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Mapping Politics of Benazir Bhutto: A Journey of Robust Political Career

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Abstract

This research paper focuses on the political career of Benazir Bhutto as the first woman and Muslim Prime Minister of Pakistan. It will also discuss Benazir Bhutto's strategies and challenges faced by her, during her political tenure. Benazir entered politics after the demise of her father Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (late). The paper also investigates her entire political career under the authoritarian rule of General Zia-ul-Haq, as Prime Minister, her removal from the Prime Minister office, accusation of corruption, the periods of exile. It examines her political elegance, stewardship, policies made by her as a woman Prime Minister and it will also look into her years of exile where she regrouped and repositioned herself politically and forged coalitions before her breathtaking return to Pakistan in 2007. Dejectedly, Benazir Bhutto was assassinated but her legacy will long be remembered in the political history of Pakistan. The research measures her impact on democracy, women in particular, as well as her capacity to politically lead the nation amidst many challenges. The study attempts to narrate Benazir's political biography with a focus on crucial events and decisions, which is characterized by her strong political career. It will explore the political, social, and institutional challenges faced by Benazir Bhutto during her political career, and the measures she took to deal with her rivals' political and conservative forces in Pakistan. The study will also focus on her accomplishments as a politician, regardless of the issues she faced.

1. Introduction

“Democracy is the best revenge.” Benazir Bhutto (Zain and Ali, 2009)

Benazir Bhutto is marked as one of the paramount actors of the political life of Pakistan and dwells in the list of such leaders who brought revolution in the history. She was the first female to lead a Muslim country's government who also faced great many ups and downs in her political career. She became Prime Minister for a second time in 1993-1996, her leadership of Pakistan was outlined by the efforts to transform the nation, supporting democratic processes and advocating for rights of women in a highly masculinized society (Khan and Wei, 2016). She has an engaging political story, around which revolves the destiny of the famous Bhutto family, and notably her father Zulfikar Ali Bhutto

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who was a Prime Minister and President of Pakistan. However, Benazir as a female PM struggled against political persecution, personal loss and systematic barriers from powerful organizations and institutions throughout her political career and it highlights the nature of her leadership.

Thus, the goal of the present research paper is to mainly consider the following questions: the political activities of Benazir Bhutto, the kind of problems she faced from political opponents and what concrete success she achieved regardless of the numerous forms of opposition? Her life therefore chronicles political progression, and personal perseverance and tactical flexibility in a context that was seldom friendly to her ambitions. The study will look at Bhutto's ascendance to power after her father's execution, her attempt to challenge an authoritarian government of General Zia ul Haq and her attempts to build up a reformist democracy. It will also analyse and assess the accusations of corruption and mismanagement made to her political career thus causing the dismissal of her governments.

Moreover, the study will explore her leadership style, her interactions within and outside the Pakistan's military during the decisive years, as well as during her struggle for democracy while in power and when in the diaspora. The all-inclusive analysis would provide a tremendous insight into what she left behind not only in Pakistan but also in world politics.

1.1 Research Objectives

- To assess Benazir's the political, social, and institutional restraints a leader a female during her political career.
- To analyse abundant measures taken by Benazir Bhutto to battle the opposition.
- To assess some realistic accomplishments of Benazir Bhutto in her political career in the light of democratization and women empowerment.

1.2 Research Questions

- What were the political, social, and institutional challenges Benazir Bhutto faced during her political career?
- What measures did Benazir Bhutto take to deal with her rivals' political and conservative forces in Pakistan?
- What were Benazir Bhutto's accomplishments in her political career regardless of the issues?

1.3 Research Methodology

This research is based on political career of Benazir Bhutto using the qualitative approach. In this study data collected from archival sources and specially from autobiography of Benazir Bhutto. Secondary sources such as books and articles are also used to cross check the collected information after the review of the existing literature on the under-discussion topic.

2. Literature Review

In "Benazir Bhutto: From Prison to Prime Minister" L. Hughes (2000) offers a convincing account of Benazir Bhutto's extraordinary political voyage, tracing her growth from a political inmate to becoming the first woman Prime Minister of a Muslim-majority country (Hughes, 1990). The book provides the specifics of Bhutto's personal life: the influence of her father's execution, numerous imprisonments, and exile and how these experiences defined her politics and management approach. Hughes recounts Bhutto's achievements in Pakistan's democratic journey, women's emancipation, and attempts at Pakistan's general modernization and fundamentalists. In general, Hughes' biography is useful to explore the private and public difficulties and achievements of Bhutto (Hughes, 2000).

In “Trial and Error: The Advent and Eclipse of Benazir Bhutto”, Iqbal Akhund (2000) offers an inclusive standpoint on Benazir Bhutto's rise and fall in politics. As an ex-mentor to Bhutto, Akhund provides a nuanced scrutiny of her political career, leadership encounters, and the unstable environment. The book investigates her accomplishments as the first female Prime Minister as well as the mistakes that led to her fall. Akhund's depiction is composed, contributing respect for her attainments (Iqbal, 2000).

In “The Bhutto Dynasty: The Struggle for Power in Pakistan” author presents a comprehensive and perilous examination of the Bhutto family's multifaceted political inheritance in Pakistan. The book archives the growth of Bhutto’s commencement with Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and enduring through Benazir Bhutto's raging leadership, so long as an in-depth study of the political, social, and personal issues that formed their rule. The writer offers a composed description, highlighting the Bhutto’s family support for the Pakistani politics, mostly their advocacy for democracy (Bennett-Jones, 2020).

The author of “Getting Away with Murder: Benazir Bhutto's Assassination and the Politics of Pakistan,” narrates a deep investigation into the environment surrounding Benazir Bhutto's murder. He examines the political conspiracies and complete failures that permitted her murder to happen, with the role of numerous political actors, security gaps, and the effect of radical groups (Muñoz, 2014). The article "Benazir Bhutto’s Politics: A Way Forward to the Restoration of Democracy in Pakistan,” analyses her political strategies and their significance in modern Pakistan. The authors contend that Bhutto's pledge to democratic values and her leadership during turbulent times provide valuable lessons for restoring democracy in the country. They climax her character in supporting women's civil rights and political reform as critical gears of her legacy (Ahmed, Magsi & Meghwar, 2022).

3. Data Analysis and Discussion

3.1 Influence of Benazir Bhutto to Pakistani and the World Politics

The Pakistani politics can owe its dynamism to Benazir Bhutto because she was one of the key political actors pushing for re-democratization of Pakistan. When Bhutto’s father was judicially murdered in 1979, she spearheaded the Pakistan Peoples’ Party (PPP) and became the face of democracy in Pakistan where martial law prevailed more than a decade. Her arrival to Pakistan in 1986 after years of exile in England gained her so much sympathy among the population and social movements against the regime of Zia-ul-Haq (Sheikh, 2005).

Globally, Bhutto was considered as a reformist who wanted to oversee change for democracy, socialism and women’s liberation. Her election as Prime Minister, after the death of Zia in 1988, was expected to set the example for Muslim women countries (Baxter, 2004). These two images give people hope because Bhutto defied all the specific expectations of the women who participated in the politics. However, her tenure at that office was not devoid of one or the other scandals. Her governments were full of such scandals of corruption and ineptitude that her administrations were dismissed by Presidents of Pakistan in early 1990s and 1996 (Husain, 2018).

3.2 Political History of Pakistan

In the political history of Pakistan, Bhutto family’s contributions and sacrifices cannot be omitted as the whole family remained active in the political arena of Pakistan since 1960s. Therefore, Benazir Bhutto was not a woman who set her sights on the power only to gain it but she was a woman with political acumen, a daughter of the people’s leader. That Benazir’s all antiquity begins with her father Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who was one of the most famous and provocative politicians of Pakistan (Ahmed, 2023). He tried to convert Pakistan into a welfare state during his power regime. He also formulated a largest political party “Pakistan Peoples’ Party (PPP)” that worked for the restoration of democracy, social justice and equality in economic reforms (Ali, 2023).

