

The Triadic Realignment: Constructing and Securitising the India-Pakistan-Afghanistan Dynamics in the Post-2021 Era

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ABSTRACT: *The withdrawal of US and NATO forces from Afghanistan in 2021 fundamentally altered the geopolitical landscape of South and Central Asia. Afghanistan transitioned from a relatively stable republic to a contested region, compelling regional actors to reassess their strategic approaches. This paper examines the strategic interests and prospective trajectories of India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Employing a qualitative case study methodology, it utilises process tracing and a comprehensive review of primary and secondary sources, including official statements, policy papers, and academic literature, to analyse the drivers of regional strategies post-2021. The study constructs scenarios to delineate potential future developments in the India-Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship. The analysis commences with the introduction of an integrated theoretical framework that synthesises Constructivist Structuralism, Structuration Theory and Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). Subsequently, the paper explores how historical tensions and evolving security paradigms inform the strategic behaviour of India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, and then assesses policy responses and broader regional implications. By integrating material and ideational theoretical perspectives, this study demonstrates that regional geopolitics extends beyond a bilateral India-Pakistan rivalry, encompassing complex dynamics rooted in enduring Afghanistan-Pakistan disputes. Pakistan's pursuit of "strategic depth" is shaped by a socially constructed "Hobbesian" conception of anarchy, an internal "double security dilemma" and persistent concerns regarding Pashtun nationalism. Concurrently, the Taliban's rejection of the Durand Line and its support for the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have undermined Pakistan's security strategy, culminating in the 2026 border conflict. India's geo-economic bypass initiatives and pragmatic engagement with the Taliban signify a substantial regional shift intended to diminish Pakistan's influence.*

KEYWORDS: *India-Afghanistan relations, RSCT, Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, Taliban, strategic depth, double security dilemma.*

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I. Introduction

Afghanistan has historically functioned as the epicentre of great power and regional rivalries, bearing the heavy toll of externally backed coups, proxy violence and the arming of client groups (Rashid, 2008). Within the contemporary regional architecture, the most consequential and enduring competition in this space is the contest between India and Pakistan (Paliwal, 2017). However, analysing this theatre purely through an India-Pakistan binary obscures the profound agency and historical grievances of Afghanistan itself. The dynamics have ensnared the three nations in what has been aptly described as a deadly triangle of mutual mistrust and competition (Dalrymple, 2013).

For two decades, the U.S.-led military intervention in Afghanistan provided a security umbrella under which India engaged heavily in the region, investing billions in infrastructure and governance schemes (Pant, 2010). Pakistan, meanwhile, utilised its intelligence apparatus to nurture the Taliban insurgency, banking on the assumption that a Taliban return to power would guarantee "strategic depth" along its western border, resolve historical territorial disputes and decisively curb Indian influence (Coll, 2004; Rashid, 2008). However, the Taliban's resurgence in August 2021 effectively disrupted the established security architecture, precipitating a profound systemic realignment that fundamentally altered regional power dynamics, compelled each actor to recalibrate their grand strategies and redefined the underlying drivers of inter-state competition and security in South and Central Asia (Khattak & Zou, 2023).

Rather than functioning as a compliant proxy, Taliban 2.0 has asserted its sovereignty, resulting in a severe deterioration of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations and the onset of open cross-border conflict in 2026 (Ranjan, 2026; Shekhawat, 2026). This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of these evolving triadic dynamics by employing an integrated theoretical framework to elucidate how historical enmity, domestic military structures, and spatial geography influence the strategic behaviour of India, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

II. Theoretical Framework: Bridging the Ontological Divide

To rigorously analyse the strategic competition in Afghanistan, it is necessary to overcome the ontological dissonance between classical neorealism and constructivism. Neorealism, as articulated by Kenneth Waltz, posits that states act as rational, utility-maximising actors constrained primarily by the material structure of anarchy (Waltz, 1979). Within this framework, survival compels states to pursue security through balancing behaviour, strategic alliances and power accumulation. However, relying solely on material power fails to explain the persistent, highly costly revisionist behaviour of Pakistan against a materially superior India, or the deeply emotional, identity-driven rhetoric that characterises South Asian diplomacy (Fair, 2014). While proponents of neorealism might contend that material incentives and external threats ultimately shape state behaviour over the long term, these materialist explanations alone cannot adequately address why Pakistan continues policies that frequently undermine its own internal stability, nor why Afghanistan has become a deeply securitised arena in the India–Pakistan rivalry (Mitton, 2014). This suggests the importance of integrating alternative perspectives to capture the full complexity of these dynamics.

