverage through the Taliban.
- Drone strikes and sovereignty issues: U.S. drone strikes inside Pakistan's tribal areas targeted al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders but also killed civilians, fueling anti-American sentiment.
- Domestic blowback: Militancy spilled over into Pakistan. The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) emerged as a deadly insurgent force, carrying out attacks on Pakistani civilians and security forces, including the 2014 Army Public School massacre in Peshawar.

Thus, Pakistan found itself trapped in a paradox: a U.S. ally yet accused of harboring America's enemies; a victim of terrorism yet blamed for enabling it.

5.2.5 The Taliban Insurgency and Resilience

After 2001, the Taliban quickly reconstituted itself. Its leadership, sheltered in Pakistan, rebuilt networks across Afghanistan. The group drew strength from:

- Popular discontent with corrupt Afghan governments.
- Civilian casualties from U.S. bombings and raids.
- Rural grievances against centralized state-building.
- Ideological and religious appeal.

By the mid-2000s, the Taliban controlled large swaths of southern and eastern Afghanistan. The U.S. surge under Obama temporarily weakened them but failed to eliminate their presence. The Taliban adopted a long-term strategy: outlast the foreign occupiers.

5.2.6 Governance and Nation-Building in Afghanistan

One of the war's central contradictions was the attempt to rebuild Afghanistan into a Western-style democracy. The 2001 Bonn Agreement created a transitional government under Hamid Karzai, later followed by elected governments under Karzai and Ashraf Ghani.

Billions were poured into reconstruction: schools, roads, health clinics, and infrastructure. However, corruption, inefficiency, and dependency plagued these efforts. Warlords were co-opted into government, undermining legitimacy.

Despite some gains—especially in education, women's rights, and urban development—the Afghan state remained fragile, propped up by foreign aid and military support. Rural areas often saw little change, and the Taliban capitalized on governance failures.

5.2.7 Al-Qaeda, Bin Laden, and U.S. Counterterrorism

While the Taliban remained the main insurgent threat, al-Qaeda was the primary U.S. target. After years of manhunts, Osama bin Laden was killed in 2011 in Abbottabad, Pakistan, by U.S. Navy SEALs. His presence in Pakistan highlighted the complexities of Islamabad's relationship with militant groups and deepened mistrust between the U.S. and Pakistan.

Drone warfare became central to U.S. counterterrorism, targeting al-Qaeda and later ISIS in Afghanistan and Pakistan. While effective in eliminating key leaders, drones also generated resentment and legal controversies.

5.2.8 NATO and International Involvement

The war in Afghanistan was not only an American enterprise. NATO invoked Article 5 (collective defense) for the first time after 9/11, leading to the deployment

of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Over 40 countries contributed troops, though most avoided frontline combat.

Despite international involvement, burden-sharing was unequal, and U.S. forces carried the bulk of the fighting. Over time, war fatigue set in across NATO countries, leading to gradual drawdowns.

5.2.9 The Search for Peace

As the war dragged on, peace became a recurring theme. Several attempts at talks with the Taliban failed in the 2000s and 2010s. However, by the late 2010s, Washington recognized that a military victory was impossible. The Trump administration initiated direct negotiations with the Taliban in Doha, culminating in the Doha Agreement (February 2020).

The deal set a timetable for U.S. withdrawal in exchange for Taliban guarantees not to harbor terrorists. However, it largely sidelined the Afghan government and emboldened the Taliban, who continued offensives while negotiating.

5.2.10 the U.S. Withdrawal and Taliban Victory

In April 2021, President Joe Biden announced the full withdrawal of U.S. forces by September 11, 2021, later accelerated to August 31. The withdrawal triggered a rapid collapse of the Afghan state.

In a matter of weeks, the Taliban overran provincial capitals. Afghan security forces, plagued by corruption, desertion, and dependency on U.S. support, disintegrated. On August 15, 2021, Kabul fell without resistance, and President Ashraf Ghani fled the country.

The chaotic U.S. evacuation from Kabul airport became a symbol of the war's failure. After 20 years, trillions of dollars, and over 240,000 deaths (including Afghans, Americans, and allies), the Taliban were back in power, almost exactly where they had been in 2001.

5.2.11 Pakistan after 9/11: Gains and Costs

For Pakistan, the U.S.–Afghan War was a double-edged sword.

Gains:

- Billions in U.S. military and economic aid.
- Renewed strategic partnership with the West.
- Strengthened leverage over Afghan politics.

Costs:

- Over 80,000 Pakistanis have been killed in terrorism-related violence.
- Economic losses exceeding $150 billion.
- Refugee inflows and social pressures.
- Tarnished international reputation for "double-dealing."

The war also reshaped Pakistan's domestic politics. Musharraf's military rule was bolstered by U.S. support but later collapsed under internal discontent. Democratic governments that followed struggled with militancy, energy crises, and economic decline.

5.2.12 Global Consequences

The U.S.–Afghan War had far-reaching consequences:

- For the U.S.: It became the longest war in American history, eroding public support for foreign interventions and reshaping debates on counterterrorism.
- For Afghanistan: Gains in education, women's rights, and civil society were rolled back with the Taliban's return.
- For global jihadism: Groups like ISIS-K emerged, while al-Qaeda adapted into a decentralized network.
- For international order: The war exposed the limits of U.S. power and accelerated debates about American decline.

5.2.13 Conclusion

The U.S.–Afghan War was a tragic cycle of intervention, insurgency, and collapse. What began as a mission to destroy al-Qaeda evolved into a two-decade experiment in state-building that failed. For Pakistan, the war was both a source of strategic opportunity and devastating internal turmoil. For the world, it reaffirmed the complexity of the Afghanistan–Pakistan frontier as a space where local conflicts intersect with global rivalries.

5.3 Refugee Crises

5.3.1 Introduction

The Afghanistan–Pakistan frontier has not only been defined by wars and militancy but also by one of the world's largest and most prolonged refugee crises. Since 1979, successive waves of conflict in Afghanistan—the Soviet invasion, civil wars, the Taliban regime, the U.S.–led intervention, and the 2021 Taliban return—have forced millions of Afghans to flee across borders, with Pakistan emerging as the primary host country.

At its peak, Pakistan hosted more than 3.5 million Afghan refugees, making it the largest refugee-hosting nation in the world for decades. Even today, millions remain displaced, with uncertain legal status and limited prospects for return. This massive movement of people has profoundly shaped the social, political, and economic landscape of Pakistan, while also influencing regional and global debates on forced migration.

5.3.2 The First Wave: Soviet–Afghan War Refugees (1979–1989)

The Soviet invasion triggered the first and largest wave of Afghan displacement. Millions fled aerial bombardments, scorched earth tactics, and communist repression, seeking safety in neighboring Pakistan and Iran.

Numbers and Settlement: By the mid-1980s, nearly 3 million Afghans had crossed into Pakistan, concentrated in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (then NWFP) and Balochistan. Refugee camps sprang up around Peshawar, Quetta, and the tribal areas.

International Support: The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), along with Western donors, provided humanitarian assistance. The refugee presence also facilitated the Mujahideen struggle, as camps became recruiting grounds and logistical hubs.

Social Impact: Afghan refugees integrated into local economies, often competing with Pakistanis for jobs, housing, and resources. Yet, they also contributed labor, trade, and entrepreneurship, particularly in transport and construction.

5.3.3 The Civil War and Taliban Era (1990s)

After the Soviet withdrawal, Afghanistan descended into civil war among rival Mujahideen factions. The violence forced continued displacement, though in smaller numbers compared to the 1980s.

Protracted Refugee Presence: By the 1990s, Pakistan still hosted over 2 million refugees, with little sign of large-scale repatriation.

Rise of Taliban Refugees: Some Afghans fled Taliban rule (1996–2001), particularly ethnic minorities and urban elites who opposed their strict governance.

Policy Shifts in Pakistan: Islamabad began to see the refugee presence as a long-term challenge. Registration drives were introduced, but most Afghans remained without formal citizenship rights.

5.3.4 Post-9/11 Displacement (2001–2014)

The U.S.–led intervention in 2001 generated hopes of refugee return. Indeed, the early 2000s saw one of the largest repatriation movements in modern history.

Repatriation: Between 2002 and 2007, around 5 million Afghans returned home under UNHCR programs, though many later re-migrated due to insecurity and poverty.

New Refugees: The Taliban insurgency and U.S. bombings created fresh displacement, though not on the scale of the 1980s.

Pakistan's Fatigue: By the late 2000s, Pakistan increasingly pushed for returns, citing terrorism, economic strain, and social pressures. Afghan refugees were often scapegoated for crime and militancy.

5.3.5 The Post-2014 Crisis and the 2021 Taliban Takeover

After NATO's drawdown in 2014, Afghanistan again saw rising violence, corruption, and instability. This, coupled with economic collapse and drought, drove new migration.

2014–2020: Hundreds of thousands of Afghans sought refuge in Pakistan, Iran, and beyond. Many also attempted irregular migration to Europe.

2021 Taliban Return: The U.S. withdrawal and the Taliban's rapid takeover triggered a fresh exodus. Urban professionals, journalists, women activists, and minorities fled, fearing repression. Pakistan received another influx, though border controls were stricter than in previous decades.

5.3.6 Pakistan's Refugee Policy and Challenges

Hosting millions of refugees for over four decades has had profound implications for Pakistan.

- Legal Status and Documentation: Most Afghan refugees hold Proof of Registration (PoR) cards or Afghan Citizen Cards (ACC), but they are not granted citizenship. Pakistan is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, which limits international legal obligations. Refugees live in legal limbo, vulnerable to deportation, harassment, and discrimination.

1. Economic Impact

Refugees contribute cheap labor and cross-border trade, but also strain resources, jobs, and infrastructure. Informal settlements in cities like Karachi, Peshawar, and Quetta complicate urban planning. The presence of Afghan traders reshaped local economies, particularly in transport (trucking) and markets.

2. Security Concerns

Afghan refugees have often been associated with militancy, smuggling, and drug trafficking.

While only a minority are directly involved, such perceptions fuel xenophobia and restrictive policies.

3. Social and Cultural Dynamics

Refugees and locals share cultural and religious affinities, easing integration in some areas.

However, ethnic tensions, especially between Pashtuns and other groups, have been exacerbated.

Generations of Afghan children have grown up in Pakistan, blurring lines between refugees and citizens.

4. International Dimensions

The Afghan refugee crisis has been a test case for international burden-sharing.

UNHCR's Role: Provided humanitarian aid, education, and healthcare, but funding shortfalls remain chronic.

Donor Fatigue: Western support has declined over the years, leaving Pakistan and Iran to shoulder the burden.

Global Migration Debates: Afghan refugees feature prominently in European asylum discussions, particularly during the 2015–2016 migration crisis.

5. The Human Dimension

Behind statistics lie human stories of displacement, resilience, and suffering. Refugees face:

- Limited access to education and healthcare.
- Child labor and early marriages in camps.
- Identity crises for second- and third-generation Afghans born in Pakistan but denied citizenship.
- Gendered challenges, with Afghan women often doubly marginalized.

6. Contemporary Developments (2021–2025)

Today, Pakistan hosts around 3–4 million Afghans, including registered refugees and undocumented migrants. The 2023–24 economic crisis in Pakistan, coupled with rising tensions with Kabul, has led to mass deportation drives, sparking international criticism. Many Afghans now face precarious futures—unwanted in Pakistan, unsafe in Afghanistan, and unwelcome in the West.

5.3.7 Conclusion

The Afghan refugee crisis is not just a humanitarian issue but a geopolitical one. It highlights the interconnectedness of war, displacement, and international politics. For Pakistan, the burden has been immense—economically, socially, and politically. For Afghans, exile has become a generational experience, shaping identities and aspirations.

As long as Afghanistan remains unstable, the refugee crisis will persist. Lasting solutions require not only humanitarian relief but also genuine political stability in Afghanistan and shared responsibility by the international Community.

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Unit 6

THE SMALLER SOUTH ASIAN STATES

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INTRODUCTION

While regional politics often focus on India, Pakistan, and China, the smaller South Asian countries—Maldives, Nepal, and Bhutan—play significant yet distinct roles in shaping the subcontinent's dynamics. Each of these states faces unique internal challenges, such as political instability in Nepal, climate vulnerability in the Maldives, and Bhutan's cautious approach to modernization. At the same time, their geostrategic positions make them important players in regional diplomacy, often balancing relations between India and China. These countries demonstrate how even smaller states navigate complex security and economic landscapes, contributing to both the diversity and the fragility of South Asia. This unit examines their political trajectories, foreign policy orientations, and developmental challenges to provide a fuller understanding of South Asia beyond its dominant powers.

OBJECTIVES

The going through the unit, the reader will be enlightened:

- To explore the internal political, economic, and social challenges faced by the Maldives, Nepal, and Bhutan.
- To analyze how these smaller states manage their relations with larger regional powers, especially India and China.
- To assess their strategic and developmental significance within the broader South Asian framework.

6.1 Sri Lanka

6.1.1 Introduction

Sri Lanka occupies a unique place in South Asian politics and history. Located just off the southern tip of India, its geographical position in the Indian Ocean has long made it a critical site for trade, colonial conquest, and strategic competition. The island is not only known for its natural beauty and cultural richness but also for its turbulent political trajectory since independence in 1948. From the legacy of colonial rule and ethnic tensions to a devastating civil war and recent economic collapse, Sri Lanka's modern history encapsulates the challenges faced by smaller South Asian states navigating domestic fragility and global pressures.

6.1.2 Colonial Legacy and Post-Independence Politics

Sri Lanka's political and social structures were profoundly shaped by colonialism. The Portuguese, Dutch, and finally the British ruled the island for centuries, altering its economy and demography. Under British rule, plantation agriculture—tea, rubber, and coconut—was developed, while Tamil laborers were brought from India to work on estates. This demographic shift deepened ethnic divisions between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minorities.

Sri Lanka's Ancient Capitals: Sri Lanka has a recorded history of **over 2,500 years**, with ancient capitals like Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa showcasing Buddhist civilization.

When independence arrived in 1948, Sri Lanka inherited a Westminster-style democracy but also unresolved communal tensions. The early decades saw governments dominated by Sinhalese elites, who increasingly adopted populist policies that marginalized Tamil-speaking communities. The Sinhala Only Act (1956), which made Sinhala the sole official language, was a turning point, alienating Tamils and sowing seeds of ethnic conflict.

6.1.3 Ethnic Tensions and Civil War

Ethnic conflict defined Sri Lanka's postcolonial trajectory. Discrimination in language, education, and jobs against Tamils led to demands for autonomy, culminating in calls for a separate Tamil homeland (Tamil Eelam). By the 1970s, militant groups emerged, the most prominent being the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The civil war began in 1983, after anti-Tamil pogroms known as "Black July." It became one of the world's longest and bloodiest insurgencies, lasting until 2009.

The LTTE pioneered suicide bombings and controlled large swathes of the north and east. The war devastated the economy, displaced hundreds of thousands, and polarized society.

India played a complicated role. In the 1980s, it initially supported Tamil militants but later intervened militarily with the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) (1987–1990). This intervention ended in failure, leaving scars on Indo-Sri Lankan relations.

6.1.4 The End of the War and Post-2009 Politics

The war ended in May 2009, when the Sri Lankan military defeated the LTTE under President Mahinda Rajapaksa. The victory was celebrated domestically but marred by allegations of human rights abuses, including the deaths of tens of thousands of civilians in the final stages.

Postwar politics were dominated by the Rajapaksa family, whose populist and nationalist appeal consolidated Sinhala Buddhist majoritarianism. While infrastructure development accelerated, ethnic reconciliation remained elusive. Tamil grievances over political rights, demilitarization, and accountability persisted, and the north and east remained heavily securitized.

6.1.5 Economic Development and Crisis

For much of the postwar decade, Sri Lanka projected itself as a fast-growing economy, attracting Chinese investment in large-scale infrastructure projects, including the Hambantota Port and Colombo Port City. However, heavy reliance on debt-financed projects and weak governance created economic vulnerabilities.

By 2022, Sri Lanka faced its worst economic crisis since independence. Foreign reserves collapsed, inflation soared, and fuel and food shortages triggered mass protests. The Rajapaksa government was forced to resign, and Sri Lanka turned to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for emergency assistance. The crisis highlighted the dangers of debt dependence and governance failures in smaller states heavily reliant on external financing.

6.1.6 Geopolitical Position in the Indian Ocean

Sri Lanka's strategic location makes it central to Indian Ocean geopolitics. Both India and China vie for influence on the island. China has financed ports, highways, and airports as part of the Belt and Road Initiative, while India has sought to counterbalance with its own aid and investments.