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was a man who assumed both the presidency and the prime minister ship of Pakistan. He started PPP in 1967 and protested against military rule characterized by General Ayub Khan. The PPP, Party focus was based on the mottos like '*Roti, Kapra, aur Makan*' which interpreted precisely means 'bread, clothes, and shelter,' something that this class of society required (Sharif & Hussain, 2024). According to the PPP priorities, it was expected that we would graduate poverty, develop education, and bring huge enterprises into the domestic realm. A Civil war -1971 led to emergence of new nation by the name Bangladesh out from East Pakistan which was a serious obstruction for Zulfikar's regime. However, he remained in power and adopted some political and economic measures and policies for building up the structures of the country. His reign was over in 1977 when he was removed power by General Mohammed Zia-ul Haq, through a military coup. This was an age of getting to political realms not only for politics of Zulfikar but to get a platter of ages to the entire family and where the politic of ping pong was to start for many long barren years for persecution and tragedy of family members (Baxter, 2004).

After removal from the office Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was imprisoned for one year he went under a much-hyped trial, hanged in 1979. This case left a blemish on our political culture and left an impact on his daughter Benazir Bhutto. Benazir mainly had been a student at Oxford University when she switched to politics to succeed her father. Yet it is remarkable that how Benazir, a woman, only thirty-five years old, neither having political elite connections nor the political bureaucracy backing, demonstrated herself as a leader and a realistic opposition to General Zia's military regime.

Benazir stepped into the politics of Pakistan, when the country was under martial law led by General Zia-ul-Haq. In his government there was intolerance, political opposition, Muslim laws and societies and ambitions to justify the military over technicians. To neutralize the PPP and its power Zia-ul-Haq committed Bhutto family or expelled the members of Bhutto family and banned the PPP. Despite, Benazir was imprisoned, was put under house arrest and even sent to exile but she never stopped and demanded democracy and challenged against mere authority of Zia. This fight against the military dictatorship made her a crusader and many people campaigned for her freedom and against dictatorship (Weiss, 1990).

Benazir leadership faced numerous challenges during her political career. Benazir and her team remained under stress during the period that tried to stop the activity of the party. But her leadership qualities made it conceivable in keeping the party united and important during the time of severe political repression. She vindicated the democratic phenomena, human rights and called for the restoration of civil power in Nigeria, that was the essence of her political activity, both nationally and internally. Her stand against Zia's authoritarian reforms aligned her with Pakistan's democracy demonstrators and the whole world awarded her a voice of democracy in Pakistan (Talbot, 1998).

During General Zia regime, Pakistani society was put on the way of Islamization of the state apparatus, eradication of the political opposition, and the military was drawn increasingly into the government. It also promoted orthodox Asiatic values and traditions which confining women to domestic duties; this made Benazir's leadership more important since she was a nuisance to a male dominated political system. She opposed the decrees of Zia on women rights and social liberalization, but these questions became the defining themes of Benazir.

Benazir Bhutto came back in 1986 and started work for the restoration of democracy and civilian supremacy. She herself always directed the public towards the PPP and rejuvenated the democratic battle against Zia's dictatorship. For instance, her speeches and appearances had followers in form of people, as seen by the need for change, and the civilian government. After the death of Zia-ul-haq in 1988. Benazir Bhutto's entrance could be depicted as one of the most significant events in the major political history of Pakistan. She created the headline when in July 1988 General Elections, she led the PPP to power to become the first woman in history to head an elected government of a Muslim country. Her political performance during this period earned her a reputation of a political leader of a high kind and it was not surprising when she rose to be the head of the government through an

appointment as the Prime Minister; her political journey navigated a complex political environment effectively.

3.3 Benazir's Rise to Political Power

The threats to Ms. Benazir Bhutto political significance were defined by a sequence of serious struggles and sacrifices on account of political turmoil after the assassination of eliminates her father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. For him, it was necessary to consider that after coming to power through a military coup in 1977. General Zia-ul-Haq not only removed the democratically elected government of Bhutto but also tried to undermine its political activities. It can be said that it was the time when Benazir started a long and intense struggle against dictators for democracy in Pakistan that turned her into the heroine of democracy struggle.

But despite Bhutto's assassination in 1979, his family became the most targeted during entire regime of General Zia's (Ahmed, 2023). Benazir along with her mother Nusrat Bhutto were put under arrested number of times and subjected to house arrest and state scrutiny and harassment. PPP was still the political party of the Bhutto family; it was imposed and Bhutto people were persecuted. During this period this lady underwent emotional and physical trampling which encompassed several years in jail or under house arrest. It is in detention that she was locked up under malicious warrants and horrid conditions, the objective was to churn out an unimportant, insignificant woman who was the world's leading political figure.

However, these adversities did not make Benazir Bhutto remain deterrent at any one time. She made her imprisonment a way of polishing her political ideology and strategies on the right kind that would suit her. After her release in 1984 she escaped to London and went underground to and resumed her support and advocacy for the PPP and also to tell people in other countries the brutality of Zia dictatorship to people. She made and sustained at least minimum meaningful contacts with foreign authorities and organizations concerned with supporting unfixed democracy and human rights in Pakistan. The political movement began a slow evolving process after the death of Zia in a plane crash in the year 1988. His sudden death enabled Benazir Bhutto to return to Pakistan from her relatively long stay in other countries. This was accompanied by a massive influx of the public carrying all manner of belongings in support of her and in support of a newborn democratic nation. The PPP was once again brought into from operation, and through Benazir the party was able to substantially increase in the voting community especially women and younger generation.

In the General Elections-1988, the PPP came into power and got majority of the seats in the National assembly (Ali, Shabbir & Ali, 2023). Benazir Bhutto has therefore won an election that made her the first woman Prime Minister of Pakistan and the first woman to head a democratic government in an Islamic country. When she was elected her victory was described as historic not only in Pakistan, but in the entire world for any female politician.

3.4 Benazir Bhutto as First Female Prime Minister (1988-1990) Achievements, and Challenges

Benazir Bhutto party got majority in the general elections and became the first Prime Minister of Islamic Republic of Pakistan. She took oath on December 2, 1988 (BBC News, 1988). In her first tenure from 1988-1990 as the Prime Minister, Benazir came with large reformist packages to modernize the traditional society of Pakistan where social factors are an overbearing issue. She launched policies for enhancing the status of women in education and health sectors and launched Women Development Program at the National level (New York Times, 1988). Her government also tried to elevate the standard and empower women in the workplaces and increase legal measures against violence on women.

In economic terms, Bhutto's government embarked on the process of liberalization and market orientated structural adjustment programs with a view to break the economic inertia that characterized the regime of the late general Zia ul-Haq (BBC News, 1988). This she wanted to achieve through the attraction of more foreign investors for economic development. Nevertheless, with these changes in the economy, she encountered most difficulties from different political parties and trade unions, which blamed her government for violating the labour standards.

However, there were some political weaknesses when Benazir Bhutto was exposed during her first term in power. Her government was accused of corruption and lack of productivity, thus causing political crises with rising opposition from other political parties. Negative talk such as nepotism and favouritism in government appointments detracted her presence and split the PPP (Pakistan Today, 2020). By 1990 the political process had become more divided along ideological lines and Bhutto's government was dismissed by President Ghulam Ishaq Khan on corruption and maladministration's charges which ultimately got Bhutto removed from the office.

Benazir Bhutto's rise to power was evidence of her resilience in the face of devastating challenges. Her journey from a young woman confined under an authoritarian administration to the first lady Prime Minister of Pakistan exemplifies a momentous chapter in the country's political history (Dawn News, 2007). Though her first tenure confronted important hurdles, her legacy as a pioneer for women in politics and a champion of self-ruled governance endures to resonate in Pakistan and beyond.