Consequently, this study adopts an integrated theoretical framework that combines constructivist structuralism, structuration theory and Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) to bridge the divide between materialist and ideational explanations of strategic behaviour. Each theory was selected for its specific analytical strengths, and an explicit comparison reveals both their unique perspectives and points of complementarity. Constructivist structuralism focuses on how entrenched social and ideational factors construct the very foundations of anarchy and inter-state enmity, directly addressing the identity-driven aspects central to the India-Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship. In contrast, structuration theory emphasises the reciprocal relationship between institutional structures and the agency of key actors, offering insight into how internal security cultures, such as those within Pakistan, are continually produced and transformed through both structure and practice. Meanwhile, RSCT situates these state- and institution-level phenomena within the broader context of regional security dynamics, highlighting how patterns of threat perception and security interdependence cluster geographically in South Asia. By explicitly comparing and synthesising these theories, the framework enables a more comprehensive and multi-layered analysis of triadic competition.

The integration of these three theoretical frameworks enables the study to transcend simplistic explanations and incorporate multiple analytical perspectives, thereby enhancing the robustness of the analysis. Each theory operates at a distinct level: constructivist structuralism elucidates the ideational and social foundations of inter-state conflict; structuration theory investigates the reciprocal influence between institutions and key actors, particularly within Pakistan’s strategic context; and RSCT situates these dynamics within the broader regional security environment, illustrating how security linkages and rivalries are clustered in South Asia. The synthesis of these approaches provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the interplay of ideas, institutions, and regional factors that shape the India-Pakistan-Afghanistan relationship.

Alexander Wendt’s constructivist structuralism provides the foundational bridge by arguing that international structure is not solely material, but also ideational and social (Wendt, 1999). While neorealism conceptualises anarchy as an objective condition that mechanically compels states toward self-help behaviour, constructivism argues that “anarchy is what states make of it” (Wendt, 1992). The anarchic structure governing South Asia is therefore best understood as a socially constructed “Hobbesian” culture of anarchy characterised by deep-seated enmity, mistrust and a zero-sum struggle for survival (Wendt, 1999).

Within this framework, the India–Pakistan rivalry is not merely a consequence of territorial disputes or power asymmetry; rather, it is constituted through historically embedded narratives, identities and ideological practices (Wendt, 1999). The bedrock of this Hobbesian structure is Pakistan’s “Two-Nation Theory,” which posits that Hindus and Muslims represent fundamentally irreconcilable political communities (Cohen, 2004). This theory became the foundational logic of the Pakistan state and has been heavily instrumentalised by the Pakistan Army to unify a multiethnic society against a perceived existential external threat (Fair, 2014).

Accordingly, Pakistan’s strategic culture is driven by the enduring conviction that India fundamentally rejects the legitimacy of Pakistan as a Muslim homeland and consequently seeks regional domination (Fair, 2014). This socially constructed perception transforms India from a conventional geopolitical competitor into a civilizational and ideological threat. Afghanistan therefore becomes strategically important not merely because of its geography, but also because, through this ideational lens, it is interpreted as a potential arena for Indian encirclement (Paliwal, 2017).

Similarly, India’s engagement with Afghanistan is also shaped by identity and historical narratives. India constructs itself as a secular, democratic and responsible regional power whose developmental engagement in Afghanistan reflects both strategic interests and normative aspirations (Muni & Mishra, 2010). Thus, the rivalry in Afghanistan is socially constituted through competing strategic imaginations rather than purely objective material calculations.