The leasing of Hambantota Port to China in 2017 for 99 years fueled fears of "debt-trap diplomacy" and raised alarms in New Delhi. For Sri Lanka, balancing external

powers has become a delicate act: securing investment without surrendering sovereignty, while managing the sensitivities of its giant neighbor, India.

6.1.7 Social and Cultural Dynamics

Beyond conflict and politics, Sri Lanka has a rich cultural tapestry. Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity coexist, though not without tension. The Sinhalese majority (about 75%) identifies primarily with Buddhism, while Tamils (around 15%) are mostly Hindu, and Muslims constitute another 9%. This pluralism has often been overshadowed by ethnic and religious divisions, especially during periods of violence.

Postwar years also saw a rise in Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, sometimes directed not only at Tamils but also at Muslims, as seen in anti-Muslim riots in the 2010s. Such dynamics underscore how identity politics remain central to Sri Lanka's stability.

6.1.8 Sri Lanka in South Asia and the World

As a smaller South Asian state, Sri Lanka has sought to play a balancing role regionally and globally. It is a member of SAARC and BIMSTEC, though, like many regional organizations, these platforms have had limited effectiveness. Sri Lanka has also engaged with the United Nations, particularly on issues of postwar reconciliation and human rights, though often defensively against international criticism.

Economically, Sri Lanka relies heavily on tourism, remittances, and agricultural exports like tea. Its tourism sector has been repeatedly battered—first by the 2004 tsunami, then by the civil war, later by the 2019 Easter bombings, and most recently by the COVID-19 pandemic and political instability.

6.1.9 Conclusion

Sri Lanka's trajectory reflects the broader dilemmas of smaller South Asian states: balancing ethnic diversity, managing fragile democracies, navigating external pressures, and coping with economic vulnerabilities. Its civil war illustrates how unresolved identity conflicts can devastate a nation, while its current debt crisis highlights the risks of overreliance on external financing.

Yet Sri Lanka also embodies resilience: despite decades of conflict, it retains a vibrant democracy, a rich cultural heritage, and significant geostrategic importance. The island remains a pivotal player in South Asia's future, especially as India and China deepen their rivalry in the Indian Ocean.

6.2 Maldives

The Maldives, a chain of nearly 1,200 islands scattered across the Indian Ocean, represents one of the most unique cases among the smaller South Asian states. With a population of just over half a million and limited natural resources, it might seem peripheral in regional affairs. Yet, its geographic location along vital sea lanes, its vulnerability to climate change, and its oscillating domestic politics have made the Maldives disproportionately significant in South Asia and the wider Indian Ocean region.

6.2.1 Historical and Political Background

Historically, the Maldives was a Sultanate for centuries, maintaining trade links with Arabia, India, and Sri Lanka while preserving a strong Islamic identity after its conversion to Islam in the 12th century. The islands became a British protectorate in the 19th century, and while Britain controlled foreign affairs and defense, the Maldivians retained their traditional governance structures. Independence came in 1965, and in 1968, the monarchy was abolished, making the country a republic.

For much of the post-independence era, the Maldives was ruled by long-serving leaders who centralized power. President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom dominated politics for three decades (1978–2008), combining developmental policies with authoritarian rule. While his tenure brought some modernization, it was also marked by political repression and limited democratic freedoms.

The democratic transition in 2008, when Mohamed Nasheed was elected president, was seen as a landmark moment in Maldivian politics. Nasheed, a pro-democracy activist and journalist, promised reforms, human rights protections, and international engagement on climate change. However, his presidency faced pushback from entrenched elites, leading to his resignation under controversial circumstances in 2012. His ouster reflected the fragility of democratic institutions in the Maldives, as political rivalries repeatedly destabilized governance.

6.2.2 Climate Change and Existential Threats

More than any other South Asian state, the Maldives symbolizes the existential threat of climate change. With most of its islands rising barely one meter above sea level, the country is highly vulnerable to sea-level rise, coastal erosion, and extreme weather events. Former President Nasheed famously held an underwater cabinet meeting in 2009 to draw international attention to the plight of low-lying island nations, framing

The Maldives faces existential threats from climate change and rising sea levels, making it a global climate voice.

climate change not just as an environmental issue but as a question of national survival.

The Maldives has become a vocal advocate in global climate negotiations, often aligning with other small island developing states (SIDS). Its demand for stronger international commitments to reduce carbon emissions reflects the country's urgency: without significant global action, the Maldives risks losing habitable land and displacing its population. This environmental vulnerability makes climate security inseparable from national security in the Maldivian context.

6.2.3 Geopolitics in the Indian Ocean

Despite its small size, the Maldives occupies a strategic position in the Indian Ocean, close to major sea lanes that carry much of the world's energy supplies and trade. This geography has attracted the attention of regional powers, particularly India and China, both seeking to extend their influence.

India has traditionally regarded the Maldives as part of its security perimeter. It played a decisive role in 1988 when Operation Cactus saw Indian forces intervene to foil a coup attempt against President Gayoom. Since then, India has provided security assistance, development aid, and capacity building. However, India's influence has periodically faced resistance, especially when Maldivian leaders sought to diversify partnerships.

China's entry into Maldivian affairs through the Belt and Road Initiative significantly altered the country's geopolitical landscape. Under President Abdulla Yameen (2013–2018), the Maldives deepened its ties with Beijing, signing infrastructure deals and allowing large-scale Chinese investments. Critics accused Yameen of indebting the country to China and undermining democratic institutions. His defeat in 2018 was partly attributed to a domestic backlash against authoritarianism and concerns over sovereignty.

The frequent shifts in Maldivian leadership have meant oscillating foreign policies—one government leaning towards China, the next towards India. This "India-first" versus "China tilt" debate continues to define the Maldives' external relations, illustrating how even small states can shape great-power dynamics in the Indian Ocean.

6.2.4 Tourism, Economy, and Vulnerability

The Maldivian economy is heavily dependent on tourism, which accounts for nearly a third of GDP and the majority of foreign exchange earnings. Pristine beaches, coral reefs, and luxury resorts have made the Maldives a global tourist destination. However, this dependence creates vulnerabilities. Global crises—whether the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the COVID-19 pandemic, or the 2022–23 global economic downturn—directly impact the country's revenues.

The Maldives has leveraged its location to play a balancing act between great powers in the Indo-Pacific

Fisheries constitute another important sector, though overfishing and climate-driven changes in marine ecosystems pose risks to sustainability. Limited diversification, high reliance on imports, and significant external debt compound the economic fragility of the country. The state's fiscal position is further stressed by the need for climate adaptation measures, including coastal protection and infrastructure resilience.

6.2.5 Domestic Politics and Democratic Fragility

The Maldives' political system remains volatile. While the democratic transition of 2008 was hailed internationally, successive years revealed persistent tensions between authoritarian legacies and democratic aspirations. The judiciary, security forces, and political elites often play outsized roles in shaping political outcomes, limiting institutional independence.

Polarization between pro-India and pro-China camps has also seeped into domestic politics. Leaders often frame foreign alignments as extensions of sovereignty and nationalism, mobilizing public sentiment against external interference. At the same time, domestic challenges—corruption, governance inefficiency, and radicalization—continue to undermine stability.

Religious conservatism adds another dimension to Maldivian politics. Though Islam has always been central to national identity, recent decades have seen the rise of more hardline interpretations, fueled in part by global Islamist movements. Instances of Maldivians joining foreign extremist groups, including ISIS, have raised alarm both domestically and internationally. The government now faces the delicate task of balancing religious identity with modern governance and global engagement.

6.2.6 The Maldives in South Asia and Beyond

As one of the smaller South Asian states, the Maldives illustrates how vulnerability and geography can translate into geopolitical importance. Its environmental challenges make it a frontline state in the global fight against climate change, while its strategic location places it at the heart of India–China competition in the Indian Ocean. Domestically, its struggle for stable democracy reflects the broader regional pattern of contested governance and elite-driven politics.

Looking ahead, the Maldives must navigate a narrow path: strengthening its democratic institutions, diversifying its economy, and investing in climate resilience while avoiding becoming a pawn in great-power rivalries. Whether it can achieve this balance will shape not only its own survival but also the dynamics of the Indian Ocean order in the 21st century.

6.3 Bangladesh

Bangladesh, one of the most densely populated countries in the world, occupies a unique and complex place among South Asia's smaller states. Despite its relatively modest geographic size, its population of over 170 million gives it considerable weight in regional politics. Born out of the traumatic partition of Pakistan in 1971, Bangladesh's history reflects the struggles of postcolonial state formation, the challenges of governance, and the pursuit of socio-economic progress amid vulnerability to natural disasters and global climate change.

6.3.1 From East Pakistan to Independence

The roots of Bangladesh's independence lie in the contradictions of Pakistan's creation in 1947. Though East Bengal (later East Pakistan) constituted the demographic majority of Pakistan's population, it was marginalized politically, economically, and culturally by the West Pakistani elite. Language became the first flashpoint when the imposition of Urdu as the sole state language in 1948 led to widespread protests, culminating in the Language Movement of 1952. This struggle for recognition of Bengali as a state language not only shaped national consciousness but also laid the groundwork for future demands of autonomy.

Peacekeepers Abroad: Bangladesh is among the **largest contributors to UN peacekeeping missions,** showcasing its global role.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, disparities deepened. Economic neglect, lack of representation, and political exclusion left East Pakistanis feeling like second-class citizens within their own state. The tipping point came after the 1970 general

elections, when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Awami League won a clear majority. The refusal of the West Pakistani leadership to honor the results, coupled with the military crackdown of March 1971, sparked the Liberation War. With India's decisive military intervention, Bangladesh emerged as an independent nation in December 1971.

6.3.2 Post-Independence Challenges

The birth of Bangladesh was accompanied by immense devastation. Millions had been displaced, infrastructure lay in ruins, and famine soon followed. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, hailed as the Father of the Nation, faced the daunting task of reconstruction. His government introduced a socialist economic model and sought to centralize authority. However, political disillusionment grew amid food shortages, corruption, and authoritarian tendencies.

The assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975 marked the beginning of a long cycle of political instability, military rule, and contested democracy. Military leaders such as Ziaur Rahman and Hussain Muhammad Ershad dominated politics for much of the following two decades, introducing multi-party competition but also fostering patronage networks and authoritarian practices.

6.3.3 Democracy, Polarization, and Governance

Since the restoration of democracy in the 1990s, Bangladesh's politics have been defined by the bitter rivalry between two parties: the Awami League (AL) led by Sheikh Hasina (daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) led by Khaleda Zia (widow of Ziaur Rahman). This "two-ladies" politics entrenched a cycle of polarization, with each party alternately accusing the other of corruption, authoritarianism, and electoral manipulation.

While democratic institutions exist, governance has often been undermined by partisanship, weak rule of law, and concentration of power. Sheikh Hasina's Awami League has maintained power since 2009, consolidating control over the judiciary, media, and opposition. Critics argue that Bangladesh's democracy has increasingly drifted toward authoritarianism, with elections in 2014, 2018, and 2024 criticized for a lack of genuine competition. Supporters, however, highlight political stability and rapid economic growth under her rule.

6.3.4 Economic Transformation and Development Success

Despite political turbulence, Bangladesh has emerged as one of South Asia's most remarkable development stories. Once dismissed as a "basket case" by international observers in the 1970s, Bangladesh has achieved sustained economic growth over the past two decades, transitioning from a low-income to a lower-middle-income country.

The ready-made garment (RMG) industry has been the backbone of this transformation, accounting for more than 80 percent of export earnings and employing millions, particularly women. This industrial success has contributed to significant poverty reduction, improvements in literacy, and advances in public health. Social development indicators such as life expectancy, maternal health, and gender parity in education now surpass those of some larger South Asian neighbors.

At the same time, economic vulnerabilities persist. Overreliance on the garment sector makes Bangladesh sensitive to global market fluctuations. Infrastructure gaps, energy shortages, and corruption remain significant obstacles. Additionally, rapid urbanization has strained cities like Dhaka and Chittagong, exacerbating problems of congestion, pollution, and inadequate services.

6.3.5 Climate Change and Environmental Vulnerability

Bangladesh is often described as ground zero for climate change. Its low-lying delta geography, dependence on agriculture, and dense population make it highly susceptible to sea-level rise, cyclones, and flooding. Each year, millions are displaced temporarily or permanently by river erosion and extreme weather events. The impacts of climate change intersect with urban migration, poverty, and food security, making environmental adaptation one of the country's foremost national priorities.

Despite these challenges, Bangladesh has become a global leader in climate adaptation. Initiatives such as cyclone shelters, community-based disaster preparedness, and innovative use of microfinance have built resilience. Internationally, Dhaka has been an active voice in climate negotiations, pushing for climate justice and financing for vulnerable countries.

6.3.6 Refugee Crises and Regional Challenges

One of the most pressing contemporary issues facing Bangladesh is the Rohingya refugee crisis. Since 2017, more than a million Rohingya Muslims have fled persecution in Myanmar's Rakhine State, seeking shelter in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar district. While Bangladesh has been praised for its humanitarian response, the influx has strained resources, created security concerns, and complicated relations with Myanmar.

Regionally, Bangladesh's relationship with India is particularly significant. While India supported Bangladesh's independence, ties have often been marked by disputes over water sharing (particularly the Teesta River), border management, and migration. Yet, under Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh has strengthened cooperation with India, especially in counterterrorism and connectivity. Relations with China have also expanded, with Beijing emerging as a major investor in infrastructure

projects. This balancing act between India and China reflects Bangladesh's effort to maximize economic opportunities while safeguarding sovereignty.

6.3.7 Bangladesh in South Asia and Beyond

Bangladesh demonstrates how smaller South Asian states can carve out space for themselves in global politics. Its developmental achievements have been lauded internationally, and it has contributed to UN peacekeeping operations worldwide, enhancing its reputation as a responsible global actor. Yet, its future trajectory depends on whether it can overcome governance deficits, ensure political inclusivity, and adapt effectively to environmental and demographic pressures.

The case of Bangladesh illustrates both the possibilities and constraints faced by smaller South Asian states. Despite limited resources and vulnerability, it has shown resilience and innovation, but its challenges remain formidable. Its success or failure in addressing them will not only shape domestic outcomes but also influence the stability and prosperity of South Asia as a whole.

6.4 Nepal

Nepal, a landlocked country nestled in the Himalayas between India and China, stands out among South Asia's smaller states for its strategic location, cultural heritage, and complex political evolution. Despite its modest size and economic constraints, Nepal has historically served as a buffer state, balancing the interests of its two powerful neighbors. Its history, domestic politics, and development trajectory provide key insights into the challenges faced by smaller South Asian nations striving for sovereignty, stability, and growth.

6.4.1 Historical Context and Monarchical Legacy

Nepal's history is deeply intertwined with its monarchy. For centuries, the Shah dynasty consolidated power, unifying various principalities under a centralized rule. The country retained its sovereignty during the colonial period, skillfully navigating the pressures from British India and maintaining its independence, unlike most South Asian territories that came under European domination.

The monarchy's authority remained largely unchallenged until the mid-20th century. In 1951, the Rana autocracy, which had dominated Nepal's politics for over a century, was overthrown, and King Tribhuvan restored limited democratic governance. This marked the beginning of Nepal's experimentation with constitutional monarchy, parliamentary politics, and gradual political liberalization. However, the democratic experience was uneven, punctuated by coups, dissolutions of parliament, and recurring interventions by the monarchy.

6.4.2 Political Transformation and Civil War

Nepal's contemporary political history has been shaped by profound social and political transformations. In 1990, a popular pro-democracy movement forced King Birendra to accept constitutional reforms, establishing a multiparty parliamentary system while retaining the monarchy. The 1990s saw the rise of political parties, growing civil society engagement, and increasing demands for social inclusion by marginalized groups such as the Madhesis, Janajatis, and Dalits.

Despite democratic reforms, inequality, marginalization, and underdevelopment fueled dissatisfaction, giving rise to the Maoist insurgency in 1996. The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) waged a decade-long "People's War" against the state, aiming to abolish the monarchy and establish a socialist republic. The conflict resulted in over 17,000 deaths and widespread displacement.

Nepal's strategic location between India and China makes it a key arena of regional power competition.

The 2006 Comprehensive Peace Accord, following a massive pro-democracy movement, ended the civil war, integrated Maoist forces into the national army, and paved the way for significant political change. In 2008, the monarchy was formally abolished, and Nepal became a federal democratic republic, with a new constitution promulgated in 2015. This historic transformation reflected both the demands for inclusive governance and the desire to end centuries of centralized monarchical control.