3.5 Second Tenure and Political Maturity (1993-1996)

Benazir Bhutto's second term as the Prime Minister of Pakistan, between 1993 and 1996 was full of challenges (Arshad, 2024). Her terms with establishment and even with other groups were not smooth. The opposition parties criticized her as a female prime minister and tried to destabilize her government. Finally, Bhutto was removed from power in 1990 but come back to politics and get the victory in General Elections -1993 in Pakistan. She became Prime Minister of Pakistan for the second time. During this tenure she was able to put in place of some of the major policies that were lacking in Pakistan and afforded her the privilege to manoeuvre in the complex political structure characterized by dominant military masters and vying political parties. Policies as well as Reform Initiatives Prime Minister of Pakistan, from 1993 to 1996, marked a period of political maturation characterized by significant reforms, complex relationships with the military and opposition parties, and the challenges that ultimately led to her government's dissolution (Arshad, 2024). After being ousted from power in 1990, Bhutto returned to the political arena and successfully won the 1993 general elections, becoming Prime Minister for the second time. This tenure offered her the opportunity to implement policies aimed at addressing some of the pressing issues that Pakistan faced, as well as the chance to navigate the intricate political landscape shaped by powerful military interests and rival political factions (Khan et al., 2017).

3.6 Policies and Reform Initiatives

In her second term, Bhutto continued with several reform agendas which she implemented with zeal, power and determination in Pakistan with an intention to address various macro and micro economic problems, social inequalities, and the oversees issues as well. Her economic principles included implementing the free-market reform and privatization policy. Government of Bhutto aimed at liberalization of the economy, minimized the state intervention, and improved functionality of the public organizations through privatization. These policy measures were an attempt to stabilize the economy which had degenerated into sky rocketing inflation, fiscal deficits and unemployment (Khan et al., 2017).

However, Benazir Bhutto also insisted on feminist perspectives, including women rights and capabilities. She also stressed the women's rights in employment and political activity, introducing

programs that would increase female opportunities for education and medical care. Her administration also boasted of enacting several bills in women's legal rights for instance the Family Law Ordinance, which sought to provide the females with certain rights to inheritance and property. She also launched several social welfare programs aimed at poverty reduction and education and other human development sectors. She created the Benazir Income Support Program to help poor families as its main objective. Such measures were aimed at raising living conditions and decreasing the role of poverty, especially among the vulnerable section of society.

3.7 Relations with Establishment

During her second tenure from 1993 to 1996, her relationships with the establishment was marked by careful teamwork but underlying pressures (Dawn, 1996). Even though she sought to proclaim civilian authority, the military establishment, commanded by Chief of Army Staff General Abdul Waheed Kakar and then General Jehangir Karamat, kept significant influence over key extents like national security and foreign policy, specifically about India and Afghanistan. However, Bhutto aimed to expand better civil-military relations, differences on policies, as well as handling Islamist fundamentals and relations with India, contributed to resistance (Anjum, 2000). The military's cynicism about her government, along with charges of dishonesty, played a part in her ultimate dismissal by the then President Farooq Leghari in 1996.

3.8 Analysis of the Factors Leading to the End of Her Second Term

However, Benazir Bhutto second era was over abruptly in 1996 when President Farooq Leghari dissolved her government due to her alleged involvement on massive corruption, incompetence to handle up growing political violence in the country. This dismissal was quite politically sensitive, and which caused lots of upheavals from her supports, who claimed she was fired from power by the military and the opposition parties.

There are several reasons which led to the early demise of Benazir Bhutto's second tenure of the government. First, the continuing increase of the effects of corrupt practices within her administration reduced her credibility among the public and the rest of the world. However, her government was characterized with serious allegations of graft and mismanagement despite her trying to spearhead reforms. These perceptions were further magnified by the economic realities of the country such as high inflation and instability of the fiscal which enlarged the level of displeasure among the societies (Anjum, 2000).

Second, her failure to build strong coalitions with other political parties weakened her to an extreme level of leadership occasioned by insufficient checking mechanisms. It resulted in a fragmentation of the political map, which made it almost impossible for her administration to mobilize the support that was needed to implement her major policies, as well as to stabilize the government. In addition, PPP factions divided her internally, leading to a lack of strategy to mobilize against the opposition forces (Azeem, 2024).

It can be concluded that Benazir Bhutto's second tenure as Prime Minister witnesses' scheme of political aspiration and difficulties. The attempts under her rule to introduce reforms and support women's rights were positive; nevertheless, her government was overwhelmed by the opposition and even accusations of corruption, the poor relationship with the military.

3.9 Years in Exile: Rebuilding and Strategic Alliances

Since Benazir Bhutto was in exile, most of the time between 1996 to 2007, she redefined her political profile and strategies. She has had many problems ever after been fired from power in 1996 including political persecution, she has been accused of embezzlement. At this time, Bhutto was more

concerned on how to reinstate herself in politics, how to democrat Pakistan and form alliances that would benefit her when she was re-elected (Shabbir & Chandio, 2023).

3.10 Engagement in Politics and Human Right Advocacy for Democracy

Throughout her exile, Benazir Bhutto continued supporting democracy in her home country, Pakistan and mobilized supporters from abroad. Originally based in London and Dubai, she was extremely active politically, urging people to learn about the tough political situation in Pakistan under the military rule of General Pervez Musharraf. Through radio and newspapers, TV interviews, conferences and foreign leaders, Bhutto drew the attention of Pakistan toward democratic rule and human rights (Shabbir & Chandio, 2023).

Her activism was targeted at awakening the values of voters and the global civil society to force the Musharraf regime into decentralization. Bhutto's advocacy for Pakistani people's aspirations combined with her family background legitimized her as a proponent of democracy. She also canded non-governmental organizations and governments of developed world appealing for a democratic Pakistan since it was in the best interest of the region and the world at large.

3.11 Role in the Formation of the Charter of Democracy (CoD) with Nawaz Sharif

The major achievement of Benazir was to build a consensus with Nawaz Sharif. Bhutto and Sharif signed a Charter of Democracy in 2006 with the vision and strong perspective to make Pakistan democratic and accountable. To these, the charter underlined the election by universal suffrage, the autonomy of the judiciary power, and military withdrawal from political matters (Younas, Iftikhar & Azhar, 2024).

The formation of this kind of coalition was quite a new story in Pakistan's political history mainly because the previous adversaries in politics of the country showed that they are ready to come under one umbrella to fight a common opponent. The Charter of Democracy (CoD) was a formal affirmation of democratic values but is also significant for electoral politics in that it set the basis for a more inclusive coalition of opposition parties that sought to counter General Musharraf's form of authoritarianism. This was to ensure that sufficient forces to counter the dictatorship had been formed and candidates of the same political hue and this could advance the processes of political liberalization and return of democracy (Younas, Iftikhar & Azhar, 2024).

3.12 Shifts in Political Narrative and Strategy During Years in Exile

As above mentioned, that another major achievement of Benazir Bhutto's political planning during her periods of exile was the Punjab alliance between her Pakistan People's Party and Nawaz Sharif an opponent turned ally, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz). Bhutto and Sharif build a political alliance against dictatorship with the vision to make Pakistan democratic and accountable. For this purpose, the charter underlined the election by universal suffrage, the autonomy of the judiciary power, and military withdrawal from political matters.

The formation of this kind of coalition was quite a new story in Pakistan's political history mainly because the previous adversaries in politics of the country showed that they are ready to come under one umbrella to fight a common enemy, that is, military rule. The Charter of Democracy was a formal affirmation of democratic values but is also significant for electoral politics in that it set the basis for a more inclusive coalition of opposition parties that sought to counter General Musharraf's form of authoritarianism (Younas, Iftikhar & Azhar, 2024). This was to ensure that sufficient forces to counter the dictatorship had been formed and candidates of the same political hue and agricultural produce could advance the processes of political liberalization and return of democracy.