To understand why Pakistan persists in highly costly revisionist behaviour, this study integrates structuration theory. By emphasising the mutually constitutive relationship between agents and structures,

structuration theory enables a more nuanced analysis of how Pakistan's actions are both shaped by, and serve to reproduce, the underlying institutional and ideological structures governing its foreign policy (Giddens, 1984). This theoretical approach clarifies that Pakistan's strategic decisions are not merely responses to external pressures, but are also active processes that reinforce and perpetuate its domestic security culture and state identity.

The Pakistan Army occupies a dominant position within Pakistan's national security apparatus. It has embedded its institutional beliefs, ideological narratives, and strategic preferences into the broader strategic culture of the state (Fair, 2014). Consequently, Pakistan's decision-makers operate within what may be termed a "double security dilemma" (Paliwal, 2017).

The first dilemma emerges from the external international structure. Material asymmetry with India and broader regional geopolitical pressures logically demand strategic accommodation and moderation (Waltz, 1979). However, the second dilemma emerges internally from Pakistan's ideological structure. The Pakistan Army derives substantial institutional legitimacy from positioning itself as the guardian of Pakistan's ideological and territorial frontiers against India (Fair, 2014). As a result, conciliatory policies toward India risk undermining the ideological foundations upon which the military establishment's dominance rests.

This duality explains why Pakistan frequently adopts revisionist policies that appear irrational from a purely neorealist perspective (Fair, 2014). The pursuit of "strategic depth" in Afghanistan, support for proxy actors and the securitisation of Indian influence in Kabul persist because they are embedded within both external security calculations and internal ideological imperatives (Rashid, 2008). Pakistan, therefore acts not simply as a rational balancer but as a dissatisfied and ideologically driven security actor operating within mutually reinforcing structural constraints.

To elevate the geopolitical analysis beyond descriptive geography, this study employs Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). RSCT posits that security interdependence is clustered into regionally based complexes because threats travel more effectively across geographic proximity than across long distances (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). South Asia constitutes a standard regional security complex with a bipolar essential structure rooted in the mutual securitisation between India and Pakistan (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Within this framework, Afghanistan occupies a critical geopolitical and strategic position because it directly affects the regional balance of power and the security perceptions of both states.

The fear of Indian encirclement through Afghanistan is therefore understood not as an objective geographic fact, but as a process of securitisation in which Pakistan has constructed Indian diplomatic, economic and developmental activities in Afghanistan as existential threats (Paliwal, 2017). Conversely, India securitises Pakistan-backed militancy and Taliban-linked extremism as threats to regional stability and Indian national security (Tellis, 2010).

Accordingly, Afghanistan emerges not as a passive buffer state, but as an active arena within the South Asian regional security complex where competing identities, strategic narratives, and geopolitical ambitions intersect. The strategic contest in Afghanistan is therefore simultaneously material and ideational, regional and domestic, geopolitical and identity-driven. By synthesising constructivist structuralism, structuration theory and Regional Security Complex Theory, this integrated framework is significant because it captures the multidimensional forces shaping the region, allowing for a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of how the India-Pakistan rivalry is constructed, perpetuated, and evolves within the Afghan geopolitical context.

III. INDIA- AFGHANISTAN: HISTORICAL TIES

The historical and cultural ties between India and Afghanistan are profoundly civilizational, forming a foundation that has deeply influenced their modern geopolitical relationship (Pant, 2010). These bonds span millennia and have evolved through a complex history of shared culture, trade and strategic recalibrations, particularly over the last century (Barfield, 2012). The historical linkages between the two regions predate the modern nation-state system. Afghanistan served as a major crossroads on the ancient Silk Route, facilitating the flow of trade, pilgrims and ideas into India (Barfield, 2012). The region shares a rich Buddhist heritage, most famously embodied by the giant statues of the Bamiyan Buddhas (Barfield, 2012).