6.4.3 Federalism, Identity Politics, and Governance Challenges

Nepal's transition to federalism has been both ambitious and contentious. The 2015 constitution sought to devolve power to provinces and address historical inequalities, but it sparked protests, particularly among Madhesi communities in the Terai region, who felt underrepresented in the new political framework. Ethnic, linguistic, and regional identity politics remain a defining feature of Nepali governance, shaping both party politics and policy debates.

The political system has also been marked by instability. Frequent changes in government, coalition breakdowns, and confrontations between the executive and legislative branches have hindered consistent policymaking. Corruption and bureaucratic inefficiency continue to constrain development, while the challenges of integrating former Maoist combatants into society remain unresolved.

6.4.4 Economic Development and Structural Vulnerabilities

Nepal is one of the least developed countries in South Asia, with limited industrial capacity and a heavy reliance on agriculture. Subsistence farming dominates rural areas, while remittances from Nepalis working abroad—particularly in the Gulf countries and India—constitute a significant portion of GDP. Tourism, especially mountaineering and trekking, is another major source of revenue, though it is vulnerable to natural disasters and global crises.

The 2015 Gorkha earthquake highlighted Nepal's vulnerability to natural hazards, destroying infrastructure, homes, and livelihoods. Recovery efforts were slow, emphasizing the need for disaster resilience, urban planning, and investment in public services. Cross-border trade with India and China remains crucial for economic stability, but Nepal's landlocked status poses structural constraints, limiting its ability to diversify trade and attract large-scale foreign investment.

6.4.5 Geopolitical Position and Regional Relations

Nepal's location between India and China has profoundly shaped its foreign policy. Traditionally, Nepal has pursued a "balancing act," leveraging its strategic position to maintain independence while engaging with both neighbors. India has historically had a strong influence over Nepal's trade, infrastructure, and security, while China has expanded its economic and political presence in recent years through investments, development assistance, and connectivity projects.

Nepal's foreign policy seeks to maximize economic opportunities while preserving sovereignty, but periodic tensions with India—over border management, trade disruptions, and political influence—have underscored the fragility of this balance. Simultaneously, China's growing footprint in infrastructure and connectivity projects provides alternative avenues for development but raises concerns about debt dependence and strategic alignment.

6.4.6 Social Dynamics and Human Development

Nepal is ethnically and linguistically diverse, home to multiple groups including Brahmins, Chhetris, Newars, Madhesis, Tharus, and indigenous mountain communities. This diversity has enriched Nepali culture but also presented challenges for political inclusion and equitable development. Gender disparities, limited access to education in remote areas, and social exclusion of marginalized groups remain significant obstacles.

Despite these challenges, Nepal has made progress in human development. Literacy rates have improved, maternal and child health indicators have advanced, and poverty rates have declined, although significant disparities persist between urban and rural areas, and among different social groups.

6.4.7 Nepal in South Asia and the World

Nepal exemplifies the dilemmas of smaller South Asian states: it must navigate domestic diversity, limited resources, and regional pressures while pursuing development and political stability. Its experiences with civil conflict, federalism, and democratization provide important lessons in managing identity politics and decentralization.

In the international arena, Nepal participates actively in SAARC, BIMSTEC, and the United Nations, seeking development aid, disaster relief, and diplomatic support. Its foreign policy remains guided by pragmatism: balancing India and China, engaging with multilateral institutions, and fostering economic partnerships to overcome structural vulnerabilities.

Nepal's trajectory underscores that smaller states in South Asia, despite limited material power, can exert influence through strategic diplomacy, cultural identity, and regional cooperation. The country's future stability will depend on consolidating democratic institutions, managing identity politics effectively, and leveraging its geostrategic position for sustainable development.

6.5 Bhutan

Bhutan, a small Himalayan kingdom situated between India and China, is often regarded as a unique example of a nation that prioritizes sustainable development, cultural preservation, and political stability. With a population of just over 800,000, Bhutan is the smallest of the South Asian states in terms of population, yet its approach to governance, economy, and international relations offers valuable insights into how smaller states navigate modern challenges while preserving sovereignty and identity.

6.5.1 Historical Context and Monarchical Legacy

Bhutan's history is defined by its isolationist policies and strong monarchical tradition. For centuries, the Drukpa Kagyu school of Buddhism shaped Bhutanese society, governance, and culture, with the monarchy acting as both spiritual and temporal authority. Bhutan maintained its independence despite pressures from British India and later from China, relying on geographic remoteness, strategic diplomacy, and internal cohesion.

The establishment of the Wangchuck monarchy in 1907 marked the consolidation of political power, unifying various regions under a central authority. The monarchy emphasized stability, gradual modernization, and preservation of cultural and religious identity. Unlike many of its South Asian neighbors, Bhutan avoided

colonial occupation, which allowed it to develop distinct institutions and maintain continuity in governance.

6.5.2 Political Transition and Democratic Reform

For much of the 20th century, Bhutan remained an absolute monarchy with limited public participation in governance. However, under King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the country underwent significant reforms aimed at gradual modernization and political liberalization. The monarchy introduced the concept of **Gross National Happiness (GNH)** as a guiding principle for development, emphasizing holistic well-being, environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and equitable socio-economic growth.

Bhutan practices "Gross National Happiness" as an alternative development philosophy, influencing global discourse.

In 2008, Bhutan transitioned to a constitutional monarchy, with parliamentary elections held for the first time. The monarchy voluntarily ceded political power while retaining symbolic and unifying roles. The introduction of democratic institutions was carefully managed to ensure stability and continuity, reflecting Bhutan's preference for gradual reform over abrupt change.

6.5.3 Governance and Development Approach

Bhutan's governance model prioritizes long-term social and environmental goals alongside economic development. Unlike conventional GDP-driven frameworks, Bhutan measures national progress using GNH, integrating indicators such as cultural preservation, environmental sustainability, and good governance.

This approach has helped Bhutan maintain social cohesion, prevent the emergence of deep inequalities, and preserve environmental integrity. Education and healthcare are widely accessible, and poverty rates have declined steadily. However, Bhutan faces structural challenges, including limited industrialization, reliance on hydropower exports (primarily to India), and vulnerability to external shocks such as natural disasters and global economic fluctuations.

6.5.4 Economy and Strategic Dependence

Bhutan's economy is small but strategically positioned. Hydropower constitutes the largest export sector, generating significant revenue through sales to India. Agriculture and forestry remain important, particularly for rural livelihoods. Tourism, though carefully regulated, provides an additional source of income, with

a focus on high-value, low-impact eco-tourism to prevent overexploitation of resources.

The country's economic dependence on India is significant, influencing trade, infrastructure, and investment. India remains Bhutan's primary development partner and security guarantor, reflecting a long-standing bilateral relationship. While Bhutan has sought to diversify its economic and diplomatic partnerships, its geographic and demographic constraints limit its options, making prudent management of external relations essential.

6.5.5 Geopolitics and Regional Relations

Bhutan's location between India and China positions it at the center of Himalayan geopolitics. India has historically maintained a strong influence, providing economic assistance, infrastructure development, and security guarantees. Border management and strategic cooperation with India remain critical for Bhutan's national security.

Relations with China are more cautious. Bhutan has no formal diplomatic ties with Beijing, and border disputes persist, particularly in the northern and western sectors. While Bhutan seeks to maintain sovereignty and avoid overdependence on any single power, its small size and limited military capabilities constrain its leverage in regional geopolitics. Bhutan's careful diplomacy demonstrates how smaller states in South Asia can preserve autonomy while engaging strategically with larger neighbors.

6.5.6 Social and Cultural Dynamics

Bhutan's population is culturally and linguistically distinct, with the Drukpa Buddhist majority forming the core of national identity. Minority groups such as the Lhotshampa, a Nepali-speaking community, have historically faced tensions with the state, particularly in the 1990s when citizenship policies and political marginalization led to displacement. Today, Bhutan emphasizes cultural preservation while promoting social inclusion, though challenges remain in ensuring equitable opportunities for all communities.

Education, health, and gender equity are central to Bhutan's development model. Literacy rates have risen significantly, and women play an increasingly prominent role in governance, civil service, and civil society. These social investments reinforce Bhutan's unique approach to development, demonstrating that small states can pursue holistic well-being rather than solely economic growth.

6.5.7 Bhutan in South Asia and Global Engagement

Bhutan exemplifies how smaller South Asian states can exercise agency despite

demographic and economic limitations. Its foreign policy emphasizes sovereignty, stability, and measured engagement with regional and global partners. The country participates in SAARC, BIMSTEC, and the United Nations, using multilateral platforms to advance development priorities and environmental advocacy.

Globally, Bhutan is recognized for pioneering sustainable development models, championing climate conservation, and maintaining political stability. Its emphasis on Gross National Happiness has inspired dialogue in other countries on alternative measures of development, illustrating how small states can contribute innovative ideas to global governance debates.

6.5.8 Conclusion

Bhutan's experience underscores the possibilities and constraints faced by smaller South Asian nations. Its success in preserving sovereignty, promoting sustainable development, and transitioning to democracy contrasts with the challenges of political instability, ethnic tensions, and economic vulnerability faced by other regional neighbors. By balancing traditional governance, environmental stewardship, and cautious engagement with external powers, Bhutan demonstrates a model of resilience and strategic prudence for small states in a region dominated by larger actors.

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Unit 7

REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AND INITIATIVES

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INTRODUCTION

Regional organizations in South Asia have played an important role in promoting dialogue, cooperation, and collective action among states with shared challenges. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established as the first major platform for regional integration, but political tensions—especially between India and Pakistan—have often hindered its effectiveness. In recent years, new organizations such as BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) and IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association) have emerged, reflecting both the limitations of SAARC and the evolving priorities of member states. These platforms are particularly significant in addressing economic cooperation, security concerns, and climate-related issues in a highly interconnected region. This unit examines the development, successes, and limitations of South Asia's regional organizations and their impact on governance, peace, and development.

OBJECTIVES

The unit will enlighten the reader as:

- To trace the origins and evolution of regional organizations such as SAARC, BIMSTEC, and IORA.
- To analyze the successes and shortcomings of these organizations in fostering cooperation and resolving conflicts.
- To assess the role of regional cooperation frameworks in addressing economic, security, and environmental challenges in South Asia.

Introduction

The South Asian region, comprising countries with diverse political systems, economic structures, and cultural histories, has long been characterized by both interdependence and rivalry. The region includes the major powers of India and Pakistan, smaller states such as Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives, and populous nations like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. This diversity, coupled with historical legacies of colonialism, partition, and ethnic conflict, has created both opportunities and challenges for regional cooperation. Over the decades, regional organizations and multilateral initiatives have emerged as key instruments for fostering dialogue, economic integration, and collective responses to shared challenges. These initiatives seek to address common concerns such as poverty alleviation, trade facilitation, energy cooperation, disaster management, and maritime security, while simultaneously offering platforms to mitigate political tensions among member states.

South Asia's economic and security landscape is unique. The region has experienced rapid demographic growth, urbanization, and industrialization, alongside persistent poverty, infrastructural deficits, and vulnerability to natural disasters. These conditions create strong incentives for cooperation, as no single country can fully address issues like cross-border trade inefficiencies, energy shortages, or environmental challenges on its own. Regional initiatives thus serve as mechanisms for pooling resources, harmonizing policies, and fostering a sense of collective responsibility. However, political tensions, historical rivalries, and differing developmental priorities often complicate these processes, limiting the effectiveness of cooperation. This paradox—high interdependence coupled with enduring mistrust—shapes the evolution of South Asian regional organizations.

7.1 South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) represents the most formalized and long-standing attempt at institutionalized regional cooperation in South Asia. Established on 8 December 1985 in Dhaka, Bangladesh, SAARC emerged against the backdrop of historical tensions, economic disparities, and a shared recognition that regional collaboration was essential for addressing collective developmental and security challenges. Its founding members—Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka—were joined later by Afghanistan in 2007, reflecting the evolving dynamics of South Asian geopolitics. SAARC was conceived as a platform to promote economic, social, and cultural development, as well as to facilitate dialogue on political and security matters, thereby creating a cooperative framework that could mitigate inter-state conflicts and foster regional integration.

7.1.1 Objectives and Organizational Structure

The objectives of SAARC, as outlined in its charter, emphasize accelerating economic growth, promoting social progress, and strengthening cultural ties among member states. The organization seeks to reduce poverty, promote education and healthcare, encourage technical and scientific cooperation, and foster regional trade and investment. SAARC also aspires to create a common South Asian identity that transcends national borders, emphasizing shared historical, cultural, and geographical linkages.

SAARC operates through a structured framework of annual summits, ministerial meetings, and specialized committees. The **Council of Ministers**, comprising foreign ministers of member states, oversees policy coordination, while the **Secretariat**, based in Kathmandu, Nepal, functions as the administrative hub facilitating communication, project implementation, and technical support. Additionally, SAARC has developed numerous specialized bodies, including the South Asian University, SAARC Development Fund, and various technical committees in fields such as energy, agriculture, environment, and disaster management. Despite this institutional architecture, SAARC's ability to translate objectives into substantive action has often been constrained by political disagreements and bureaucratic inertia.

7.1.2 Achievements and Initiatives

SAARC has made notable contributions in several spheres, even if its broader objectives have often remained unrealized. One significant achievement is the establishment of **regional institutions and knowledge-sharing platforms**. The South Asian University, inaugurated in 2010 in New Delhi, serves as a hub for regional academic collaboration, offering programs that encourage cross-border understanding and cooperation. Similarly, the **SAARC Development Fund**, operational since 2010, finances social, economic, and infrastructural projects aimed at poverty alleviation, energy security, and connectivity. These initiatives demonstrate the organization's potential to catalyze development, particularly in smaller member states with limited resources.

The **South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)** was established in 1985 to foster economic and cultural cooperation among its eight members.

In the domain of **disaster management**, SAARC has played a constructive role. The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and recurrent floods in Bangladesh, India, and Nepal prompted SAARC to create frameworks for regional disaster preparedness, early

warning systems, and emergency response coordination. Such collaboration has enhanced regional resilience and highlighted the practical benefits of cooperation in areas of shared vulnerability. SAARC has also promoted **cultural and social initiatives**, facilitating student exchanges, joint research, and cultural festivals, which foster people-to-people links across South Asia.

7.1.3 Economic Cooperation and Trade

Economic integration has been a core aspiration of SAARC, culminating in initiatives such as the **South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA)** and the **SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA)**. These frameworks aimed to reduce tariffs, enhance market access, and promote intra-regional trade. While SAFTA and SAPTA laid important legal and institutional foundations for economic cooperation, actual trade volumes among SAARC members have remained relatively low, constituting less than 6% of total intra-regional trade in South Asia as of recent years.

Several factors contribute to this limited economic integration. Political tensions, particularly between India and Pakistan, have frequently stalled progress on trade agreements and infrastructure connectivity. Non-tariff barriers, inadequate transport and logistics infrastructure, and bureaucratic hurdles further restrict trade flows. Additionally, the economic asymmetry between India—the region's largest economy—and smaller member states creates challenges in ensuring equitable benefits and balanced participation. Despite these limitations, SAARC remains the principal formal framework for addressing economic cooperation, and its agreements provide a platform upon which further liberalization and integration could be built.

7.1.4 Political Dimensions and Challenges

The political dimension of SAARC is simultaneously its greatest strength and weakness. On one hand, it provides a formal mechanism for dialogue among historically adversarial states, offering the possibility of confidence-building and conflict mitigation. For instance, SAARC summits have occasionally provided venues for high-level engagement between India and Pakistan, helping to de-escalate tensions or create avenues for negotiation on specific issues such as trade, water sharing, or disaster response.

On the other hand, political rivalries, especially the India-Pakistan conflict, have significantly hampered SAARC's functionality. Frequent disruptions of scheduled summits, disagreements over agenda-setting, and reluctance to implement binding agreements reflect the deep mistrust among member states. Afghanistan's inclusion has further complicated internal dynamics, given its ongoing security challenges and reliance on external actors for stabilization. These tensions highlight the

intrinsic difficulty of fostering regional cooperation in a context characterized by historical animosities, divergent national interests, and uneven economic capacities.

7.1.5 Social and Human Development Initiatives

Beyond politics and economics, SAARC has emphasized **human development and social cooperation**. Programs in education, health, and gender equity aim to address persistent developmental disparities in the region. The **SAARC Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS Centre**, the **SAARC Energy Centre**, and the **SAARC Human Resource Development Centre** exemplify efforts to leverage regional expertise and resources for common benefit. Such initiatives are particularly valuable for smaller member states, which often lack the scale or capacity to implement comprehensive national programs independently.