Besides, Benazir's strategic coalitions strengthened her cooperation with Nawaz Sharif. She wanted to involve with several political groups, civil society groups, and grassroots activities to build an extended coalition to encounter Musharraf's authority. Her ability to steer the multifaceted political landscape and form coalitions with various groups was contributory in her last return in 2007, where she met with awe-inspiring backing from her voters.

Overall, Benazir's years in exile were marked by pliability and planned anticipation. Her political involvement and fight for democracy during exile helped her in maintaining her importance in the country politics, even though her alliance with Nawaz Sharif and the agreement (CoD) marked a significant shift in the political landscape. These years were crucial in structuring her slant to leadership and laying the basis for her coming back to power, at last determining her legacy as a prominent personality in the history of the restoration for democracy.

4. Conclusion

Benazir Bhutto's political career was full of hurdles and mega challenges. Being a first woman to Muslim-majority country's leader, she accepted the legacy of her father and transformed Pakistan's instable political landscape with extraordinary willpower. Her rise to power started in 1988, mirrored public demand for democracy afterwards General Zia-ul-Haq's authoritarianism, but her tenure exposed the determined fight between civilian and the military establishment.

Benazir's political journey was oriented with endeavours to regain civilian supremacy in major policy spheres of the country, but she was confronted by stiff opposition by strong military and intelligence establishments. As for the few patronage initiatives she tried to bring to the society: humanizing governance through supporting women's rights; her administration clashed most vividly with the military on security, foreign policy, and Islamist militant issues. Therefore, her accomplishments and debacles in diplomacy and economics during her two governments were marked by political instability and allegations of corruption, due to party politics and military opposition. Benazir's unyielding implications through marches, tactical partnership, and populist crusades reflect her strategy. However, her political career was always coloured by warfare like political environment which kept the governments of Pakistan under siege of judiciary, military or other factions. Her tragic assassination in 2007 established her indispensably to Pakistan's experiment with democracy and remains a constant reminder of the risks that civilian leadership faces in Pakistan's volatile political climate. She was a symbol of hope and democracy with her civilian government, yet her performance also discovered that there are many hindrances to civilian rule, which are put up by the military.

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Empowering Pakistan: The Role of Democratic Development in Achieving Stability and Prosperity

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Article Information	Abstract
Received: Dec 16, 2024 Revised: Dec 15, 2025 Accepted: Dec 31, 2025	<p>The democratic process has been associated with Pakistan to some degree, contributing to stability and prosperity. It is concerned with political revolution, human rights, a responsive government, and pro-people socio-economic policies. This research paper will argue and explain the significance of democratic development in the realization of political stability, civil liberties, economic growth and peace in a heterogenous and in most cases polarized society like Pakistan. It is interesting to note that the paper investigates the reasons why democracies consolidate, such as military interventions, poor institutional structures, and social/economic inequalities.</p> <p>It is a qualitative study which involves both primary and secondary data. Interviews with political analysts, policymakers, policymakers and Pakistani scholars could be used to gather primary information. The secondary data will include academic, policy, historical, and reports on governance problems of democratic transitions and challenges in Pakistan.</p> <p>Such findings indicate that the promotion of democracy results in the engagement of the strengthening of the national cohesion, where the practice results in transparency, good legitimacy, and involvement of the citizens. It makes extremism unappealing, advances good governance, and results in sustainable economic and social reforms. Nonetheless, resilience in democracy can be attained by building stronger institutions, ensuring political inclusion, and socio-economic equality. The study finds that democratic governance seems to be the puzzle to the long-term peace, prosperity, and political stability of Pakistan.</p>
Keywords <i>Political stability,</i> <i>economic growth,</i> <i>democratic development,</i> <i>governance,</i> <i>human rights</i>	

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The dynamic process is democratic development, which preconditions the changes of political, social and economic life of the country. The outcomes of learning in Pakistan can be conveyed as the unbelievable one, considering the fact that this country has been going through the military and democratic governance over the years (Khwaja, 2020). However, during the past decade and a half since the foundation of the nation back in 1947, Pakistan has experienced multiple instances of political unrest, the fact of more than two military coups, and which have muffled the tendencies toward democracy (Akbar & Bhatti, 2018). The poor political institutions have also contributed by the overthrow of democracy in favour of authoritarianism and the reversion to democracy, thus compromising their output hence further weakening the stability of the political system in addition to the lack of confidence of people in political system. Pakistan is one such state where democratic development process has influenced political stability, economic development and growth, social justice and protection of human rights negatively (Rizvi, 2000). Democratic type of government, the government by the people and of the people, in its turn, is also characterized by the list of perks in the peaceful transfer of the power to it, responsibility in the course of the ruling, and forms of non-stakeholder in the decision-making (Hasan, 2017). The context of the issue where democracy has not taken root in Pakistan in this paper will be addressed considering the peculiarities of the global setting environment.

1.2 Research Gap

The relation of democracy and development has taken the centre stage of the political science and governance studies during the last decades. This has been attested by many foreign scholars that democratic governments have a great contribution in promoting stability, safeguarding human rights and leading to economic development. In some cases, democracy is seen as an avenue towards institutional accountability, social equality and inclusive development as it applies to developing countries. However, with regards to Pakistan, the academic interests have mainly been on the military dictatorship and democratic regimes and the reconstructions of the electoral sphere and the civil-military tensions. The spheres of democratic progress, therefore, have been considered a reactive political process instead of a conclusive step towards national happiness.

Despite the enlightening literature regarding the discontinuities of democracy and the imposed legacy of dictatorship in Pakistan, however, a gap in the literature is nowadays that encompasses the wholesome democratic growth as a tool to the eventual attainment of political stability as an instrument to the realization of economic growth and peace. The bulk of the literature is a one-off study of political events, elections or criticism of weak democratic transitions as opposed to a systematic study of integrative impacts of democratic development across the levels, political, social and economic in the unique environment of Pakistan characterized by ethnic diversity, weak institutions and economic inequality.

Also, the recent democratic practices in Pakistan (e.g., the post-2008 transition, the 18th Amendment, judicial activism, and decentralization under the 7th NFC Award) have not been analysed in terms of long-term effectiveness, as far as improving the quality of governance, citizen participation, and sustainable development is concerned. Most of the past research work fails to take into consideration the recent statistics, geopolitical developments and role played by civil society in ensuring that the democratic process is consolidated.

It is precisely this gap that the current paper will fill by exploring the democratic development process outside the evaluation of a governance model and instead from the point of perspective of a strategic approach to the national transformation process. It will examine how democratic values can be applied to empower institutions, fight extremism, ensure inclusiveness to minorities, and create

economic justice. This paper will offer a multidimensional and up to date answer to the democratic possibility of empowering Pakistan, which will combine both quantitative and qualitative data, and references to the history of democracy. In this, it does not only offer a more mature academic argumentation but also gives some policy guidance on how to capitalise on democratic development in order to make Pakistan a stable, prosperous and inclusive nation with a secure future.

1.3. Research Questions

What is the effect of democratic development in the politics of political stability, peace and governance of the changing political system in Pakistan?

How effective in protecting human rights and inclusive socio-economic development in a multicultural society such as Pakistan are democratic institutions and processes?

Which are the major issues to democratic consolidation in Pakistan and which policy-oriented approaches are relevant to enhance democratic resilience and sustainable development?

1.4. Aims and Objectives

Discover how democratic development affects the political stability and peace in Pakistan.

Evaluate the contribution of democratic operations to the protection of human rights and the inclusive development.

Decipher the contribution of democracy to economic growth and sustainable development.

Trace some of the major obstacles to democratic consolidation in Pakistan and propose practical solutions.

2. Research Methodology

The current study involves a qualitative research design to explore the connection between the democratic development and the aspect of offering political stability, safeguarding human rights, economic well-being, and peace in Pakistan. Primary data will be collected using purposive sampling where semi-structured interviews are conducted with the experts, political analysts, scholars, human right activists, and policymakers. Such interviews would provide insights to the issue of the levels of democracy in Pakistan, obstacles to democracy, and the possibility of developing democracy to achieve stability and growth. The secondary data will include a synopsis of the scholarly sources, the executive reports, and the policy reports and grey literature on the democratic process, aspects of governance, and socio-political alterations in Pakistan. The special focus will be on exploring the experience of the democratic change, civil-military interrelation, the development of the electoral reform, and the signs of governance.