In the modern Indian imagination, this relationship is deeply romanticised, anchored by Rabindranath Tagore's classic 1892 short story, *Kabuliwallah* (Paliwal, 2017). Depicting a touching friendship between a rugged Afghan fruit-seller in Calcutta and a young Bengali girl, the story cemented an enduring image of Afghans as fiercely independent, robust, yet remarkably warm and soft-hearted. Indian policymakers frequently evoke this "Kabuliwallah bond," viewing the India-Afghanistan relationship as inherently familial and deeply rooted in people-to-people affection (Paliwal, 2017).

The geopolitical dynamics of the last century were fundamentally altered by the end of British rule and the 1947 Partition of the Indian subcontinent (Paliwal, 2017). The partition created Pakistan as a geographical wedge between India and Afghanistan. However, Afghanistan fiercely rejected the colonial-era Durand Line as

its legitimate border with Pakistan. It laid irredentist claims to Pashtun-majority areas, leading Kabul to be the only nation to vote against Pakistan's admission to the United Nations in 1947 (Taye & Ahmed, 2021).

This mutual antipathy towards Pakistan brought India and Afghanistan together as natural allies (Paliwal, 2017). The two nations signed a Treaty of Friendship in January 1950 (MEA, 1950). Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, India expanded its technical and economic assistance, sending teachers, training Afghan Air Force personnel and helping establish meteorological and aeronautical facilities.

During the Cold War, Afghanistan's increasing reliance on the Soviet Union culminated in the 1979 Soviet military invasion (Paliwal, 2017). Driven by its own strategic dependence on Moscow and a desire to balance against a US-Pakistan axis, India became one of the few non-communist states to recognise the Soviet-installed government in Kabul (Paliwal, 2017).

The Soviet withdrawal in 1989 and the subsequent fall of the Afghan communist government in 1992 forced a shift in India's policy (Paliwal, 2017). New Delhi transitioned to a conciliatory approach, engaging with the Mujahideen government (Paliwal, 2017). However, when the Pakistan-backed Taliban seized power in 1996, India refused to grant the regime diplomatic recognition and was forced to close its embassy (Paliwal, 2017).

During the Taliban's rule (1996–2001), India actively provided financial, medical, and limited covert military support to the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance (United Front), commanded by figures like Ahmad Shah Massoud, to prevent Pakistan from monopolising influence in the country (Paliwal, 2017). Following the US-led intervention that ousted the Taliban in 2001, India rapidly re-established its diplomatic presence and emerged as Afghanistan's premier regional development partner (Pant, 2010).

IV. INDIA'S PRAGMATIC RECALIBRATION AND GEO-ECONOMIC BYPASS STRATEGIES

India's Afghan policy has historically been shaped by two competing advocacy coalitions: the *partisans* and the *conciliators* (Paliwal, 2017). The partisans view Afghanistan purely through the lens of containment, advocating for aggressive alignment with anti-Pakistan proxy forces to squeeze Pakistan strategically (Paliwal, 2017). The conciliators, conversely, argue for a broader engagement strategy that prioritises state-building, economic development, and diplomatic outreach to all Afghan factions, viewing military intervention or proxy warfare as a dangerous escalation of the South Asian security dilemma (Paliwal, 2017). During the U.S. occupation, India's approach was largely guided by the conciliators, relying heavily on soft power. India invested over \$3 billion in the Afghan Republic's infrastructure, constructing the Afghan parliament and the Salma Dam to cultivate goodwill and combat the spread of Pakistan-sponsored radicalism (Paliwal, 2017; Pant, 2010).

Recognising that Pakistan systematically leverages its geography to restrict Afghanistan's economy, as demonstrated by frequent closures of the Torkham and Chaman border crossings, India sought to modify the regional "interaction capacity" (Pant, 2010; Taye & Ahmed, 2021). India made substantial investments in Iran's Chabahar Port and in the construction of the Zaranj-Delaram highway in south-western Afghanistan (Pant, 2010). These connectivity projects represent significant geopolitical interventions intended to circumvent Pakistan's blockade and to counterbalance the expanding China-Pakistan economic corridor. They provide landlocked Afghanistan with an alternative maritime route and help prevent the encirclement of Indian regional interests (Paliwal, 2017; Taye & Ahmed, 2021).