SAARC has also promoted **women's empowerment and social inclusion**. Through forums and projects focused on gender equality, entrepreneurship, and vocational training, the organization has sought to mainstream women's participation in development and policy-making. These social initiatives, while sometimes overshadowed by high-profile political disagreements, constitute a core element of SAARC's long-term contribution to regional cohesion and capacity building.

7.1.6 Limitations and Critiques

Despite its ambitions, SAARC has faced persistent critiques regarding its effectiveness. Analysts point to the **slow pace of decision-making**, excessive dependence on consensus, and limited enforcement mechanisms as major structural constraints. Political disputes, particularly Indo-Pakistan tensions, have often stalled summits and initiatives, creating a perception of inertia. Moreover, economic integration remains shallow; intra-regional trade, investment, and mobility lag behind potential, undermining the organization's relevance in comparison to other regional blocs such as ASEAN or the European Union.

Another critique concerns the **asymmetry of power and influence** among member states. India's dominant position can lead smaller states to perceive SAARC as a vehicle for Indian interests rather than a genuinely balanced forum, resulting in occasional disengagement or the pursuit of alternative sub-regional mechanisms, such as BIMSTEC. Similarly, smaller states like Bhutan, the Maldives, and Nepal sometimes struggle to have their voices heard in a framework dominated by larger economies and political concerns.

7.1.7 SAARC's Strategic Relevance

Despite these limitations, SAARC remains strategically significant. The organization embodies the normative aspiration for **South Asian regionalism**,

providing a reference point for dialogue, economic cooperation, and social development. It has also helped institutionalize a culture of multilateral engagement, encouraging member states to address transnational challenges collaboratively rather than solely through bilateral channels.

In terms of security, SAARC has explored cooperative measures on **counter-terrorism, drug trafficking, and border management**, offering frameworks for intelligence sharing and joint initiatives. While progress has been uneven, these efforts highlight the organization's potential to address non-traditional security threats that transcend national boundaries.

7.1.8 Conclusion

SAARC exemplifies both the potential and the challenges of regional cooperation in South Asia. Its achievements in social development, disaster management, education, and cultural cooperation demonstrate that collaboration is possible even amid political rivalries. However, structural constraints, political disputes, and economic disparities have limited its effectiveness, particularly in trade and economic integration. For smaller South Asian states, SAARC provides a platform for engagement, capacity building, and multilateral diplomacy, while larger powers use it as a forum to exercise regional influence.

Ultimately, SAARC represents a cautious experiment in South Asian regionalism: a formal, institutionalized effort to bridge historical divisions and foster cooperation. While it has yet to fully realize its economic and political ambitions, it continues to play a role in shaping regional dialogue, offering lessons in both the opportunities and constraints of multilateralism in a politically fragmented environment. Its evolution also sets the stage for complementary initiatives, such as SAFTA and BIMSTEC, which seek to overcome the limitations of consensus-based frameworks and promote more targeted economic and technical cooperation across the region.

7.2 South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA)

The South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) represents a landmark initiative aimed at enhancing economic integration within the South Asian region. Established under the broader framework of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), SAFTA was signed in 2004 during the 12th SAARC Summit in Islamabad and came into effect on 1 January 2006. Its primary objective is to promote and intensify intra-regional trade by reducing tariff and non-tariff barriers, thereby fostering economic growth, diversification, and interdependence among member states. SAFTA encompasses the eight SAARC members—Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka—offering a structured mechanism for economic liberalization and

cooperation in a region historically constrained by political tensions, infrastructural limitations, and economic disparities.

7.2.1 Objectives and Rationale

SAFTA was conceived in response to the recognition that South Asia, despite its geographic proximity and shared historical ties, has historically experienced low levels of intra-regional trade. As of the early 2000s, trade among South Asian nations constituted barely 5–6% of total regional trade, a stark contrast to the higher integration seen in Southeast Asia or Europe. The rationale for SAFTA was thus both economic and strategic: by facilitating freer trade, the initiative aimed to increase market access for smaller states, promote industrialization, create employment opportunities, and encourage investment flows across the region.

The idea of a **South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA)** was introduced in 2006.

The specific objectives of SAFTA include: reducing tariff barriers among member states; promoting economic cooperation through mutually beneficial trade arrangements; encouraging private sector participation in regional trade; and creating a platform for addressing disputes related to trade policies. Moreover, SAFTA seeks to provide smaller member states such as Bhutan, Maldives, and Nepal with avenues to access larger regional markets, mitigating the asymmetry created by the dominance of India's economy. By institutionalizing trade liberalization, SAFTA aims to transform South Asia from a politically fragmented region into an economically interconnected zone.

7.2.2 Structure and Mechanisms

SAFTA operates through a comprehensive set of rules and institutional mechanisms designed to facilitate trade liberalization while ensuring equitable treatment of member states. The **SAFTA Ministerial Council** serves as the apex decision-making body, comprising trade ministers from all member countries. This council is responsible for reviewing the implementation of agreements, resolving trade disputes, and monitoring progress toward tariff reductions.

A critical component of SAFTA is its **tariff reduction schedule**, which differentiates between **developed** (India and Pakistan) and **least developed countries (LDCs)** (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka). Developed member states are required to reduce tariffs on goods originating from other members to 5%, while LDCs have a more extended timeline to achieve similar reductions. This graduated approach seeks to address the

economic asymmetry in the region and protect smaller economies from the potential adverse effects of abrupt trade liberalization.

SAFTA also includes mechanisms to address **non-tariff barriers (NTBs)**, such as import licensing requirements, technical standards, and customs procedures, which can hinder the free flow of goods. The SAFTA Secretariat, based in Kathmandu, Nepal, plays a key role in coordinating these efforts, providing technical assistance, and monitoring compliance among member states.

7.2.3 Achievements and Impact

SAFTA has contributed to formalizing the framework for intra-regional trade and increasing awareness of the benefits of economic cooperation. By establishing clear rules for tariff reductions and preferential trade arrangements, SAFTA has provided smaller states with opportunities to access larger regional markets. For instance, countries like Bhutan and Nepal have leveraged preferential access to export agricultural products, textiles, and handicrafts to neighboring economies. Similarly, Sri Lanka has used SAFTA provisions to expand its export base to India and Bangladesh, particularly in the apparel and tea sectors.

The agreement has also promoted **institutional capacity building**. Training programs, workshops, and technical assistance initiatives under SAFTA have enhanced the ability of trade officials to implement liberalization measures effectively. Moreover, SAFTA has encouraged dialogue on trade-related issues, creating a platform where member states can negotiate on tariff schedules, standards, and customs procedures. Such mechanisms have the potential to strengthen regional regulatory coherence and reduce transaction costs over time.

7.2.4 Limitations and Challenges

Despite its formal achievements, SAFTA has faced several structural and political challenges that have limited its impact on actual trade flows. One major limitation is the persistence of **non-tariff barriers**. Even when tariffs have been reduced, bureaucratic hurdles, complex customs procedures, and technical standards have continued to impede the movement of goods. Infrastructure deficiencies, including poor road connectivity, limited rail networks, and inadequate port facilities, have further constrained trade, particularly for landlocked countries such as Nepal and Bhutan.

Political tensions, especially between India and Pakistan, have also hampered SAFTA's effectiveness. Periodic border closures, trade restrictions, and disagreements over certification and standards have created an unpredictable trade environment, discouraging private sector participation and investment. Smaller member states often bear the brunt of these disruptions, as their limited market

access and dependency on larger economies make them vulnerable to unilateral policy shifts.

Another significant limitation is **economic asymmetry**. India, as the largest and most dynamic economy in the region, dominates trade within SAFTA, while smaller economies struggle to compete or negotiate favorable terms. This imbalance has sometimes led to perceptions of inequity and reluctance among smaller states to fully embrace liberalization measures. Additionally, limited institutional enforcement mechanisms mean that compliance is largely voluntary, reducing the credibility and effectiveness of the agreement.

7.2.5 Trade Patterns and Economic Integration

The practical impact of SAFTA on intra-regional trade has been mixed. While formal trade agreements exist, actual trade volumes remain modest, constituting less than 6–7% of total trade in the region. India accounts for the bulk of intra-SAFTA trade, followed by Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Smaller economies, despite preferential access, often lack the productive capacity or logistical networks to take full advantage of SAFTA provisions.

Nonetheless, SAFTA has created opportunities for **sectoral diversification**. Agricultural products, textiles, and handicrafts dominate trade among smaller states, while energy, machinery, and consumer goods flow predominantly from India. SAFTA has also encouraged regional discussions on **services trade**, investment facilitation, and trade in knowledge-intensive sectors, signaling a gradual broadening of the agenda beyond traditional goods.

7.2.6 Strategic and Political Dimensions

SAFTA is not merely an economic instrument; it also has strategic and political significance. By formalizing economic interdependence, SAFTA seeks to reduce the likelihood of conflict and foster cooperative norms among historically adversarial states. Economic integration is seen as a pathway to political stability, with trade acting as a stabilizing force that creates mutual interests and incentives for dialogue.

However, the political dimension has also constrained SAFTA's potential. The frequent disruption of India-Pakistan trade relations, coupled with unresolved disputes such as water sharing, border demarcation, and security concerns, has limited confidence-building and hindered long-term planning. Afghanistan's integration into SAFTA also remains fragile, given its security challenges and dependence on transit through Pakistan for market access.

7.2.7 Future Prospects

The future of SAFTA depends on several factors, including political will, infrastructure development, and regional economic diversification. Enhancing connectivity through projects such as road and rail networks, digital trade facilitation, and customs modernization could significantly improve intra-regional trade. Addressing non-tariff barriers and harmonizing standards would further reduce transaction costs and create a more predictable trade environment.

For smaller member states, SAFTA offers opportunities to increase exports, attract investment, and participate in regional value chains. Leveraging preferential market access, building industrial capacity, and fostering entrepreneurship are critical strategies to ensure equitable benefits from trade liberalization. Larger economies, particularly India, can play a constructive role by supporting infrastructure development, technical assistance, and investment in neighboring markets, thereby creating a more balanced and sustainable regional economic system.

7.2.8 Conclusion

SAFTA exemplifies both the promise and the challenges of economic regionalism in South Asia. By institutionalizing preferential trade arrangements and establishing clear rules for tariff reduction, it has laid the foundation for greater regional economic integration. However, political tensions, infrastructural deficits, and economic asymmetries have limited its practical impact. Despite these challenges, SAFTA remains a vital instrument for promoting intra-regional trade, providing smaller states with market access, and creating a framework for dialogue and cooperation.

As a complement to SAARC, SAFTA highlights the potential of targeted economic initiatives to advance regional integration, even in politically fragmented environments. Its evolution demonstrates that while political rivalries may constrain broad multilateral frameworks, economic imperatives can still drive cooperation and interdependence. For South Asia, SAFTA represents an ongoing experiment in reconciling economic liberalization with political realities, offering lessons in the opportunities and limitations of regional economic cooperation.

7.3 Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) represents a pivotal framework for regional cooperation that connects South Asia with Southeast Asia. Established in 1997 through the Bangkok Declaration, BIMSTEC initially brought together five member

states—Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Myanmar—and later expanded to include Nepal and Bhutan, creating a seven-member organization. The initiative was conceived as a response to the slow progress of SAARC, particularly due to India-Pakistan tensions, and sought to foster economic, technical, and strategic collaboration in the Bay of Bengal region. By linking countries with shared maritime and terrestrial interests, BIMSTEC aims to promote trade, investment, energy cooperation, connectivity, and security, positioning itself as a more flexible and pragmatic alternative to SAARC in advancing regional integration.

7.3.1 Objectives and Strategic Vision

BIMSTEC's objectives are multifaceted, reflecting both economic and geopolitical imperatives. At its core, the organization seeks to promote regional trade and investment, enhance infrastructure connectivity, encourage technological cooperation, and facilitate joint projects in sectors such as energy, fisheries, tourism, and agriculture. Beyond economic considerations, BIMSTEC emphasizes **strategic cooperation**, including counter-terrorism, transnational crime prevention, disaster management, and maritime security, recognizing that the Bay of Bengal region is vulnerable to both environmental hazards and security threats.

The initiative also seeks to foster **sub-regional integration**, particularly by connecting South Asian and Southeast Asian economies and providing smaller states with opportunities to participate in regional value chains. BIMSTEC is strategically important for India, which views it as a mechanism to enhance its influence in the Bay of Bengal and to counterbalance China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean. For smaller states like Bhutan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, BIMSTEC offers alternative avenues for economic cooperation, investment, and diplomatic engagement, bypassing the constraints imposed by the India-Pakistan rivalry in SAARC.

The rise of **BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation)** reflects South Asia's search for alternative frameworks beyond SAARC.

7.3.2 Organizational Structure and Mechanisms

BIMSTEC operates through a structured framework that includes a **BIMSTEC Summit**, a **Council of Ministers**, and a **BIMSTEC Secretariat** based in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The summit, held periodically, sets the overall strategic direction and priorities for cooperation. The Council of Ministers, composed of foreign and sectoral ministers from member states, oversees the implementation of policies and projects. Additionally, **sectoral ministerial meetings** focus on specific areas such

as trade, energy, transport, health, and science and technology, providing detailed guidance for initiatives within each sector.

BIMSTEC emphasizes **pragmatic cooperation** rather than strict adherence to consensus, allowing for flexibility in project implementation. Member states can engage in sub-sectoral collaborations even if full agreement is not reached across all areas, which contrasts with SAARC's often slow, consensus-driven decision-making processes. This flexibility has enabled BIMSTEC to implement a range of initiatives in trade facilitation, energy cooperation, transport connectivity, and disaster response, demonstrating its capacity to adapt to the region's diverse political and economic realities.

7.3.3 Economic Cooperation and Trade Facilitation

Economic integration constitutes a central pillar of BIMSTEC's agenda. The organization has pursued initiatives to enhance **intra-regional trade**, reduce tariffs and non-tariff barriers, and encourage investment flows. A key milestone was the **BIMSTEC Free Trade Agreement (BFTA)**, signed in 2004 and later operationalized in 2006, aimed at promoting trade liberalization and preferential market access among member states. The BFTA seeks to complement SAFTA by providing an alternative platform for economic integration that is less encumbered by political rivalries.

BIMSTEC has also focused on **connectivity** as a means of promoting trade. Initiatives such as the BIMSTEC Transport Infrastructure and Logistics Plan seek to improve road, rail, and maritime links between member states, facilitating the movement of goods, services, and people. Energy cooperation is another critical component, with collaborative projects in electricity generation, natural gas, and renewable energy designed to address energy deficits in smaller economies and promote shared benefits. These measures underscore BIMSTEC's strategic emphasis on creating tangible economic linkages, rather than relying solely on normative agreements.

7.3.4 Sectoral Cooperation

BIMSTEC's multi-sectoral approach distinguishes it from other regional organizations. The organization operates across fourteen priority sectors, including trade and investment, transport and communication, energy, tourism, fisheries, agriculture, public health, technology, and counter-terrorism. This diversified agenda reflects the recognition that regional integration requires cooperation in multiple spheres, from economic development to social welfare and security.

For example, in the field of **disaster management**, BIMSTEC has developed regional early warning systems, coordinated relief efforts, and conducted joint

training programs, particularly in response to cyclones, floods, and earthquakes that frequently affect member states. Similarly, in the **health sector**, collaborative initiatives focus on combating communicable diseases, enhancing regional research, and promoting knowledge exchange. These sectoral efforts not only improve regional resilience but also strengthen institutional linkages and trust among member states, fostering a more cohesive regional identity.

7.3.5 Strategic and Geopolitical Dimensions

BIMSTEC holds significant strategic importance due to its location in the Bay of Bengal, a critical maritime corridor connecting South and Southeast Asia. The organization provides a platform for member states to coordinate on **maritime security, counter-terrorism, and transnational crime**, areas of growing concern given the rise of non-traditional security threats. India, in particular, views BIMSTEC as a means to project influence in the Bay of Bengal, secure maritime trade routes, and provide an alternative to China's growing presence in the region through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

For smaller member states, BIMSTEC offers strategic leverage and diversified engagement opportunities. Countries like Bhutan and Nepal can pursue economic and technical cooperation with both South and Southeast Asian partners, reducing overdependence on a single neighbor. Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, as maritime states, benefit from collaborative initiatives in port development, shipping, and fisheries, linking economic growth with regional security imperatives. The organization thus serves as a critical platform for balancing national interests with collective regional priorities.

7.3.6 Achievements and Milestones

BIMSTEC has achieved notable progress despite being relatively young compared to SAARC. Several **regional projects** have been successfully initiated, particularly in trade facilitation, transport connectivity, energy cooperation, and disaster management. The **BIMSTEC Coastal Shipping Agreement** and initiatives in port modernization exemplify efforts to enhance regional maritime trade. The **BIMSTEC Energy Grid** and cross-border electricity projects illustrate practical steps toward energy integration.