It will be discussed in a historical and thematic overview to establish trends and patterns and challenges on the way to the establishment of the democracy in Pakistan. Based on the synergistic engagements of the expert opinion, empirical and historical evidence, the study seeks to build a comprehensive idea of the different strategies that can be employed to facilitate national stability and socio-economic growth by indulging in democratic practices.

3. Purpose of the Study

The following research question is primarily used in this study: In the country of Pakistan, under the existing circumstances, how democratic development can help to produce stability, safeguard human rights, ensure growth, accountability, and generate peace? In this paper, the influential factors that

threaten democratization in Pakistan are political instability or corruption, social stratification, economic disparities, and the deteriorated institutions. This research will also give recommendations on how to improve and enhance institutions and functions that promote democracy in Pakistan where the society should move towards an inclusive and effective democracy. Better awareness of the forces influencing the growth of democracy would contribute to writing an article that provokes the discussion and inform individuals about democracy and how it has affected the future of Pakistan.

4. Structure of the Paper

The problems that democratization in Pakistan raises are addressed in various sections of this paper to ensure that the issue at hand is being addressed in a systematic and holistic way. The first one provides the background of the matter, and the setting and goes directly to the strength of the research questions. In the following paragraph, the paper will address the threats to democracy in Pakistan, and these could be divided into political, socio-economic, and institutional threats of democracy. The third part is the evaluation of the impacts of the democratic development in the terms of stability, human rights, economy and peace. The fourth section provides recommendations on how to empower the democratic institutions and inclusiveness. A short summary of the conclusions is also given at the end of the paper where the significance of democracy to Pakistan is reiterated.

5. Pakistan Democratic Development Threats.

5.1 Managing Political Hurdles

Pakistan is a newborn nation. She has been a witness of numerous political upheaval and political shifts in government and dictatorial regimes in the military. The military seized power and blocked the democracy several decades and decades; the actual manipulation of the election could not be determined as cynical enough. The interactional democracy has endangered the existence of the stable democratic culture, the dilution of the political institutions and the prolonged impaired deficiency of the government. This particular political factor can exacerbate the politics of the nation since different parties are built on an ethnic and regional level (Murtaza, 2021). However, the emergence of new political elites representing families of political influence, and the fact that the military continues to contribute significantly to the political life of the country are also among the most crucial issues that continue to burden democracy in the country (Ahmed, 2019; Naseem and Ahmad, 2022). This has proved to be a lethal combination to the democratic processes of most of the countries with poor political conditions, which have not allowed the democratic bodies to play productively, and in most instances, could not meet the demands of the citizens (Freedom House, 2023; UNDP, 2018).

Among the political instabilities that have plagued the political situation in Pakistan are political instability, dictatorships and military coup. The below figure, which is aesthetically presented as timeline of Pakistan, displays the political history of Pakistan, the periods of stability and regime change are depicted as two opposite periods between 1947 and 2023.

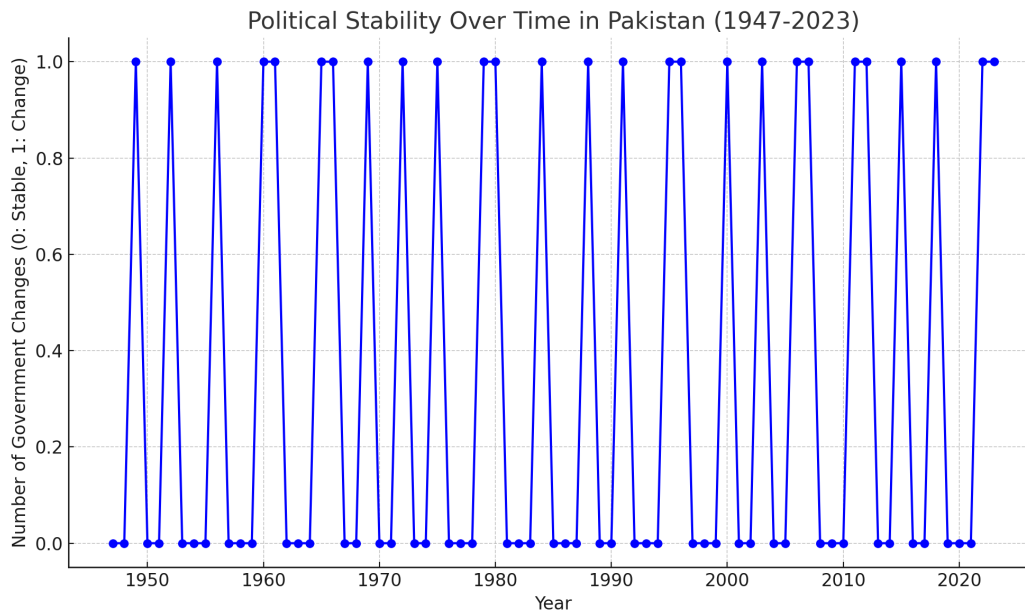


Figure 1. Source: Political Stability Timeline –IDEA database.

The history of Political Stability in Pakistan (1947-2023). This chart shows the difficulty of survival time of a democratic system. It shows that the only way that democracy can continue to exist is through a longer and stable democracy, which in itself, guarantees political stability.

5.2 The Response of Social Inequities

Due to ethnic and religious diversifications, it is even harder to have a democracy in Pakistan. This comprises of Punjabis, Sindhis, Pathans, Baloch and Mohajirs; other ethnicities have large minorities in the country. The country is a multi cultural one and various religions are practised in the country- Christians, Hindus and Amirids. This is racial and geographical diversity, which should be the primary strength of the Party, yet over the years, it has become the subject of conflict. These ethnic and sectarian divisions have taken flight into violence at other times, compromising social contract and faith in democracy by people. It diminishes/converts the representative nature of the governance; the ostracizing and social exclusion of minorities and poor people forms of people make them remain out of the democratic process. These social questions should be responded to in order to guarantee proper kind of inclusion and equity in the Pakistani democratic process.



Figure 2: Ethnic and Religious Diversity- Human Rights Commission data. One of the issues that democracy has to confront in Pakistan is Ethnic and Religious diversity that must serve the ethnic needs of Punjabis, Sindhis, Pathans, Baloch, and Mohajirs.

5.3 Economic Constraint Overcoming

Economic Factor: In this paper, the four primary factors which influence development of democracy in Pakistan were identified; one of them being Political development and economic factors. All these have made the history of this more complicated, as the corruption that has rocked through the business and the political systems has made people less trusting of the democratic institutions. The total transparency of the economic management and the extensive permeation of favouritism and patronage only aggravate this issue to unrealistic levels (Mahmood, 2016, p. 251). The second problem is the economic situation and the increase of poverty that predisposes masses of the population to unwillingness to participate politically and change the society. The overall outcome is that the utilization of resources is not efficient creating a situation of disillusionment by the people, which in turn creates unstable situations. It is not democracy that only benefits in overcoming these economic challenges but sustainable growth and economic development as well.