India perceived the collapse of the Afghan Republic in 2021 as a significant national security threat (Khattak & Zou, 2023). In response, New Delhi recalibrated its foreign policy, adopting a more pragmatic approach. Observing the growing rift between Kabul and Islamabad, India transitioned from principled opposition to the Taliban to a strategy of cautious and pragmatic engagement.

India reopened its embassy in Kabul as a "technical mission" and resumed humanitarian assistance, including massive wheat shipments via Chabahar (Change and Continuity, n.d.). The Taliban, desperate to reduce its reliance on Islamabad amid crippling border closures and facing disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz, warmly welcomed Indian outreach (Strait of Hormuz Disruption, n.d.). In October 2025, coinciding with Pakistan's escalating airstrikes, interim Afghan Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi visited New Delhi, referring to India as a "significant regional partner" and advocating expanding the India-Afghanistan Air Freight Corridor and Chabahar trade (Recalibrating Ties, n.d.).

By employing geo-economic strategies such as investing in the Chabahar Port in Iran and constructing the Zaranj-Delaram highway, India has materially enabled alternative transit routes that have allowed Afghanistan to engage in trade and receive aid independently of Pakistan's border controls (Pant, 2010; Taye & Ahmed, 2021). These initiatives have undermined Pakistan's ability to exert economic pressure through border closures, effectively circumventing traditional blockades. Furthermore, the widening rift between Kabul and Islamabad, particularly after the Taliban refused to recognise the Durand Line and sheltered anti-Pakistan elements, created an opening for India to re-establish its presence in Afghanistan. India's re-engagement took the form of reopening its Kabul embassy as a technical mission and providing large-scale humanitarian

assistance, such as wheat shipments via Chabahar. In exchange, India reportedly obtained verbal counterterrorism assurances from the Taliban leadership, all achieved without deploying its own military personnel (Khattak & Zou, 2023).

V. THE AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN CONFLICT: HISTORICAL ANIMOSITY AND THE DURAND LINE

To fully grasp the contemporary triadic realignment, it is imperative to analyse the deep-rooted historical mistrust between Afghanistan and Pakistan, a dynamic often overshadowed by the India-Pakistan rivalry. The relationship between Kabul and Islamabad has been more conflictual than cooperative since Pakistan's inception (Taye & Ahmed, 2021).

The primary source of ideational and territorial conflict between the two states is the Durand Line. Established in 1893 after an agreement between British diplomat Sir Mortimer Durand and Afghan Emir Abdur Rahman Khan, the boundary arbitrarily divided the indigenous Pashtun tribes (Taye & Ahmed, 2021). Afghanistan has never officially accepted the Durand Line as a legitimate international border, arguing that the agreement was signed under duress with an unequal colonial power and that its validity expired after 100 years (Omrani, 2009; Taye & Ahmed, 2021). Following the partition of British India in 1947, Afghanistan laid irredentist claims to the Pashtun-dominated regions of north-western and south-western Pakistan, advocating for an independent or autonomous "Pashtunistan" (Bezhan, 2014). Pakistan retaliated immediately with a trade embargo, setting a precedent for using economic coercion to manage its landlocked neighbour (Schofield, 2010).

Throughout the Cold War, Afghan leaders continually stirred Pashtun nationalist sentiments, which Pakistan viewed as an existential threat to its territorial integrity (Rais, 2017). In response to this perceived Afghan irredentism and the fear of an India-Afghanistan alliance encircling the nascent state, Pakistan's military establishment adopted the doctrine of "strategic depth" (Fair, 2014). The pursuit of strategic depth was not solely about finding physical space to retreat during a war with India; it was an ideological necessity to install a compliant Islamist regime in Kabul that would neutralise ethnic Pashtun nationalism, recognise the Durand Line, and deny India a foothold (Fair, 2014; Paliwal, 2017). This structural imperative drove Pakistan to nurture the Afghan Mujahideen in the 1980s and the Taliban in the 1990s (Coll, 2004; Rashid, 2008).