The organization has also fostered **institutional development**, including the creation of technical committees, ministerial councils, and task forces to monitor project implementation. Sectoral cooperation in health, education, and technology has provided tangible benefits, particularly for smaller member states that require regional support to overcome capacity constraints. Furthermore, BIMSTEC has strengthened

people-to-people contacts through cultural exchanges, student programs, and professional networks, contributing to regional cohesion and shared identity.

7.3.7 Limitations and Challenges

Despite its achievements, BIMSTEC faces several limitations. Political instability in member states, particularly Myanmar, has occasionally disrupted coordination and delayed project implementation. Infrastructure deficits, limited financial resources, and uneven institutional capacity constrain the organization's ability to execute complex projects. Furthermore, intra-regional trade, while growing, remains modest relative to potential, as logistical bottlenecks, tariff disparities, and regulatory differences hinder seamless economic integration.

The absence of Pakistan from BIMSTEC, while reducing India-Pakistan tensions, limits the organization's inclusivity in South Asia. Additionally, competition with other regional frameworks, such as SAARC and ASEAN-led mechanisms, sometimes creates overlapping agendas and coordination challenges. Ensuring sustained political commitment, institutional capacity, and resource mobilization remains critical to BIMSTEC's long-term effectiveness.

7.3.8 Future Prospects

BIMSTEC's future prospects are promising, particularly if member states prioritize connectivity, trade facilitation, and sectoral cooperation. Enhancing transport and digital infrastructure, harmonizing trade regulations, and expanding sectoral collaboration in areas like renewable energy, tourism, and technology can significantly boost regional integration. Strengthening institutional mechanisms, ensuring the timely implementation of projects, and fostering trust among member states will further enhance BIMSTEC's credibility and effectiveness.

The organization also has the potential to **complement global initiatives**. By integrating climate resilience, disaster management, and sustainable development goals into its agenda, BIMSTEC can position itself as a model for pragmatic regional cooperation that links economic growth with environmental sustainability and human development. For smaller member states, BIMSTEC represents a platform to diversify partnerships, attract investment, and participate in regional value chains, strengthening their developmental prospects.

7.3.9 Conclusion

BIMSTEC exemplifies a flexible, pragmatic, and multi-sectoral approach to regional cooperation in South Asia and Southeast Asia. By linking seven countries with shared maritime and economic interests, the organization fosters trade, investment, energy cooperation, connectivity, and security, while providing an alternative platform to SAARC for regional collaboration. Its strategic relevance is

underscored by its location in the Bay of Bengal, a critical maritime corridor, and by its capacity to enhance regional resilience against non-traditional security threats and environmental challenges.

While challenges related to political instability, infrastructure deficits, and limited trade integration remain, BIMSTEC's achievements in sectoral cooperation, connectivity, and institutional development highlight its potential as a driver of sub-regional integration. By addressing structural limitations, enhancing sectoral collaboration, and fostering stronger institutional mechanisms, BIMSTEC can become a cornerstone of South and Southeast Asian regionalism. Its evolution reflects the possibilities of regional cooperation in a politically fragmented and economically diverse region, demonstrating that strategic pragmatism, flexibility, and multi-sectoral engagement can overcome historical constraints and create pathways for sustainable development.

7.4 Idean Ocean Rim Association (IORA)

The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) is a prominent regional organization that focuses on fostering economic cooperation, maritime security, and sustainable development among countries bordering the Indian Ocean. Established in 1997 as the **Indian Ocean Rim Initiative** and later formalized as IORA in 1997 under the Jakarta Concord, the association encompasses 23 member states spanning South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Its creation reflected the recognition of the Indian Ocean's strategic, economic, and environmental significance, as well as the shared interests of littoral states in promoting trade, investment, environmental protection, and regional stability. For South Asian states such as India, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, IORA provides a platform to engage with a broader set of regional and extra-regional partners while addressing shared challenges in maritime security, energy cooperation, and sustainable development.

7.4.1 Objectives and Strategic Importance

IORA's objectives are multifaceted, encompassing economic, social, and environmental dimensions. The association seeks to strengthen **trade and investment**, promote **sustainable use of marine resources**, enhance **maritime safety and security**, facilitate **technology transfer**, and encourage **capacity building** in sectors critical for regional development. The strategic importance of IORA is underscored by the Indian Ocean's role as a critical global trade corridor, linking East

Today, IORA has **23 member states** and 10 dialogue partners, making it one of the widest regional groupings in the Indo-Pacific.

Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Approximately 80% of the world's maritime trade passes through this ocean, including a significant portion of energy supplies destined for Asia, making cooperation among littoral states essential for regional and global stability.

For India, IORA serves as a mechanism to consolidate its role as a key maritime power, advance economic engagement with Indian Ocean countries, and counterbalance external influence in the region. For smaller South Asian states such as the Maldives and Sri Lanka, participation in IORA provides opportunities to diversify trade partnerships, attract investment, and participate in regional security initiatives. IORA thus functions not only as an economic and technical cooperation platform but also as a strategic forum for collective engagement on issues of shared concern.

7.4.2 Organizational Structure and Mechanisms

IORA operates through a structured governance framework designed to facilitate collaboration while respecting the sovereignty and capacities of its diverse members. The organization is headed by the **Council of Ministers**, which includes foreign ministers of member states and meets periodically to review progress, adopt policies, and provide strategic guidance. The **Committee of Senior Officials** oversees the implementation of programs and projects, while specialized working groups focus on thematic areas such as trade and investment, maritime safety, fisheries management, disaster risk reduction, and academic cooperation.

The **IORA Secretariat**, based in Mauritius, coordinates the activities of the association, provides technical assistance, and monitors compliance with agreements. Unlike more rigid regional organizations, IORA operates on a **voluntary and consensus-based model**, allowing member states to engage flexibly according to their capacities and priorities. This flexible approach has enabled IORA to accommodate a diverse group of countries with varying economic, political, and security interests while maintaining a focus on practical cooperation and shared objectives.

7.4.4 Economic Cooperation and Trade Initiatives

Trade and investment facilitation constitute a central pillar of IORA's agenda. The organization has sought to enhance intra-regional trade by reducing barriers, promoting investment flows, and encouraging public-private partnerships. South Asian states such as India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh actively participate in trade promotion initiatives, seeking to leverage IORA membership to expand market access, diversify exports, and attract investment in infrastructure, manufacturing, and services.

IORA's focus on **maritime trade facilitation** includes initiatives such as port development, logistics enhancement, and the promotion of shipping and maritime transport standards. These measures are particularly important for small island states such as the Maldives, which rely heavily on maritime connectivity for trade, tourism, and economic sustainability. By improving port infrastructure, streamlining customs procedures, and enhancing maritime transport networks, IORA seeks to reduce transaction costs and improve the competitiveness of littoral economies.

The organization also emphasizes **investment in key sectors**, including energy, fisheries, tourism, and technology. Collaborative projects in renewable energy, coastal management, and fisheries management aim to balance economic growth with environmental sustainability, reflecting the Indian Ocean region's vulnerability to climate change, sea-level rise, and resource depletion. These initiatives enable smaller states to access technical expertise and funding from larger partners, promoting inclusive development across the Indian Ocean littoral.

7.4.5 Maritime Security and Strategic Cooperation

Maritime security is a critical concern for IORA, given the Indian Ocean's significance as a global trade corridor and its exposure to threats such as piracy, trafficking, smuggling, and terrorism. IORA provides a forum for member states to coordinate on **maritime surveillance, joint exercises, and capacity-building initiatives**, strengthening regional resilience against non-traditional security threats. For South Asian states, such cooperation is vital for protecting trade routes, safeguarding energy supplies, and ensuring the safety of maritime infrastructure.

India, as a leading maritime power in the Indian Ocean, plays a central role in shaping IORA's security agenda. Through joint naval exercises, information sharing, and capacity-building programs, India enhances regional maritime security while fostering trust and collaboration among member states. Smaller states, including Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Mauritius, benefit from access to technical expertise, training, and coordinated response mechanisms, enabling them to protect territorial waters and economic interests effectively.

IORA also engages in discussions on **blue economy initiatives**, emphasizing the sustainable use of marine resources for economic growth. Programs in fisheries, aquaculture, coastal tourism, and marine biotechnology illustrate how the organization integrates economic, environmental, and security objectives to create a comprehensive regional cooperation framework. By linking economic development with environmental protection, IORA promotes sustainable and resilient maritime governance.

7.4.6 Environmental and Disaster Management Initiatives

Environmental sustainability and disaster risk reduction are core elements of IORA's agenda, particularly in light of the Indian Ocean region's susceptibility to cyclones, tsunamis, and climate-induced hazards. IORA has facilitated cooperation in **early warning systems, disaster preparedness, and post-disaster response**, enabling member states to share expertise, resources, and best practices. Collaborative programs in coastal zone management, marine biodiversity protection, and climate adaptation reflect the recognition that environmental challenges transcend national boundaries and require coordinated action.

The association's emphasis on **sustainable development** aligns with global agendas such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). By promoting responsible resource use, environmental conservation, and capacity-building in climate adaptation, IORA helps member states balance economic growth with long-term ecological resilience. This focus is particularly relevant for smaller South Asian states like the Maldives, whose low-lying geography makes them highly vulnerable to sea-level rise and climate change impacts.

7.4.7 Achievements and Milestones

Since its inception, IORA has made significant progress in promoting regional cooperation across multiple domains. Notable achievements include the establishment of sectoral working groups, enhanced maritime safety mechanisms, trade facilitation initiatives, and investment promotion platforms. Collaborative projects in renewable energy, fisheries, and coastal tourism have provided tangible benefits, particularly for smaller and island states. IORA has also strengthened **people-to-people links**, academic exchanges, and professional networks, fostering a sense of shared identity and collaboration among diverse member states.

Strategically, IORA has positioned itself as a platform for **Indian Ocean diplomacy**, enabling member states to coordinate on global and regional maritime issues, engage with extra-regional powers, and participate in transnational initiatives. By addressing both economic and security imperatives, IORA demonstrates the potential of maritime-focused regional cooperation to complement land-based frameworks such as SAARC and BIMSTEC.

7.4.8 Limitations and Challenges

Despite its achievements, IORA faces several challenges that limit its effectiveness. The voluntary nature of participation and consensus-based decision-making can slow project implementation and reduce accountability. Economic and institutional disparities among member states, particularly between larger economies such as India and smaller island nations, pose challenges for equitable benefit-sharing.

Funding constraints, logistical difficulties, and political instability in certain member states further complicate project execution.

Additionally, IORA must navigate **geopolitical complexities**, including the increasing presence of external powers such as China and the United States in the Indian Ocean. While engagement with extra-regional actors can bring investment and technical expertise, it also introduces strategic competition that can complicate coordination among member states. Ensuring balanced engagement and maintaining regional autonomy remain critical challenges for the organization.

7.4.9 Future Prospects

IORA's prospects are closely linked to the growing importance of the Indian Ocean in global trade, energy security, and environmental sustainability. Strengthening institutional capacity, enhancing funding mechanisms, and improving coordination among member states are essential for realizing its full potential. Expanding cooperation in emerging sectors such as renewable energy, marine biotechnology, digital infrastructure, and blue economy initiatives can provide significant economic and environmental benefits.

The association also has the potential to serve as a **strategic platform for smaller South Asian states**, allowing them to diversify trade and investment partnerships, enhance maritime security, and participate in regional governance. By integrating economic, security, and environmental priorities, IORA can serve as a model for holistic regional cooperation that balances national interests with collective well-being.

7.4.10 Conclusion

The Indian Ocean Rim Association represents a unique and dynamic model of regional cooperation, emphasizing maritime connectivity, trade facilitation, environmental sustainability, and strategic collaboration. For South Asian states, participation in IORA provides opportunities to enhance economic growth, secure maritime trade routes, address climate and disaster risks, and engage in multilateral diplomacy with both regional and extra-regional partners.

While challenges related to institutional capacity, economic disparities, and geopolitical complexities persist, IORA's achievements in trade, investment, maritime security, and environmental management underscore its potential as a critical forum for cooperation in the Indian Ocean region. By focusing on practical, sectoral, and inclusive initiatives, IORA demonstrates how regional organizations can address the multifaceted challenges of geography, economics, and security, creating pathways for sustainable development and strategic collaboration.

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Unit 8

SECURITY CHALLENGES IN SOUTH ASIA

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INTRODUCTION

South Asia faces a complex array of security challenges that have hindered peace, stability, and development in the region. Terrorism, insurgencies, and cross-border militancy remain persistent threats, often fueled by unresolved disputes and weak governance. The presence of nuclear weapons in both India and Pakistan further intensifies the risks, as miscalculations or escalations could have devastating consequences. Ethnic conflicts and separatist movements add another layer of instability, highlighting the deep-rooted social and political divides within states. Human rights concerns, including civilian casualties, restrictions on freedoms, and displacement, remain critical issues that undermine trust between governments and their populations. This unit examines these interconnected security threats and emphasizes the need for cooperative frameworks, stronger governance, and confidence-building measures to reduce risks and foster stability in South Asia.

OBJECTIVES

After going through the unit, the reader will know:

- To identify and analyze the key security challenges in South Asia, including terrorism, nuclear proliferation, ethnic conflicts, and human rights concerns.
- To understand how these challenges are interconnected and reinforced by historical disputes and governance failures.
- To evaluate possible strategies for addressing security threats through regional cooperation and policy reforms.

Introduction

South Asia, encompassing countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Afghanistan, and the Maldives, has historically been a region of intense geopolitical significance. Its strategic location, diverse demography, and complex socio-political structures make it prone to multifaceted security challenges. While the region has witnessed significant economic growth and development in the past decades, persistent threats such as terrorism, nuclear proliferation, ethnic conflicts, and human rights violations continue to undermine stability, governance, and development. Security challenges in South Asia are not confined to traditional military threats; they encompass transnational terrorism, insurgency, sectarian violence, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, and socio-political marginalization.

The security landscape of South Asia is shaped by a combination of historical legacies, geopolitical rivalries, socio-economic disparities, and evolving global dynamics. The region has experienced multiple wars, cross-border conflicts, and internal insurgencies that have left a deep imprint on political institutions, civil society, and regional cooperation mechanisms. While countries like India and Pakistan possess nuclear capabilities, smaller states grapple with internal instability, ethnic tensions, and human rights challenges. Understanding South Asia's security environment requires a multidimensional approach that considers the interplay of internal and external threats, state and non-state actors, and domestic as well as regional factors. This unit explores the primary security challenges in South Asia, focusing on terrorism, nuclear proliferation, ethnic conflicts, and human rights.

8.1 Terrorism

Terrorism has emerged as one of the most pressing security challenges in South Asia, posing multifaceted threats to political stability, economic development, and social cohesion. The region, encompassing countries such as Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, has experienced both domestic and transnational terrorism, driven by ideological, political, religious, and economic factors. The persistent nature of terrorism in South Asia is rooted in historical conflicts, weak governance, porous borders, socio-economic disparities, and the complex interplay of regional and international actors.

In Pakistan, terrorism has manifested through multiple forms, including sectarian violence, Islamist militancy, and insurgency in border regions such as the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Baluchistan. Militant organizations such as Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) have conducted high-profile attacks targeting civilians, military installations, and state infrastructure. These groups exploit historical insurgencies, political grievances, and porous borders to establish operational safe havens. Sectarian terrorism targeting Shia minorities and other marginalized communities has further fragmented Pakistani society, creating long-term social and political challenges. Operations by the Pakistan military in Swat, North Waziristan, and other regions have demonstrated the state's resolve to counter terrorism, yet the underlying causes, such as radicalization, social marginalization, and ideological indoctrination, remain significant hurdles.

South Asia has been one of the most terrorism-affected regions globally, with Pakistan and Afghanistan at its core.

India has faced persistent terrorism challenges, particularly in Jammu and Kashmir, the Northeast, and urban centers. The Kashmir conflict has been a focal point for insurgency, with groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, Hizbul Mujahideen, and Jaish-e-Mohammed employing guerrilla warfare, suicide attacks, and cross-border infiltration to challenge Indian state authority. Additionally, Maoist Naxalite insurgents in central and eastern India have used terrorism and armed struggle to mobilize marginalized populations, exploiting socio-economic deprivation and political neglect. Urban centers have also experienced terrorist attacks targeting civilians and critical infrastructure, reflecting the adaptability of extremist networks. Counterterrorism in India has involved military operations, intelligence-led policing, and legislative measures such as the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, alongside efforts to promote community resilience and deradicalization programs.