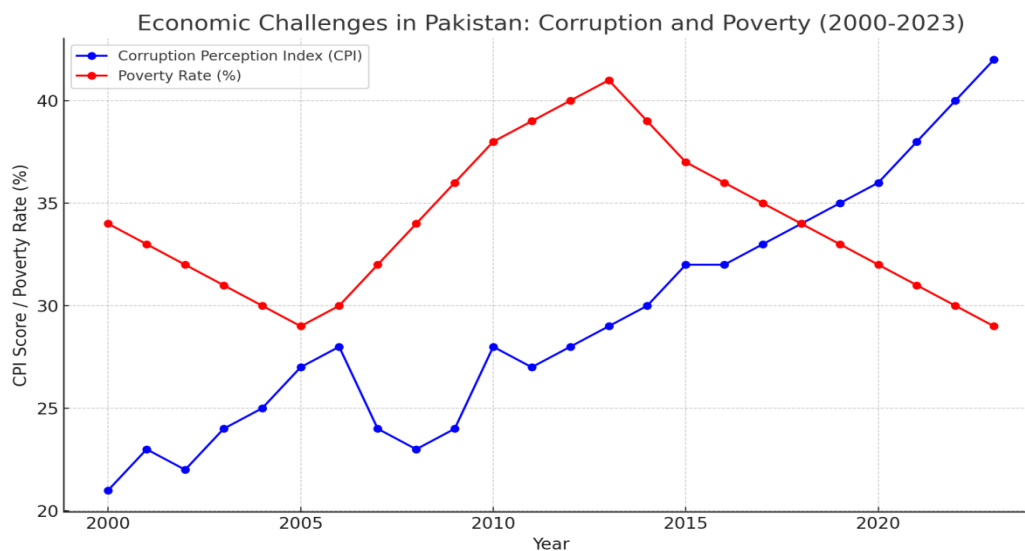


Figure 3: CPI and Poverty rate- Transparency International. Corruption Perception Index (CPI) and Poverty rate in Pakistan (2000-2023). This graph reveals the trend of corruption rates and poverty rates per year which constitute the economic issues that do not guarantee effective democratic government and self-sacrificing and consistent development.

5.4 Dealing with Institutional Weaknesses

The other issue that is faced by the democratic evolution is the organizational weakness of the business-like democracy in Pakistan. The laws, the electoral machineries and the police are partisan, and its political independence is extremely low. They are rather conditioned, however, to be quite appendages of the administrative state but not to be relatively independent institutions capable of uplifting the values of good governance and relieving the cynicism of the people with the democratic institutions, in particular. The second limitation of the democratic consolidation and stabilization is lack of civic engagement and political participation because the majority of the provinces have a literacy level of 40 and less where the people have access to the internet, little knowledge and general apathy. More to the point, the institutions should be unified, and people should be made to participate in the democratic process actively in a manner so that there can be any new democracy in Pakistan.

Further, the political systems and demonstrations of the democratic processes of the country have also been scaled down to bare minimum, as nobody believes in anything on any of the levels.

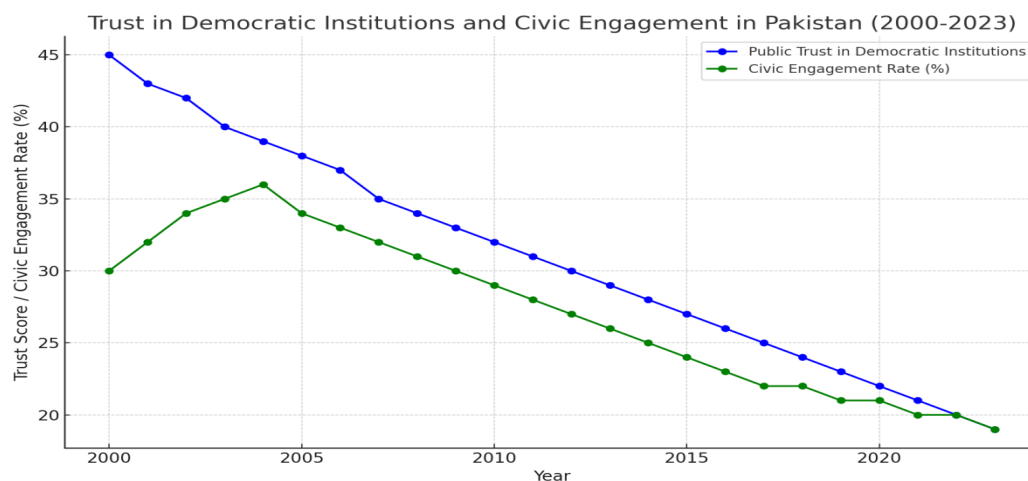


Figure 4: Other reports that the data is compiled by are that of Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT), (2000-2023) level of Public Trust in Democratic Institutions and Level of Civic Engagement: The negative trend over the years that are reported under include that there should be some sort of a reform to bring some form of energy in these ineffective systems in order to bring a fighting force of ordinary people who want some change brought about through democracy.

6. Summary of the Problems

In conclusion, it is possible to say that Pakistan is vulnerable to numerous threats, which are rather interdependent and include political uncertainty, social fragmentation, economic inequalities, and low institutional foundation. Such issues can merely be addressed by a holistic solution that may include the reformation of political and governance system, addressing social cohesion, enhancing financial governance and empowering the democracies. To advance on the path of sustainable democracy, Pakistan must get over these forces that have a great impact on society.

7. Evaluation of the Impact of Democratic Development

7.1 Slideway of Democracy to Political Resilience

Democratic development is one of the processes required, and it is to constitute and solidify institutionalism, which assists in maintaining the stability of state by heralding the free-flowing power via electoral processes. Whereas autocracies have been cited to have experienced violent upheavals during the process of handing power, democracies have come up with measures that reduce the strains of handing power. This is similar to the recent election processes in Pakistan though not flawless as it has not yet demonstrated any substantial change in democracy with regard to power transfers through civilian government. Democratic governance can be considered as a form of offering a legitimate political power that signifies the desire of people and as such enhances trust with the state. The legitimacy is also required as it is vital in the provision of a cohesion in the country and the avoidance of anarchy as far as legitimate governance means the representative government of the people and hence holds the people accountable.

7.2. Empowering Human Rights and Strengthening Social Equity

Democracy is required as well since democracy is a form of ensuring civil liberties and the equality of rights to vote. Democracy helps in the achievement of social justice and human rights. Along with the free media and the civil society, just as it is the case with the other democratic states, they are highly appreciated within the context of the government power check in the countries and the protection of the liberties of individuals. The process of democratization of Pakistan has been accompanied by the general awareness of human rights and activism by the civil society organization CSOs as the activists to maintain vigilance upon the minority, women, and other minority groups. Nevertheless, they are not alone, and we find them in the implementation and maintenance processes of human rights acts most of the times. It will also promote discourses and bargaining in a manner that individuals, particularly those who are socially marginalized individuals in the decision-making will not miss.

7.3 Economical Impact of Democratic Governments

This is because democracy provides economic stability and development because it culminates in transparency establishment, mobilized accountability, as well as participatory policy making. Democratic governments will possess much greater policy which is much better suited to the needs and wants of the people and much less tend to shortsighted exploitation of the environment. The reforms of finances in Pakistan have been accompanied by democracy in some respects which include liberalization, privatization and creation of market-oriented government. Nor is the government, which is Democracy, an obstacle to the volatility (we are as secure as we can be against any one of the methods of losing us by a coup), or will fail to bring in the funds, both foreign and internal, which are the blood of growth. The predictable democratic state is nonetheless the most appropriate countermeasure to the ills of poverty, inequality and unemployment that can be achieved by enacting inclusive growth policies and improvement of social well-being. As recalled, these policies are a blend of strategies which imply some social spending on education, health, establishing jobs and other projects that strive to equal the population groups that have been left behind in the game and thereby reduce the difference in incomes. Such systems are not as well-organized as well as the population has more opportunities of being engaged. Hence, the latter plans are less prone to represent such a need of the elite in comparison to the needs of the population as a whole. The view that democracy is a wisdom in decision making may result in policies on the economy tailored to reach developmental goals as opposed to demagogic rhetoric, the institutionalized economic policy as such will thus be at liberty to plot a proper, hegemonic and future equity in all classes in the society.