VI. THE 2021 PARADIGM SHIFT AND THE 2026 OPEN WAR BETWEEN PAKISTAN AND AFGHANISTAN

The return of the Taliban in August 2021 was initially celebrated by the Pakistan military establishment as a strategic victory that would eliminate India's influence in Kabul and finally secure Pakistan's western flank (Khattak & Zou, 2023). A few days after the takeover, the former director-general of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) visited Kabul, underscoring Islamabad's confidence in its proxy (Afghanistan-Pakistan relations, n.d.). However, as fundamental points of divergence over the Durand Line and the Taliban's continued sheltering of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) emerged, relations deteriorated rapidly. These tensions escalated into regular border clashes and, in reality, Taliban 2.0 has fundamentally fractured Pakistan's doctrine of "strategic depth." The significance of the 2026 conflict lies in its exposure of the limitations and contradictions of Pakistan's longstanding approach; the open warfare not only invalidated Islamabad's expectation of strategic depth but also underscored Afghanistan's assertion of sovereign agency, with the Taliban prioritising their own interests over those of their former patrons. This conflict marked a paradigmatic shift by demonstrating that attempts to instrumentalise Afghanistan as a security buffer could ultimately produce greater instability, undermining regional security and compelling all actors to reassess the premises of their strategic engagement.

Freed from the pressures of the U.S. occupation, the Afghan Taliban emerged as a sovereign actor determined to assert its independence. The ideational structures, namely, shared religious ideology, that once bound Pakistan and the Taliban, have proven subordinate to state interests and ethnic Pashtun nationalism (Rais, 2017). The Taliban actively destroys fencing erected by Pakistan along the Durand Line and forcefully asserts its historical territorial claims (Rais, 2017).

Most critically, the Afghan Taliban has provided sanctuary to the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). This ideological twin conducts devastating terrorist attacks against Pakistan (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2026). An estimated 6,000 to 6,500 TTP fighters are based in eastern Afghan provinces (Taye & Ahmed, 2021). The Afghan Taliban refuses to crack down on the TTP, viewing them as brothers in arms and fearing that applying pressure would drive fighters to defect to the rival Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) (Afghanistan-Pakistan: The Overlooked War, n.d.).

In late February 2026, following a surge in TTP violence, the Pakistan military declared a state of "open war" and launched *Operation Ghazab Lil-Haq* (Wrath for the Truth) (Ranjan, 2026). The Pakistan Air Force conducted extensive airstrikes inside Afghanistan, targeting suspected TTP and ISKP hideouts in Kabul,

Kandahar, Paktia, Paktika, Khost and Laghman, resulting in significant civilian casualties (Ranjan, 2026; Shekhawat, 2026).

The Afghan Taliban responded forcefully, launching artillery and ground-level attacks on Pakistan border posts, framing their response as *Radd al-Zulm* (Response to Oppression) and likening Islamabad's actions to those of a hostile occupying power (Shekhawat, 2026). Although a truce between Pakistan and Afghanistan was subsequently mediated, the underlying mistrust remains deeply entrenched (Shekhawat, 2026). Pakistan's pursuit of a proxy client to alleviate its "double security dilemma" has paradoxically empowered an entity that now shelters its most lethal domestic threat, generating the highest levels of terrorism impact globally for Pakistan (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2026).

VII. THE INDIA-PAKISTAN-AFGHANISTAN INTERACTION: NAVIGATING THE "DEADLY TRIANGLE"

The strategic contest in South Asia is often inaccurately depicted as a bilateral India-Pakistan rivalry imposed upon a passive Afghan buffer. In reality, empirical evidence indicates a complex triadic interaction in which Afghanistan exercises significant sovereign agency, navigating an "India-Pakistan dilemma" (Paliwal, 2015). This triadic relationship constitutes a "deadly triangle of mutual mistrust and competition" (Dalrymple, 2013).

Within this interactive framework, India and Pakistan pursue mutually exclusive objectives in Afghanistan and leverage sharply different tools to achieve their respective goals (Constantino, 2020). Pakistan utilises militant groups, including the Afghan Taliban, as strategic proxies, relying on hard power and coercion to enforce its strategic depth. Conversely, India places considerable weight on its soft power, utilising development aid, capacity-building, and support for democratic institutions to cultivate immense goodwill among the Afghan populace (Heine & Ghosh, 2011; Pant, 2010).