Afghanistan represents a long-standing hub for terrorism in South Asia, exacerbated by decades of conflict, foreign intervention, and fragile governance. The Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) have maintained operational capabilities, often targeting government institutions, civilians, and international forces. The porous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan has facilitated the movement of fighters and resources, complicating counterterrorism efforts and regional security cooperation. The resurgence of the Taliban in 2021 further altered the security calculus, raising concerns about

Afghanistan once again becoming a haven for transnational terrorist organizations with potential regional and global implications.

Sri Lanka experienced a devastating terrorist campaign during the civil war led by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The LTTE, advocating for an independent Tamil Eelam in the northern and eastern parts of the country, employed guerrilla warfare, assassinations, and suicide attacks for nearly three decades. The conflict caused extensive civilian casualties, displacement, and socio-economic disruption. Although the war ended in 2009, the post-war environment continues to face challenges related to reconciliation, rehabilitation, and addressing underlying ethnic grievances, demonstrating that the legacy of terrorism extends beyond the cessation of active conflict.

Transnational terrorism in South Asia is closely intertwined with global jihadist networks, organized crime, and ideological indoctrination. Terrorist groups often receive logistical, financial, and ideological support from international actors, enabling them to sustain operations and expand networks. Radicalization, particularly among youth, is fueled by socio-economic marginalization, political disenfranchisement, and extremist narratives propagated through digital media and social platforms. Online recruitment and propaganda have expanded the reach of terrorist ideologies, creating complex challenges for law enforcement and counter-radicalization programs.

Pakistan has suffered enormously from terrorism, losing over **80,000 lives** since 2001.

Counterterrorism strategies in South Asia have evolved to address these diverse threats. Military operations, intelligence cooperation, and border management play a critical role in disrupting terrorist networks. In Pakistan, operations in Swat, Waziristan, and Baluchistan have aimed to dismantle militant infrastructure and restore state authority, complemented by legislative frameworks and counter-radicalization initiatives. India's counterinsurgency strategies in Jammu and Kashmir and the Northeast involve coordination between the military, paramilitary forces, and intelligence agencies, alongside efforts to promote socio-economic development and political engagement. Afghanistan has relied heavily on international military and intelligence support to combat terrorism, although the changing political environment presents new challenges for governance and security.

Regional cooperation is essential for addressing terrorism in South Asia, given the transnational nature of threats. Initiatives under SAARC, BIMSTEC, and other platforms aim to enhance intelligence sharing, legal harmonization, and joint

operations. However, political mistrust, historical rivalries, and varying levels of institutional capacity often hinder effective collaboration. Cross-border coordination remains critical, particularly in border regions between India and Pakistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and among other South Asian states, where militant movements exploit weak governance and porous boundaries.

Terrorism in South Asia also has profound socio-economic implications. Frequent attacks disrupt economic activity, reduce investor confidence, damage infrastructure, and impose significant costs on public resources allocated to security measures. The humanitarian impact, including civilian casualties, displacement, and psychological trauma, further exacerbates vulnerabilities and social fragmentation. Education, healthcare, and social services are often disrupted in conflict-affected regions, perpetuating cycles of poverty and marginalization that can feed into radicalization and recruitment by extremist groups.

Preventing and countering terrorism requires a multidimensional approach that integrates military, legal, political, economic, and social strategies. Strengthening governance, improving law enforcement and judicial systems, enhancing border security, and investing in education and employment opportunities are critical to reducing the appeal of extremist ideologies. Community engagement, interfaith dialogue, and deradicalization programs play a crucial role in addressing the ideological and social roots of terrorism. International cooperation, including intelligence sharing, capacity-building, and counter-financing of terrorism, is essential to disrupt global networks and prevent the proliferation of extremist groups.

The evolution of terrorism in South Asia demonstrates its adaptive and resilient nature. Groups have shifted tactics from conventional insurgency to urban terrorism, cyber propaganda, and transnational networks. Suicide bombings, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), targeted assassinations, and attacks on soft targets reflect the changing strategies of terrorist organizations. Counterterrorism policies must, therefore, remain dynamic, incorporating technological tools, intelligence-driven operations, and regional coordination to anticipate and neutralize emerging threats.

Despite the challenges, South Asian countries have made progress in combating terrorism. Pakistan has reduced large-scale terrorist incidents through sustained military operations and intelligence-led interventions. India has enhanced counterinsurgency capabilities and strengthened legislative frameworks to address domestic and cross-border terrorism. Afghanistan and Sri Lanka continue to engage in stabilization efforts, reconciliation, and institution-building to address the root causes of terrorism. Regional dialogues and initiatives, such as the SAARC Convention on Suppression of Terrorism and BIMSTEC security cooperation,

provide frameworks for collaboration, although their effectiveness depends on political will, trust-building, and sustained engagement.

In conclusion, terrorism in South Asia represents a complex and enduring security challenge with political, social, and economic ramifications. The interplay of domestic grievances, ideological extremism, historical conflicts, and transnational networks has created a multifaceted threat environment. Addressing terrorism requires coordinated military, political, legal, and socio-economic strategies, complemented by regional and international cooperation. Strengthening governance, addressing root causes of radicalization, improving border management, and fostering inclusive development are essential for sustainable security. While progress has been made in mitigating terrorist threats, the evolving nature of terrorism necessitates ongoing vigilance, adaptive strategies, and a commitment to regional collaboration to ensure stability and resilience in South Asia.

8.2 Nuclear Proliferation

Nuclear proliferation constitutes one of the most critical and complex security challenges in South Asia. The region is home to two declared nuclear-armed states—India and Pakistan—whose historical rivalry, particularly over the Kashmir dispute, has driven the development and expansion of nuclear capabilities. Nuclear weapons in South Asia are not merely military assets; they are deeply intertwined with political strategy, national identity, and regional deterrence doctrines. The proliferation of nuclear weapons in the region has significant implications for strategic stability, crisis management, and global non-proliferation norms.

India's nuclear program began in the 1940s and 1950s with an emphasis on peaceful nuclear technology under the guidance of the Department of Atomic Energy. However, geopolitical tensions and security concerns, particularly after the 1962 Sino-Indian War and the 1965 conflict with Pakistan, accelerated India's development of nuclear weapons capabilities. India conducted its first nuclear test in 1974, which it described as a "peaceful nuclear explosion," but the test effectively signaled India's entry into the global nuclear weapons club. Pakistan, perceiving a strategic imbalance vis-à-vis India, initiated its own clandestine nuclear program in the 1970s, led by Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan. Pakistan's nuclear development accelerated following India's 1974 test and subsequent nuclear modernization, culminating in the 1998

India and Pakistan conducted nuclear tests in **May 1998**, openly declaring their nuclear weapons capability.

nuclear tests conducted shortly after India's Pokhran-II tests. These developments created a declared nuclear dyad in South Asia, which remains central to the regional security paradigm.

The proliferation of nuclear weapons in South Asia has led to a delicate **strategic balance** underpinned by nuclear deterrence. Both India and Pakistan have adopted doctrines intended to prevent conventional conflict from escalating into full-scale war. India has maintained a declared no-first-use (NFU) policy, asserting that nuclear weapons would only be used in retaliation against a nuclear attack. Pakistan, however, has deliberately avoided an NFU declaration, emphasizing first-use as a potential strategy to offset India's conventional military superiority. These divergent doctrines contribute to strategic instability, as misunderstandings or miscalculations could result in rapid escalation during crises.

The Kashmir conflict has been a persistent flashpoint for nuclear tensions. Multiple wars, skirmishes, and cross-border terrorist attacks have heightened the risk of nuclear confrontation. The 2001–2002 standoff following the Indian Parliament attack and the Kargil conflict in 1999 illustrated the potential for conventional crises to escalate dangerously in the context of nuclear capabilities. Both India and Pakistan have invested heavily in nuclear command, control, and communication (NC3) systems to manage these risks. Nevertheless, concerns persist regarding operational readiness, accident prevention, and unauthorized use, particularly given internal security challenges and political volatility in the region.

Nuclear proliferation in South Asia is further complicated by the **potential for non-state actors** to access nuclear materials. Terrorist organizations operating in Pakistan, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, have historically sought to exploit state vulnerabilities. Although both India and Pakistan have implemented robust safeguards, the risk of nuclear or radiological materials falling into the hands of extremist groups remains a significant concern for regional and global security. International actors, including the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), and various non-proliferation treaties, play a role in monitoring and assisting with nuclear security, yet regional dynamics remain largely shaped by bilateral considerations between India and Pakistan.

China's support to Pakistan's nuclear program and U.S. support to India complicate non-proliferation efforts.

Both India and Pakistan have pursued the modernization and diversification of their nuclear arsenals. India has developed a range of delivery systems, including land-based ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and aircraft-delivered nuclear weapons, forming a

credible triad for deterrence. Pakistan has similarly developed short- and medium-range ballistic missiles, tactical nuclear weapons, and nuclear-capable cruise missiles. These developments reflect the ongoing **arms race** dynamics, with both countries seeking to enhance survivability, accuracy, and response capabilities. Such advancements raise the stakes in any potential confrontation, as the operationalization of sophisticated nuclear systems increases the complexity of crisis management and strategic stability.

Beyond the India-Pakistan dyad, nuclear proliferation in South Asia has implications for the broader regional and global order. India's civilian nuclear agreements with the United States and other global powers, alongside its participation in forums like the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards, illustrate efforts to integrate into the global non-proliferation regime while maintaining strategic autonomy. Pakistan, largely excluded from formal global nuclear frameworks due to political considerations, has relied on indigenous technological development and selective partnerships to sustain its program. The divergent approaches of India and Pakistan complicate efforts to implement comprehensive non-proliferation measures and reinforce the strategic autonomy and security imperatives of each state.

Efforts to **mitigate nuclear risks** in South Asia include bilateral and regional confidence-building measures (CBMs). Initiatives such as the India-Pakistan hotline, agreements on advance notification of missile tests, and periodic diplomatic dialogues aim to reduce misunderstandings and prevent inadvertent escalation. Track-two diplomacy, involving retired military officers, academics, and civil society actors, has also contributed to discussions on nuclear risk reduction, crisis management, and arms control. However, progress remains fragile due to enduring political mistrust, the Kashmir dispute, and the perception of zero-sum strategic competition.

Nuclear proliferation in South Asia is not limited to weapons development; it encompasses a broader spectrum of **dual-use technologies**, nuclear infrastructure, and scientific expertise. Both India and Pakistan have invested in nuclear research, uranium enrichment, and plutonium production capabilities, creating potential pathways for technological escalation. International oversight, export controls, and multilateral non-proliferation regimes play a role in monitoring these activities, but regional

South Asia's nuclear deterrence is often described as **unstable**, given the role of terrorism and short-range missiles.

security imperatives often prioritize sovereign development of nuclear capabilities over external constraints.

The **strategic consequences** of nuclear proliferation extend beyond military considerations. Nuclear weapons shape political decision-making, constrain diplomatic options, and influence the calculus of conventional warfare. The existence of nuclear deterrence can prevent full-scale wars but may encourage lower-intensity conflicts, proxy wars, and cross-border terrorism as alternatives to direct conventional confrontation. This paradox underscores the complex relationship between nuclear weapons and regional security in South Asia, where deterrence provides both stability and risk.

In addition to interstate tensions, internal security dynamics impact nuclear stability. Political instability, civil-military relations, and insurgency within Pakistan can affect the security and management of nuclear assets. In India, domestic political pressures, social unrest, and regional insurgencies, particularly in Jammu and Kashmir, add layers of complexity to nuclear decision-making. Ensuring robust command-and-control structures, secure storage of nuclear materials, and effective crisis management protocols is therefore critical for regional stability.

Global actors play a crucial role in shaping the nuclear landscape of South Asia. The United States, China, Russia, and European powers engage through diplomacy, arms control frameworks, and technical assistance to prevent proliferation and reduce nuclear risks. China's support to Pakistan's nuclear program and its strategic partnership with India influence the regional balance, while global non-proliferation norms such as the NPT and NSG frameworks provide standards for safe and responsible nuclear development. Nevertheless, regional rivalry, strategic mistrust, and national security priorities continue to dominate the proliferation discourse.

Looking to the future, nuclear proliferation in South Asia presents both **challenges and opportunities**. While the existence of nuclear arsenals increases the risk of escalation during crises, it also creates an incentive for crisis management, diplomatic engagement, and conflict resolution. Strengthening bilateral dialogue, promoting transparency in nuclear doctrines, and fostering regional security cooperation are essential to reducing the risks associated with nuclear weapons. South Asia's nuclear environment requires constant vigilance, institutional robustness, and adherence to safety and security protocols to prevent accidents, unauthorized use, or escalation during conflicts.

In conclusion, nuclear proliferation remains a defining feature of South Asia's security environment. India and Pakistan's nuclear capabilities, while intended to

deter conflict, introduce complex strategic dynamics that influence military, political, and diplomatic decision-making. The interplay of historical rivalry, regional tensions, internal security challenges, and global non-proliferation norms creates a multifaceted security landscape. Addressing the challenges of nuclear proliferation requires sustained bilateral dialogue, confidence-building measures, robust command-and-control systems, and active engagement with global non-proliferation frameworks. Only through careful management, transparency, and regional cooperation can South Asia navigate the risks of nuclear proliferation while maintaining stability and preventing catastrophic escalation.

8.3 Ethnic Conflicts

Ethnic conflicts represent one of the most persistent and complex security challenges in South Asia. The region is characterized by diverse populations, encompassing multiple linguistic, religious, cultural, and ethnic groups. While diversity has historically enriched South Asia's social and cultural landscape, it has also been a source of tension, particularly when coupled with political exclusion, socio-economic marginalization, and historical grievances. Ethnic conflicts in South Asia manifest in both intrastate and intercommunal tensions, ranging from demands for autonomy and recognition of minority rights to violent insurgencies and secessionist movements.

Sri Lanka exemplifies the destructive potential of ethnic conflict in the region. The longstanding conflict between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority culminated in a civil war that lasted nearly three decades, from the early 1980s to 2009. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) sought an independent Tamil state in the northern and eastern provinces, employing guerrilla warfare, targeted assassinations, and suicide attacks. The roots of this conflict lie in the historical marginalization of Tamils, inequitable access to education and employment, discriminatory language policies, and political exclusion. The civil war resulted in over 100,000 deaths, widespread displacement, and the destruction of critical infrastructure, highlighting the profound human and economic costs of ethnic conflict. Although the war ended in 2009, post-war challenges persist, including reconciliation, political inclusion, resettlement of displaced populations, and addressing grievances that, if left unresolved, could reignite tensions.

Sri Lanka's three-decade-long civil war with the LTTE (Tamil Tigers) was one of the most violent ethnic conflicts in the region.

Nepal's experience with ethnic and political conflict provides another example of the complex interplay between ethnicity and security. While

the country was historically a monarchy dominated by high-caste elites, marginalized ethnic groups—including Madhesis, Tharus, and indigenous nationalities—experienced social, economic, and political exclusion. This exclusion contributed to the rise of a decade-long Maoist insurgency from 1996 to 2006, which sought to overthrow the monarchy and establish a federal republic. Ethnic grievances intersected with socio-economic inequality, land disputes, and demands for political representation, fueling armed conflict that resulted in over 17,000 deaths and widespread displacement. The Comprehensive Peace Accord of 2006 formally ended the insurgency, leading to the abolition of the monarchy and the establishment of a federal democratic republic. However, challenges remain in implementing inclusive federal structures, ensuring minority representation, and addressing historical marginalization, demonstrating that ethnic grievances in South Asia often require long-term institutional and social solutions.

In India, ethnic conflicts have been particularly pronounced in the Northeast and in regions with distinct cultural and linguistic identities. States such as Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, and Mizoram have experienced insurgencies, separatist movements, and demands for autonomy. Historical grievances, cultural differences, and perceptions of neglect by the central government have fueled movements seeking self-determination or greater political rights. The Naga insurgency, one of the oldest ethnic conflicts in India, involves groups such as the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), which has demanded an independent Naga homeland. While ceasefires and peace negotiations have reduced large-scale violence, unresolved issues surrounding territorial claims, identity recognition, and local governance continue to present security challenges. Similarly, Assam has witnessed ethnic tensions between indigenous communities and migrant populations, occasionally erupting into violent clashes, illustrating the intersection of ethnicity, migration, and resource competition in fueling conflict.