7.4 Nurturing Democratic Systems Accountability and Transparency

One of the principal democratic values is power sharing which facilitates economic stability and growth. Democracy guarantees transparency, responsibility and participatory in the decision-making process. Democratic governments stand high probabilities of promoting policies that meet the fantasies of the people and therefore sustainable development. The liberalization, privatization and neo-liberal neoliberal economic shocks are normally equated to the spurts of democracy in Pakistan. The two which constitute the foundation of any type of democracy are transparency and accountability. The checks are in accompaniment of the accountability mechanisms and the democratic power relations are decentralized. The task of all our institutions which we own especially in a democratic country like Pakistan is of unimaginable magnitude to strive to bring out Big Liars like we have done the same thing in this country. It provides the citizens a platform to talk and what drives the voters to desire change is the setting of a facet of an opportunity to win. Democracy I can think of any kind of reasons why democracy is such a good thing ... ‘Transparency’, Yes, especially because it makes them the harder to maintain within their corrupt course and it gives a material incentive in the direction of the administration and supply of public.

Transparency, accountability and mechanism of inclusive decision making enabled through the democratic vision of power sharing makes the economy stable and grows. The elected governments have higher chances of containing the policies which have high probabilities of sustaining the needs and aspirations of the people to sustainable development. Democratic surges in Pakistan are linked with the liberalization, privatization and economic reforms that are friendly to the markets. Transparency and accountability forms the basis of any form of democratic governance. The system of democracies includes decentralization of power and entrenched checks and accountability. A democratic state like Pakistan requires the Parliament, judiciary and the media to play a critical role during the process of bringing to light such people as we see in Pakistan and who are described as dishonest. They give citizens the voice and the desire of winning drives voters to want to vote so that something can be changed. Democracy is a great form of governance as there are numerous benefits connected to it. Transparency Yes, because this will make it harder to participate in what they are doing will guarantee better management and delivery of their services as well as give some additional credibility to the manner in which more democracy ruling societies are run.

7.5 The Contribution of Democracy towards the Achievement of Peace and Security

Lastly, the model of democracy can be regarded as a condition to the peace and safety of individuals as they have an opportunity to raise their voices and resolve conflicts through the assistance of the democratic process and the law. Politicization of opposition is quickly boiled down to extremism and even violence in dictatorship. Democracy on the contrary gives them the freedom to negotiate and co-exist with their utensils in harmony. The ethnic, religious and provincial wars are dissolvable thus providing all communities with means to govern the country like democracy in Pakistan. Despite the fact that the democratic regimes are supposed to generate trust towards the government and tolerate all the voices of the government, they are opposed to the extremist opinions that would not help to generate peace and security.

8. Strategies on Enhancing Foundations of Democracy

8.1 Development of Effective Democratic Institution

This research suggests that the judicial institutions play a major role in strengthening the democratic institutions in Pakistan since they are effective and independent. No secret is that the concept of judicial independence is strongly linked with the human rights, rule of law and accountability as far as the constitutional law is concerned. It would also require the election reforms that are highly important aspects (such as the enhancement of the voter registration systems, printing of the colourful electoral material, simplification of the electoral registration system and improvement of the electoral

management). On the same note, political stability and legitimate political mandate requires democracy and therefore free and fair elections.

8.2 Multicultural Inclusion

One of the policy concerns that elicit the necessity to provide more people with access to quality education is social and economic mobility. So, it is challenging considerable expansion and diversification to the Pakistani democracy and creating a more inclusive and progressive society. The reserved seats or affirmative action should be used to control the number of oppressed populations and minority in the political institutions. The first steps towards establishing liberal political environment should also include improving dialogue that brings about understanding between two or more groups. Weaknesses of civil society Empowerment is amplifying of the institutions of civil society and help them in their efforts to develop awareness and mobilization of the citizens and democratization of the society.

8.3 Economic Governance in Reform to sustainable growth

To make sure that the economic policy represents democratic values and principles, the opportunity to make economic governance more transparent and accountable should be employed. This can be extended to the instances where we roll out the anti-corruption campaign, civil servants reform and engage politics and balance in the public financial management and the economic policies of pro-poor growth. It also must be interested in the sustainable development that the other policies are educational and healthcare, and the infrastructure, which is required by the sustainable long-term economic growth and stability.

8.4 Community Bonding and Unifying the Nation

Any form of social cohesion that Pakistan must achieve must be founded on such pillars, there must be end-link that makes the country to be established, and everybody must have the feeling that he/she belongs to this country. Such signs as wish of inter-faith dialogue, cultural interchange, and multi culturalism within the political structures are processes that will strengthen the cross-cultural sensitization. The more secured society, one whose tendencies towards violence are lower is also linked with democratization of the mechanisms involved in ensuring social integration.

9. Conclusion

This paper therefore attempts to ask questions concerning what lies at the heart of democracy that forms the cornerstone of the repertoire upon which Pakistan can be trained to progressively be guided toward such a future. This paper has firmly determined that democratization is one of the pertinent variables of defining political stability, human rights, economic growth, accountability, and peace. There are, however, many conditions and limitations of the transition of Pakistan into consolidated democracy that includes political polarization of the state, social conflict, economic imbalance, and the poor institutions. Such a reaction, in that case, ought to promote civic and pluralist type of democracy, restructure state institutions, enhance distribution of economies and bring a social bonding process. With this, Pakistan will strive to make the country more tolerant, prosperous and stable to all the citizens of the country. The findings of this study are important in highlighting the importance of democracy and associated institutions in Pakistan, and hence establishing democracy as the foundation within which development and interpersonal relationship in the country should be built.

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India's Nuclear Safety & Security: Implications for South Asian Strategic Stability

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South Asia

Abstract

The proliferation hazards and the illegal use of nuclear material and related technology have long been a source of concern. India aspires to play a major role on the regional and global front, while at the state level; it struggles with nuclear security lapses. The recurring incidents of nuclear theft highlight significant flaws in India's nuclear policy and security mechanisms. This research explores the inconsistency between India's nuclear regulatory structure and the rules set out by the International Atomic Energy Agency. India's noncompliance with nuclear security protocols creates a significant danger to the security of South Asia due to the possibility of hazardous material getting into the wrong hands. The privatization of the nuclear sector would further raise the risk of undermining centralized control over nuclear materials and opening possible gaps for illegal entry, diversion, or theft. The provocative nuclear discourse by India further endangers the stability of the region, increasing the chances of miscalculation. India is one of the countries whose nuclear arsenals increased in 2023, with a focus on long-range missiles, such as the recent flight test of ICBM Agni V. SIPRI Yearbook 2024 also views the expanding number and types of nuclear weapons in India as a potential escalation in the region. This research analyses how India's growing nuclear arsenal, without adequate safety and security measures, would have implications not only for South Asia but also for the entire world.

1. Introduction

In international security studies, attention was diverted towards nuclear safety and security as the events unveiled the threat it posed. For instance, following the disintegration of the USSR, academics and policymakers were deeply concerned about the fate of its nuclear weapons and infrastructure (Kapur, Rajagopalan, & Wueger, 2024). Previously, the majority of researchers and analysts dealing with nuclear-related issues had shifted their attention to other directions, for instance, how nuclear weapons serve the purpose of deterrence and coercion in the case of a dispute (Ellsberg, Sanders, & Caplan, 1992). Nonetheless, a nuclear-related catastrophe is less likely to occur during a nuclear conflict than a mishap during peacetime or a terrorist attack at a power station.

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The safety of these radioactive substances is a national obligation, and any failure in this regard would have serious repercussions for the entire region, since non-state actors can easily obtain nuclear material to make "dirty bombs" or "conventional explosives." Owing to the illegal uranium trade, the threat of nuclear terrorism grows. In the context of South Asia, which housed two rival nuclear-armed neighbours, the safety and security of nuclear material became a grave concern, posing a serious risk to regional and global security. The rampant nuclear theft incidents in India exposed fundamental lapses in command-and-control system, regulatory mechanism and safeguard measures.