Recognising that Pakistan systematically uses its geography and border closures to choke Afghanistan's economy, successive Afghan governments have proactively courted Indian economic and political support to offset Islamabad's dominance. Kabul utilises Indian investments to build state capacity and secure alternative transit routes, thereby increasing its own strategic autonomy. (Afghanistan's India Pivot: Economic Pragmatism and Strategic Calculus, 2025)

Pakistan views India's intentions and capabilities through an adversarial lens, perceiving any Indo-Afghan cooperation as a concerted strategy of "strategic encirclement" (Constantino, 2020; Fair, 2014). Consequently, whenever Kabul asserts its independence by engaging New Delhi, Islamabad's "double security dilemma" is triggered. Pakistan responds to this interaction by weaponising its transit routes and deploying insurgent proxies to subvert the Indo-Afghan partnership and punish Kabul. Thus, the India-Pakistan-Afghanistan interaction is defined by a paradoxical cycle: Kabul's attempts to escape Islamabad's orbit through New Delhi consistently accelerate Pakistan's destabilisation efforts in Afghanistan, which, in turn, reinforce Afghan resentment toward Pakistan and push Kabul further toward India (Paliwal, 2015).

VIII. CONCLUSION

The competition in Afghanistan transcends the traditional India-Pakistan proxy war paradigm, instead constituting a complex triadic struggle informed by entrenched ideational factors, historical grievances and shifts from bipolarity to multipolarity in the international order. By applying an integrated theoretical approach, this paper not only identifies the persistence of rivalry as rooted in a socially constructed "Hobbesian" culture of anarchy, Pakistan's "Two-Nation Theory," its "double security dilemma," and ongoing concerns over Afghan Pashtun nationalism, but also demonstrates how these theoretical insights can inform policy. Recognising the multidimensional sources of insecurity suggests the need for policy interventions that address both material and ideational drivers, including fostering inclusive regional dialogues, prioritising identity-sensitive confidence-building measures, and developing frameworks that proactively account for the agency and sovereignty of all three states.

These findings carry significant policy implications for both regional and international stakeholders. Policymakers are encouraged to move beyond short-term solutions and address the underlying ideational and historical drivers of insecurity, as constructivist structuralism highlights. Furthermore, regional cooperation should respect Afghanistan's sovereignty and avoid reducing it to a proxy, consistent with structuration theory's emphasis on recognising the agency of all states, particularly those with less power.

Confidence-building measures, such as trilateral dialogues or targeted economic initiatives, can help reduce mistrust, as posited by the Regional Security Complex Theory. Enhancing regional interaction capacity enables states to shift from perceiving one another as threats to collaborating on security issues. Emphasising identity and historical context highlights the necessity for more inclusive narratives and educational reforms to mitigate longstanding tensions, consistent with constructivist perspectives on conflict formation. For external actors, strategies that account for the distinct objectives and security concerns of all three countries, rather than

relying on traditional balance-of-power approaches, are more likely to promote regional stability. Ultimately, enduring stability will result from incremental efforts that acknowledge historical grievances, foster interdependence, and support the development of a cooperative security architecture, as this analysis indicates.

Pakistan's persistent pursuit of "strategic depth" has resulted in a significant strategic paradox. The Taliban 2.0 administration resists subordination, actively contesting the Durand Line and providing sanctuary to the TTP, leading to an "open war" that severely undermines Islamabad's regional security architecture.

Meanwhile, India has leveraged its expanding influence as an autonomous actor in a multipolar international system and adopted pragmatic realism to reshape regional interactions in South Asia. Through investments in initiatives such as the Chabahar Port and pragmatic engagement with the Taliban, New Delhi has capitalised on the rift between Afghanistan and Pakistan to counter Islamabad's attempts at regional dominance. As Afghanistan continues to assert its independence amid ongoing border conflicts, the region is expected to remain a volatile and unpredictable geopolitical environment for the foreseeable future.

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