Bangladesh has also experienced ethnic tensions, particularly involving indigenous communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). The Chakma, Marma, and other indigenous groups historically faced marginalization, land dispossession, and cultural assimilation pressures from the dominant Bengali population. These grievances led to the formation of armed groups and insurgent movements seeking autonomy and protection of indigenous rights. The 1997 Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord provided a framework for political representation, land rights, and demilitarization of the region. While the accord reduced large-scale violence, the effective implementation of its provisions remains uneven, and sporadic tensions continue to pose security challenges.

Afghanistan's internal conflicts are closely intertwined with ethnic and sectarian divisions. The country is home to multiple ethnic groups, including Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, and others. Historical rivalries, combined with political exclusion and regional power struggles, have contributed to cycles of violence. During the Soviet invasion in the 1980s, ethnic dynamics influenced patterns of resistance and alliances, with Pashtun and Tajik groups forming distinct militias. The Taliban's rise in the 1990s, dominated by the Pashtun ethnic group, exacerbated ethnic tensions, particularly with Hazaras and other minority communities. These divisions continue to shape governance challenges and security risks, as competing ethnic factions influence political representation, access to resources, and territorial control.

Nepal has faced ethnic divisions over federalism, Madhesi representation, and political inclusion.

Ethnic conflicts in South Asia are not only about identity; they are often linked to **resource competition, economic disparity, and political exclusion**. Marginalized ethnic groups frequently lack access to education, employment, political representation, and basic services, creating conditions for mobilization and insurgency. State policies that fail to recognize minority rights, enforce discriminatory practices, or engage in repression often exacerbate grievances and intensify conflict. In some cases, ethnic conflicts intersect with terrorism and insurgency, creating hybrid security challenges where non-state actors exploit ethnic grievances to advance broader political or ideological agendas.

Regional dynamics also influence ethnic conflicts. Cross-border ethnic linkages, historical migrations, and shared cultural identities can complicate domestic conflicts and introduce external actors into local disputes. For example, the Naga ethnic community spans the India-Myanmar border, influencing insurgent dynamics and complicating peace negotiations. Similarly, ethnic and sectarian connections across Afghanistan and Pakistan affect security in border regions, enabling militant groups to exploit ethnic networks for recruitment, logistics, and safe havens.

Efforts to address ethnic conflicts in South Asia have included military interventions, peace agreements, constitutional reforms, and decentralized governance. In Sri Lanka, post-war reconciliation commissions, resettlement programs, and economic development initiatives aim to address grievances, although concerns about accountability and minority representation persist. In Nepal, federal restructuring, proportional representation, and affirmative action policies have sought to integrate marginalized ethnic groups into the political process. India has relied on a combination of military operations, peace negotiations, and constitutional autonomy arrangements to manage ethnic insurgencies in the Northeast. In Bangladesh, implementation of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord seeks to balance indigenous rights with national sovereignty, though challenges remain in ensuring meaningful autonomy and development.

Afghanistan remains fractured along ethnic lines, complicating efforts at national unity.

Despite these efforts, ethnic conflicts in South Asia continue to pose significant security challenges. The persistence of historical grievances, coupled with socio-economic inequalities and political exclusion, means that the risk of renewed violence remains. Ethnic mobilization can exacerbate regional tensions, strain state capacity, and undermine national unity. Effective conflict resolution requires inclusive governance, recognition of minority rights, equitable resource distribution, and sustained engagement with affected communities.

Ethnic conflicts also have broader implications for regional security. They can contribute to internal displacement, refugee flows, and cross-border instability, affecting neighboring states and complicating humanitarian responses. For instance, conflicts in Afghanistan and Sri Lanka have generated significant refugee populations that have impacted Pakistan, India, and other neighboring countries. Similarly, ethnic tensions in Nepal and Bangladesh have implications for migration, labor markets, and social cohesion in the wider region.

In conclusion, ethnic conflicts in South Asia represent a persistent and multifaceted security challenge, shaped by historical grievances, political exclusion, socio-economic disparities, and regional dynamics. Countries such as Sri Lanka, Nepal, India, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan illustrate the diversity of ethnic conflicts, ranging from separatist insurgencies to demands for minority rights and political inclusion. Addressing these conflicts requires comprehensive strategies that integrate political, social, economic, and legal measures, including inclusive governance, equitable development, minority protection, and conflict resolution mechanisms. Regional cooperation, international support, and civil society

engagement are also critical for mitigating ethnic tensions, preventing violence, and fostering long-term stability in South Asia.

8.4 Human Rights

Human rights challenges constitute a critical dimension of security and stability in South Asia. Violations of civil, political, economic, and social rights exacerbate internal tensions, fuel grievances, and can indirectly contribute to terrorism, insurgency, and ethnic conflicts. South Asia's diverse political systems, colonial legacies, socio-economic inequalities, and complex ethnic and religious landscapes make human rights a pressing concern. Across the region, issues such as restrictions on freedom of expression, political repression, gender-based discrimination, religious intolerance, and arbitrary detention are prevalent, affecting both domestic stability and regional security.

In Pakistan, human rights issues are closely intertwined with political and security dynamics. Restrictions on media and civil society, harassment of journalists, and limits on freedom of speech have been reported in multiple contexts. Religious minorities, including Christians, Hindus, Ahmadis, and Shias, face systemic discrimination, attacks, and harassment, often exacerbated by extremist ideologies and weak law enforcement. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) from conflict-affected regions such as Baluchistan, the former FATA, and conflict zones in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa face inadequate protection, limited access to services, and challenges in resettlement, reflecting gaps in governance and the protection of basic human rights. Pakistan has enacted legislation to protect human rights, and institutions such as the National Human Rights Commission exist, but enforcement remains inconsistent, and security imperatives often overshadow human rights priorities.

Kashmir remains one of the most militarized regions in the world, raising persistent human rights concerns.

India, despite its democratic framework, faces significant human rights challenges, particularly in conflict-affected regions. In Jammu and Kashmir, counterinsurgency operations and restrictions under laws such as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) have raised concerns regarding extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and arbitrary detention. Ethnic and religious minorities, including Muslims, Dalits, and indigenous communities, face discrimination, social marginalization, and occasional targeted violence. Human rights violations in urban centers, including police brutality and restrictions on freedom of assembly, further highlight systemic governance challenges. Indian civil society organizations, judicial activism, and international scrutiny have been instrumental in highlighting

violations and promoting accountability, yet implementation gaps persist, particularly in sensitive conflict zones.

Sri Lanka's post-war human rights landscape reflects the lingering impact of the civil war with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). While the cessation of large-scale violence in 2009 marked a turning point, concerns remain regarding accountability for war crimes, treatment of Tamil minorities, and reconciliation processes. Allegations of arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, and restrictions on freedom of expression have been reported, particularly in the Northern and Eastern provinces. Post-war reconstruction and resettlement efforts, though significant, have not fully addressed historical grievances, land disputes, and socio-economic marginalization, leaving communities vulnerable and perpetuating potential sources of instability.

Nepal, following its decade-long Maoist insurgency, has also faced challenges in consolidating human rights protections. During the insurgency, both state forces and insurgents committed violations, including extrajudicial killings, forced recruitment of children, and arbitrary detention. Post-conflict governance reforms, including the adoption of a federal democratic republic and the establishment of mechanisms for transitional justice, have aimed to address these violations. However, enforcement remains inconsistent, and political instability occasionally undermines protections for civil liberties and minority rights. Indigenous groups and marginalized populations continue to face socio-economic exclusion, highlighting the intersection of human rights and development in the post-conflict context.

Bangladesh's human rights environment is shaped by both political and social factors. Restrictions on political freedoms, limitations on freedom of expression, and harassment of journalists and activists have been reported, particularly during periods of political unrest. Minority groups, including Hindus, Buddhists, and indigenous communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, face discrimination and land rights challenges. Additionally, labor rights violations in industrial sectors, particularly in garment factories, highlight the broader economic dimensions of human rights concerns. Government initiatives, civil society advocacy, and international pressure have led to some improvements, but structural inequalities, political partisanship, and institutional weaknesses continue to constrain effective human rights protections.

Afghanistan under the Taliban has seen **severe restrictions on women's rights**, drawing global condemnation.

Afghanistan's human rights situation remains one of the most challenging in the region, especially following the Taliban's resurgence in 2021. Restrictions on women's education, employment, and freedom of movement have been widely reported. Ethnic and religious minorities, including Hazaras and Shia communities, face targeted violence and systemic discrimination. Arbitrary detentions, summary executions, and suppression of political dissent have further weakened civil liberties. The humanitarian crisis, compounded by economic collapse and displacement, exacerbates human rights vulnerabilities and has broader implications for regional security and migration patterns.

Human rights violations in South Asia are closely linked to broader security challenges. In many cases, the suppression of civil liberties, political exclusion, and marginalization of minority communities contribute to radicalization, insurgency, and ethnic tensions. Poor protection of human rights undermines social cohesion, erodes trust in institutions, and perpetuates cycles of conflict. Addressing human rights challenges is therefore both a moral imperative and a strategic necessity for stability and governance.

Efforts to improve human rights protections in South Asia include legal reforms, institutional strengthening, civil society engagement, and international cooperation. Human rights commissions, ombudsman institutions, and judicial activism provide mechanisms for accountability and redress. Legislative reforms targeting gender equality, minority protections, labor rights, and freedom of expression aim to create a more inclusive framework for citizens. Regional organizations such as SAARC and BIMSTEC have begun incorporating human rights considerations into their agendas, although progress has been uneven due to political sensitivities and state sovereignty concerns.

South Asia's human rights landscape is shaped by weak institutions, fragile democracies, and unresolved conflicts.

International actors, including the United Nations, human rights NGOs, and foreign governments, play a crucial role in monitoring and promoting human rights in South Asia. Reports by organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) provide critical documentation of violations and recommend policy interventions. International engagement also includes technical assistance, capacity building, and advocacy to support domestic institutions in implementing human rights protections. However, sovereignty concerns, political resistance, and regional rivalries often limit the effectiveness of external pressure, requiring nuanced approaches that balance accountability with respect for local contexts.

Human rights in South Asia are also intertwined with socio-economic development. Education, health, employment, and access to basic services are fundamental human rights that influence social stability and resilience. Marginalized groups, including women, children, minorities, and indigenous populations, are particularly vulnerable to violations in these domains. Addressing these structural inequalities is essential not only for compliance with human rights norms but also for preventing the conditions that can lead to radicalization, insurgency, and social unrest. Development initiatives that integrate human rights principles—such as inclusive governance, participatory decision-making, and equitable resource allocation—enhance both human security and broader stability.

The intersection of human rights with other security challenges, such as terrorism, ethnic conflict, and political instability, underscores the multidimensional nature of security in South Asia. Violations of civil and political rights can exacerbate grievances that fuel insurgency, terrorism, and ethnic mobilization. Conversely, effective protection of human rights strengthens state legitimacy, promotes social cohesion, and enhances resilience against extremist ideologies and conflict. This interconnection emphasizes the importance of integrating human rights considerations into broader security strategies, including counterterrorism, conflict resolution, and development planning.

In conclusion, human rights represent a foundational aspect of security and governance in South Asia. Challenges in Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan illustrate the diversity and complexity of human rights issues in the region. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive approaches that include legal and institutional reforms, inclusive governance, socio-economic development, and active engagement with civil society and international actors. Human rights protection is not merely a normative goal; it is integral to mitigating conflict, preventing radicalization, promoting social cohesion, and ensuring long-term stability in South Asia. The recognition that human security and human rights are inseparable from national and regional security is crucial for building a stable, resilient, and inclusive South Asian region.

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Unit 9

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH ASIA

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INTRODUCTION

Economic development in South Asia has been marked by both impressive growth and persistent inequalities. Countries like India and Bangladesh have shown rapid progress in certain sectors, while others, such as Afghanistan and Nepal, continue to struggle with instability and underdevelopment. The region faces common challenges, including poverty, unemployment, infrastructural gaps, and dependence on agriculture, but also possesses immense potential through trade, investment, and demographic dividends. Regional economic cooperation, however, has been limited due to political rivalries and protectionist policies, leaving South Asia less integrated than other regions. Foreign investment and initiatives like China's Belt and Road projects present opportunities, but they also raise concerns about dependency and sovereignty. This unit explores patterns of growth, poverty reduction strategies, regional trade, and foreign investment to assess both achievements and barriers in South Asia's economic development.

OBJECTIVES

After going through the unit, the reader will be able:

- To examine the trends of economic growth and development across South Asian countries.
- To analyze the challenges of poverty reduction, employment generation, and infrastructural development.
- To evaluate the role of regional trade, foreign investment, and cooperation in shaping the region's economic future.

Introduction

Economic development in South Asia has been a central concern for both policymakers and scholars, given the region's large population, diverse economies, and persistent development challenges. South Asia comprises some of the world's fastest-growing economies, yet it also faces structural constraints, including poverty, income inequality, political instability, infrastructure deficits, and environmental vulnerabilities. The region's economic trajectory is shaped by historical legacies of colonialism, post-independence economic policies, demographic pressures, and integration into the global economy. Understanding the patterns of economic growth, poverty reduction, regional trade, and foreign investment is essential for assessing the region's development prospects and its role in global economic governance.

South Asia's economic landscape is heterogeneous. Countries such as India and Bangladesh have achieved notable growth in recent decades, driven by services, manufacturing, and export-oriented sectors. Smaller states, including Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives, rely heavily on tourism, hydropower, and remittances, making them vulnerable to external shocks. Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and other regional economies face a combination of macroeconomic instability, fiscal constraints, and structural inefficiencies, which impede sustained growth. Regional integration, foreign investment, and effective poverty reduction policies are thus critical for promoting inclusive and resilient development.

9.1 Economic Growth

Economic growth in South Asia has been a defining feature of the region's development trajectory over the past few decades, marked by rapid expansion in some countries alongside slower progress in others. India, as the largest economy in the region, has been the primary driver of South Asia's growth. Since the economic liberalization of the 1990s, India has experienced sustained GDP growth, largely fueled by the services sector, industrial expansion, and domestic consumption. The information technology (IT) and software services industries have become significant contributors to the economy, enabling India to integrate into global value chains and attract foreign investment. In addition to services, manufacturing and industrial sectors have expanded, although growth has often been constrained by infrastructure deficits, regulatory challenges, and labor market rigidities. India's rapid urbanization and rising middle class have further stimulated domestic consumption, positioning the country as a key engine of regional economic dynamism.

Bangladesh has emerged as one of South Asia's fastest-growing economies, driven primarily by its textile and garment industry, which forms the backbone of its exports. The sector has generated millions of jobs, particularly for women, contributing to both economic growth and social transformation. Infrastructure development, energy sector expansion, and improvements in transport networks have further enhanced productivity and industrial competitiveness. Despite challenges such as political instability, vulnerability to natural disasters, and energy constraints, Bangladesh has maintained GDP growth rates averaging 6–7% in recent years, making it a model for smaller economies in the region striving for inclusive growth.

South Asia is one of the **fastest-growing regions** in the world, driven by India and Bangladesh.

Pakistan's economic growth has been uneven, influenced by political instability, security concerns, and structural economic challenges. Agriculture remains a major sector, providing employment and contributing to exports, yet low productivity and outdated farming practices limit its growth potential. Industrial expansion and services sector growth have faced constraints due to energy shortages, fiscal imbalances, and weak infrastructure. Initiatives such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) have created opportunities for infrastructure-led growth, industrial parks, and improved connectivity, but sustainable long-term growth will require comprehensive structural reforms, improved governance, and enhanced human capital development.

Sri Lanka's economic growth has been influenced by both domestic and external factors. Post-war reconstruction following the end of the civil conflict in 2009 enabled significant infrastructure development, urbanization, and tourism expansion, contributing to moderate GDP growth. However, the economy remains vulnerable to fiscal deficits, external debt pressures, and fluctuations in global commodity prices. The Maldives, with its small island economy, relies heavily on tourism as a growth engine. While the sector has brought prosperity and employment opportunities, it also makes the economy highly sensitive to global economic shocks, climate change impacts, and natural disasters, necessitating diversification strategies for sustained growth.

Smaller landlocked economies such as Nepal and Bhutan face unique growth challenges and opportunities. Nepal relies heavily on remittances from migrant workers, hydropower potential, and tourism for economic expansion. While remittances provide critical household income and stimulate domestic consumption, dependence on external sources exposes the economy to vulnerabilities from global economic shifts and labor market fluctuations. Bhutan

has pursued a distinctive development model emphasizing Gross National Happiness alongside economic growth, focusing on environmental sustainability, social equity, and high-value sectors such as hydropower exports. These smaller economies demonstrate how policy frameworks, natural resource management, and strategic economic planning can influence growth trajectories in resource-constrained contexts.

Across South Asia, economic growth exhibits both opportunities and challenges. While India and Bangladesh exemplify rapid expansion and structural transformation, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives face structural constraints, vulnerability to external shocks, and development disparities. Urbanization, demographic change, and increasing regional connectivity provide opportunities for accelerated growth if matched with investment in infrastructure, human capital, and governance reforms. Ensuring that growth is inclusive, environmentally sustainable, and resilient to shocks is critical for translating GDP expansion into broader social and economic development outcomes.

Bangladesh's ready-made garment industry makes it the **second-largest apparel exporter** after China

In conclusion, economic growth in South Asia is diverse, uneven, and closely linked to sectoral strengths, policy frameworks, and governance capacities. India and Bangladesh drive regional dynamism through industrial, service, and export-oriented growth, while Pakistan and smaller states face structural and external challenges that require targeted policy interventions. Growth not only enhances national prosperity but also provides the resources necessary for poverty reduction, infrastructure development, and regional integration, making it a central pillar of South Asia's economic and developmental strategy.

9.2 Poverty Reduction

Poverty reduction remains one of the most pressing developmental challenges in South Asia, a region home to a significant proportion of the world's poor. Historically, structural inequalities, colonial legacies, and socio-economic disparities have contributed to persistent poverty across countries in the region. Despite periods of rapid economic growth, progress in reducing poverty has been uneven, influenced by factors such as population growth, governance challenges, natural disasters, and limited access to education, healthcare, and basic services. Addressing poverty is critical not only for improving human well-being but also for fostering social stability, economic resilience, and inclusive development.

Bangladesh has emerged as a notable example of successful poverty reduction in South Asia. Over the past two decades, the country has achieved substantial declines in poverty, largely due to the expansion of the garment and textile sector, which has created millions of jobs, particularly for women. Initiatives such as microfinance programs, led by institutions like Grameen Bank and BRAC, have empowered marginalized communities, facilitated entrepreneurship, and increased household incomes. Rural development programs, including agricultural modernization, infrastructure improvements, and social safety nets, have further contributed to poverty alleviation. However, challenges persist, particularly regarding vulnerability to climate change, natural disasters, and economic shocks, which disproportionately affect the poor and can reverse development gains.

South Asia has lifted **hundreds of millions out of poverty** since the 1990s but still houses the largest poor population in the world.

India has also made significant strides in poverty reduction, leveraging economic growth alongside targeted social welfare programs. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) has provided guaranteed wage employment to rural households, while initiatives like the Public Distribution System (PDS) have enhanced food security for low-income populations. Programs targeting health, education, and housing have further contributed to improving living standards among marginalized groups. Nevertheless, regional disparities, urban poverty, informal labor markets, and social inequalities continue to limit the effectiveness of poverty reduction measures. Rural areas, in particular, experience higher poverty rates compared to urban centers, highlighting the need for region-specific and inclusive policies.

Pakistan's efforts to reduce poverty have been shaped by a combination of social protection programs, economic growth initiatives, and international development assistance. Programs such as the Benazir Income Support Program (BISP) provide direct cash transfers to low-income households, improving access to food, education, and healthcare. Rural development initiatives, microfinance programs, and investment in infrastructure have further supported poverty alleviation. However, the country faces structural challenges, including limited access to quality education, health services, and employment opportunities, as well as macroeconomic instability and vulnerability to natural disasters. These factors constrain sustained reductions in poverty and highlight the need for comprehensive, multi-sectoral strategies.

Sri Lanka has successfully reduced poverty through a combination of social welfare programs, post-conflict reconstruction, and targeted development initiatives. Government programs focusing on rural livelihoods, education, healthcare, and housing have contributed to improvements in living standards across the country. However, economic vulnerabilities, periodic fiscal crises, and dependence on external markets pose risks to the sustainability of poverty reduction gains. Maldives, with its small population and high reliance on tourism, exhibits relatively low absolute poverty, yet social inequality and susceptibility to economic and environmental shocks remain areas of concern.

Nepal and Bhutan, as smaller and more geographically constrained economies, face distinct poverty reduction challenges. In Nepal, remittances from migrant workers have played a critical role in reducing household poverty, providing income security and stimulating domestic consumption. Rural development programs, investments in agriculture, and access to education and healthcare have further supported poverty alleviation. However, access to basic services remains uneven, particularly in mountainous and remote areas, and natural disasters such as floods and landslides pose ongoing risks. Bhutan has pursued a unique development model emphasizing Gross National Happiness alongside economic development. By integrating social equity, environmental sustainability, and targeted human development programs, Bhutan has achieved substantial reductions in poverty, though economic opportunities remain limited due to the country's small domestic market and geographic constraints.

Bangladesh achieved remarkable poverty reduction through **microfinance, NGOs, and social safety nets**.

Across South Asia, effective poverty reduction requires a combination of economic growth, inclusive social policies, and targeted interventions for vulnerable populations. Programs that address education, healthcare, gender equality, rural livelihoods, and social protection are critical for enabling long-term improvements in living standards. Poverty is closely linked with other developmental challenges, including unemployment, malnutrition, health disparities, and limited access to services, making integrated approaches essential. Furthermore, addressing the root causes of poverty, such as inequality, landlessness, social exclusion, and environmental vulnerability, is critical for sustainable outcomes.

Climate change, natural disasters, and population pressures further complicate poverty reduction in South Asia. Floods, cyclones, droughts, and other extreme weather events disproportionately affect poor communities, particularly in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan. Vulnerability to these shocks exacerbates

inequality and can reverse gains achieved through development programs. Therefore, poverty reduction strategies must incorporate resilience-building measures, disaster risk management, and adaptation policies to protect the most vulnerable populations.

Climate change threatens to reverse decades of poverty reduction by hitting agriculture-dependent communities.

In conclusion, poverty reduction in South Asia has seen meaningful progress, with countries such as Bangladesh, India, and Sri Lanka achieving significant improvements in living standards. Nevertheless, persistent structural challenges, social inequalities, and environmental vulnerabilities continue to impede the full eradication of poverty. Sustainable poverty reduction requires coordinated efforts that integrate economic growth with social protection, inclusive governance, education, health, and disaster resilience. By addressing both immediate needs and structural constraints, South Asian countries can continue to make progress toward reducing poverty, improving human well-being, and promoting equitable and inclusive development.

9.3 Regional trade

Regional trade is a vital component of economic development in South Asia, offering opportunities for market expansion, industrial growth, and economic integration. Despite the geographic proximity of South Asian countries, intra-regional trade remains relatively low compared to other regions, accounting for only a small fraction of total trade. Historical conflicts, political tensions, infrastructural deficits, and complex regulatory frameworks have constrained the growth of trade among South Asian nations. Recognizing the potential benefits of regional trade, countries in the region have established multilateral frameworks, such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), to reduce trade barriers, promote market access, and enhance economic cooperation.

India, as the largest economy in South Asia, plays a central role in shaping regional trade dynamics. Its export profile includes manufactured goods, information technology services, pharmaceuticals, and agricultural products, while imports from neighboring countries primarily consist of raw materials, energy resources, and intermediate goods. Bilateral and multilateral trade agreements have been used to facilitate commerce with countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka. India's role as a regional hub is further strengthened by its infrastructure investments, including improvements in road, rail, and port connectivity, which facilitate cross-border trade and logistics.

Intra-South Asian trade is **less than 5%**, making it one of the least integrated regions economically.

Bangladesh relies heavily on regional trade for both imports and exports. The garment and textile sector, which drives its export-led growth, benefits from preferential trade agreements and access to neighboring markets. Bangladesh's trade with India provides essential goods, raw materials, and access to ports for international shipping. Enhanced cross-border infrastructure, streamlined customs procedures, and trade facilitation mechanisms have the potential to significantly expand trade flows and reduce logistical costs, supporting industrial competitiveness and economic diversification.

Pakistan's regional trade has historically been limited due to political tensions with India, despite geographical proximity and economic complementarities. However, trade with other neighboring countries, particularly Afghanistan and China, remains significant. Initiatives such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) are expected to enhance trade by improving transport infrastructure, establishing industrial zones, and facilitating cross-border commerce. Pakistan's potential as a regional trade hub is substantial, provided political stability, regulatory improvements, and infrastructure development are prioritized.

Smaller economies such as Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives face structural constraints in regional trade due to their geographic isolation, landlocked status, and small domestic markets. Nepal depends heavily on India for access to ports, trade routes, and essential goods, making it highly sensitive to Indian policies and regional dynamics. Bhutan relies on India for trade facilitation and market access, particularly for its hydropower exports. The Maldives, as an island nation, primarily engages in maritime trade, importing food and essential goods while exporting fish and tourism-related services. Enhancing connectivity, negotiating favorable trade

agreements, and diversifying export sectors are crucial for these smaller economies to maximize the benefits of regional trade.

Sri Lanka has sought to leverage its strategic location along major shipping routes to enhance regional trade. Port development, logistics improvements, and maritime infrastructure have enabled Sri Lanka to expand its role as a regional trade and transshipment hub. Trade with India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and other regional partners contributes to industrial and service sector development, while strategic partnerships provide access to technology, capital, and regional markets.

Pakistan and India's weak trade ties prevent the region from realizing its true market potential.

Despite these efforts, several challenges continue to constrain regional trade in South Asia. Non-tariff barriers, such as complex customs procedures, regulatory discrepancies, and border delays, impede the smooth flow of goods. Political tensions, historical disputes, and security concerns often limit trade expansion, particularly between India and Pakistan. Limited infrastructure connectivity, including inadequate road networks, underdeveloped ports, and insufficient energy supply, further reduces the efficiency and competitiveness of regional trade. Addressing these structural and political challenges is essential for unlocking the potential of intra-regional commerce.

Enhancing regional trade in South Asia requires a combination of infrastructure development, policy reforms, and institutional cooperation. Improved transport corridors, harmonized customs regulations, and streamlined border procedures can significantly reduce transaction costs and promote cross-border economic activities. Multilateral trade frameworks such as SAFTA provide a platform for tariff reduction and dispute resolution, although effective implementation remains uneven. Expanding regional value chains, promoting industrial complementarities, and facilitating the movement of goods, services, and capital are essential for realizing the economic benefits of regional integration.

Regional trade also has broader developmental implications. By increasing market access, countries can stimulate industrialization, create employment opportunities, and enhance economic diversification. Trade-driven growth can support poverty reduction, improve living standards, and strengthen resilience against economic shocks. Moreover, regional trade fosters economic interdependence, which may contribute to political stability and cooperation in the South Asian context, reducing the likelihood of conflicts and enhancing collective prosperity.

Connectivity projects like **China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)** aim to reshape regional trade flows.

In conclusion, regional trade in South Asia holds significant potential to drive economic growth, integration, and development. While India and Bangladesh lead in regional commerce, smaller economies such as Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives face structural challenges that require targeted interventions. Addressing non-tariff barriers, improving infrastructure, enhancing connectivity, and strengthening multilateral trade frameworks are critical for realizing the full benefits of regional trade. By promoting intra-regional commerce, South Asia can not only stimulate economic growth but also enhance social development, stability, and long-term regional prosperity.

9.4 Foreign Investment

Foreign investment plays a crucial role in the economic development of South Asia, providing capital, technology, and access to international markets. It contributes to industrial growth, infrastructure development, employment generation, and overall economic modernization. Both foreign direct investment (FDI) and portfolio investment are significant, with FDI being particularly impactful for long-term economic transformation, as it introduces new technologies, management practices, and competitive dynamics. Governments across South Asia have implemented various policies to attract foreign investment, including regulatory reforms, tax incentives, investment promotion agencies, and the establishment of special economic zones (SEZs).

India has emerged as the largest recipient of foreign investment in the region. Its large domestic market, skilled labor force, strategic geographic location, and policy reforms aimed at improving the ease of doing business have attracted significant FDI. Key sectors attracting investment include information technology, telecommunications, manufacturing, renewable energy, and infrastructure development. Government initiatives such as "Make in India" and the liberalization of foreign investment regulations in sectors like defense, retail, and finance have further enhanced India's appeal to foreign investors. Additionally, India's integration into global value chains has been facilitated by trade agreements, export promotion policies, and a growing consumer market, making it a strategic hub for international investors seeking access to the South Asian region.

India attracts the bulk of **foreign direct investment (FDI)** in South Asia, especially in IT, manufacturing, and services.

Bangladesh has also experienced significant growth in foreign investment, primarily driven by its export-oriented industrial sectors, particularly textiles and garments. The government has promoted investment through policies such as tax incentives, export processing zones, and simplified business registration procedures. FDI in Bangladesh has contributed to the modernization of manufacturing processes, job creation, and industrial diversification. Infrastructure projects in energy, transport, and logistics have also attracted foreign capital, enhancing the overall investment climate. International development partners and multinational corporations have played a key role in providing technical expertise and financing to support industrial expansion.

Pakistan has sought to attract foreign investment through a combination of economic reforms, infrastructure development, and strategic partnerships. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a flagship initiative that exemplifies how foreign investment can drive large-scale infrastructure projects, industrial parks, and energy production. Investment from China and other countries has contributed to road, rail, and port development, enhancing connectivity and trade potential. Key sectors attracting FDI include energy, manufacturing, and services, while reforms in taxation, labor, and investment regulations aim to improve the business environment. Despite these efforts, political instability, security concerns, and macroeconomic volatility continue to challenge investor confidence, highlighting the importance of governance and stability for sustainable investment inflows.

Smaller economies in the region, including Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives, rely heavily on foreign investment for sustaining growth, generating employment, and improving infrastructure. In Nepal, FDI is concentrated in hydropower, tourism, and manufacturing sectors, often facilitated through bilateral agreements and regional cooperation frameworks. Bhutan's approach to foreign investment emphasizes sustainable development, with projects primarily in hydropower, tourism, and environmentally sensitive industries. The Maldives attracts foreign investment mainly in tourism infrastructure, hospitality, and related services, leveraging its natural beauty and strategic location to appeal to international investors. For these smaller economies, foreign investment is essential for complementing domestic capital, technology, and skills, as their limited domestic markets often constrain large-scale economic expansion.

Bangladesh is emerging as a magnet for FDI in textiles and infrastructure projects.

Sri Lanka has actively promoted foreign investment to boost industrial growth, infrastructure development, and tourism. Strategic initiatives, including port development, special economic zones, and investment facilitation programs, have attracted multinational corporations and capital inflows. Investment in logistics, energy, and information technology sectors has been particularly significant, although macroeconomic vulnerabilities, fiscal deficits, and political instability have at times limited investor confidence. Regional and global partnerships are increasingly leveraged to enhance investment flows and ensure that foreign capital contributes to sustainable development objectives.

Foreign investment in South Asia faces both opportunities and challenges. Opportunities arise from the region's large population, growing consumer markets, abundant natural resources, and strategic geographic location connecting major global economies. Challenges include political instability, regulatory inconsistencies, bureaucratic inefficiencies, security concerns, and infrastructure deficits. Effective policy frameworks, transparent governance, and investment-friendly regulatory environments are crucial to maximizing the benefits of foreign investment while minimizing risks and ensuring that investments contribute to inclusive development.

Beyond capital inflows, foreign investment has broader implications for technological advancement, skills development, and industrial competitiveness. Multinational enterprises introduce modern management practices, advanced technologies, and international quality standards, which can enhance productivity and innovation in domestic industries. Linkages between foreign firms and local suppliers promote technology transfer and knowledge sharing, creating long-term capacity-building benefits. Moreover, foreign investment can stimulate regional

economic integration, as investors seek efficient supply chains, access to regional markets, and opportunities for cross-border trade and cooperation.

Sustainable foreign investment in South Asia requires balancing economic, social, and environmental objectives. Policies must ensure that investments respect labor standards, environmental regulations, and social equity. Investments in infrastructure, renewable energy, and industrial development should align with long-term national priorities, fostering inclusive growth and resilience. Effective monitoring, regulatory oversight, and strategic planning are essential to prevent exploitation, mitigate risks, and ensure that foreign investment contributes to national development goals rather than short-term profits alone.

China is the largest investor in South Asia through projects like **CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor)** and port development in Sri Lanka and Maldives.

In conclusion, foreign investment is a critical driver of economic development in South Asia, complementing domestic capital and facilitating industrial growth, infrastructure development, and employment generation. India and Bangladesh lead the region in attracting investment, while Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives rely on strategic initiatives and international partnerships to harness capital inflows. Ensuring that foreign investment translates into sustainable and inclusive development requires effective governance, regulatory reforms, infrastructure development, and alignment with social and environmental objectives. By fostering an investment-friendly environment, South Asian countries can leverage foreign capital to stimulate growth, reduce poverty, enhance competitiveness, and integrate more effectively into the global economy.

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