India is expanding nuclear warheads on one side while shows non-compliance towards the legal measures that assures the security and protection of sensitive material such as Convention on Physical Protection of Nuclear Material (CPPNM) and its Amendment 2005 along with International Atomic Energy Agency Additional Protocols. These legal instruments and the UNSC Resolution 1540 abstain states from the spread of nuclear, chemical and biological weapon to non-state actors. Instead of taking measures to control the nuclear theft incidents, India is aiming to privatize its nuclear sector, which would further weaken nuclear regulatory oversight. It also raises possibility of illegal access to sensitive material leading to safety violations.

Furthermore, the politicization of nuclear rhetoric in India exploited nuclear fears. The political leaders politicize the nuclear rhetoric for political and electoral gains like Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's blatant statement in the aftermath of Balakot crisis threatening to nuke Pakistan. Similar to this, Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh made a public demand that Pakistan's nuclear weapons be handed over to the IAEA; these statements are generally regarded as a politically driven and dangerous step. Furthermore, as part of an information warfare plan to undermine Pakistan's nuclear credentials, India has been disseminating false information regarding a purported radioactive leak in Pakistan. Following the propaganda campaign initiated by India, John Bolton, former US National Security Advisor becoming prey to this misinformation and commented on Pakistan's nuclear program, questioning its ability to handle nuclear weapons, which was biased and misguided. He overlooked the sharp contrast between the two nuclear-armed states, where one state is prone to growing nuclear theft incidents while Pakistan's track record is clear of any such nuclear theft. India despite not being a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), its attempt to join the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) has drawn intense criticism on a global scale. In this regard, Islamabad and Beijing have repeatedly raised objections on India's membership for NSG owing to its poor nuclear safety and security that compromised the objectives of Nuclear Supplier Group and the non-proliferation efforts. India is not only selectively implementing the international standards but also exploiting the nuclear narratives.

The politicization of nuclear rhetoric by India accompanied with nuclear safety lapses would have hazardous implications towards the strategic stability of South Asia where New Delhi indulged in increasing nuclear stockpiles while ignoring the safety and security of nuclear arsenals. There are justifiable nuclear safety and security concerns raised by the growing radicalization of India's media, political landscape, and societal groups. The continued existence of a nuclear black market in India, which exposes significant flaws in its nuclear security architecture as shown by frequent instances of theft and illegal trafficking of sensitive nuclear materials, exacerbates these concerns even further. Global institutions must act quickly to address the threat of nuclear terrorism, the deterioration of deterrent credibility, and the politicization of nuclear concerns.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

This study aims to analyse India's nuclear safety and security procedures critically, document the increasing number of nuclear theft incidents, evaluate its adherence to international legal requirements, and assess the regional ramifications that are still directly affected by India's nuclear behaviour.

2. Literature review

Illicit use and proliferation risks of nuclear material have long been an international concern as they present a danger to global security and stability. Global security obligations are a mixture of tangible and non-tangible elements to ensure nuclear security responsibilities. Physical protection has been used to describe nuclear security according to the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material and Nuclear Facilities 225/Rev. 5. Physical protection can be considered a subset of nuclear security (Iqbal, 2024).

The South Asian strategic context provides a diverse range of deterrence debates on certain geostrategic and geopolitical realities between India and Pakistan. In the field of strategic studies, nuclear deterrence is the most interesting topic, covering various aspects of security. Rizwana Abbasi and Zafar Khan, *Nuclear Deterrence in South Asia: New Technologies and Challenges to Sustainable Peace*, highlighted in their book the developments from the perspective of new technologies and their implications on the sustainable peace in South Asia. The debate in the book revolves around the strategic stability, deterrence stability, security dilemma, and defensive realism explain the geostrategic and geo-economic aspects at the regional and international level (Abbasi & KHAN, 2021).

Pakistan and India have divergent goals in South Asia, while Pakistan seeks to maintain strategic stability, India wants to become a great power. India's ambitions to become a great power are further fuelled by national Hindutva ideology with hostile and aggressive policies. India's technological advancements and rapid military modernization disrupt the balance of power in the region. Along with that contradicts NFU policy and official military doctrine, further complex crisis instability (Riaz, 2025).

3. Qualitative Research Method

This research employs the qualitative research method to collect primary and secondary data. Data to analyse India's nuclear safety and security was collected through government reports, research journals, think tank studies, official policy documents, and government reports.

4. Nuclear Theft Incidents in India

According to a timeline released by the South Asia Strategic Stability Institute (SASSI), there were 18 recorded incidents in India between 1994 and 2021 concerning the illicit possession and loss of over 200 kilograms of nuclear material. Even though India has been involved in these instances since the 1970s, there have been reports that the country was also involved in the theft of nuclear fissile material; this threat increased dramatically in the 1980s and 1990s (Mazari & Sultan, 2014). It was discovered by the CIA in the late 1980s that India was attempting to produce a highly advanced hydrogen weapon. A tip led to the interception of a \$24 million consignment of beryllium in Vilnius in 1994. It was believed that the buyer was from either North Korea or India, even though the shipment was stopped before it could reach the purchaser. The first recorded instance of nuclear smuggling in India is from November 1994, when police in Meghalaya captured a group of four people who were smuggling 2.5 kilograms of uranium from the Domiasiat region of the country. Another significant nuclear theft event occurred in 1998 when a West Bengal opposition politician was detained on suspicion of transporting over 100 kg of uranium. A highly radioactive container containing uranium was taken in December 2006 from a research facility in Eastern India. Within 1.5 kilometres, its radiation could have dangerous effects. Three individuals were apprehended by the Navi Mumbai Crime Branch with five kilograms of depleted uranium.

A three-person group from Bihar was detained on August 9, 2024, on suspicion of smuggling 50 grams of radioactive californium. Just after a few days on August 17, 2024, at Chaudhary Charan Singh Airport, Lucknow, radioactive material was found in the cargo area. This episode is just one more gem in India's long history of nuclear thefts. Even in July 2024, five guys from Dehradun were

taken into custody after stealing a black box containing radioactive material from the Mumbai-based Bhabha Atomic Energy Centre.



Figure 1 Info-graph highlights nuclear theft incidents in India, Source CISS AJK

Three years prior, a different group from Lucknow was apprehended for importing 340 grams of California. Five men were detained in Kolkata in 2018 for selling one kilogram of uranium for three crore rupees in the open market. In May 2021, the Maharashtra Anti-Terror Squad uncovered another nuclear embezzlement fraud in which a scrap dealer had 7 kilograms of uranium. The vulnerability of India's nuclear safety command and control was made obvious by this tragedy. A month later, there was another instance reported in Jharkhand, where seven members of a gang were apprehended by police as they planned to sell 6.4 kg of uranium on the black market. The same year, two suspects who were reportedly involved in the smuggling of 250 grams of Californium; a synthetic element created in a lab were apprehended close to the Kolkata airport.

The sort of instances that have occurred in India raises the possibility that those working at nuclear power plants or mining sites are either independent contractors or members of a gang network. They are probably aware of the advantages and disadvantages of a facility as well as the vulnerabilities that can be used against it. India could confront a variety of insider dangers. They may be involved in providing adversaries with information about the organizations and routes utilized to transport nuclear

material, stealing small amounts of nuclear material to sell on the black market, or using cyber technologies to harm or even destroy the installation's data and infrastructure.

Indian 90 to 110 nuclear bombs are stored in government-run sites patrolled by the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF), as per an estimate by Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, an independent think tank, and Indian officials (Levy & Smith, 2015) . The table 1.1 below illustrates the security forces guarding sensitive nuclear sites.

Stage	Site	Responsible Force
Mining & Processing (UCIL)	Eight mines, three processing plants	CISF and other guards
Storage (Nuclear Fuel Complex)	Two sites	CISF
Solvent & additive production (HWP)	Seven sites	For radioactive sites – CISF, For non-radioactive sites - State Police
Power Production (NPCIL & Bhavini)	Twenty-two plants	CISF (inner perimeter), State Police (outer perimeter)
Vitrification & storage	03 plants	CISF
Transportation	Null	State Police & CISF
Post-Disaster	Null	Other agencies & CISF
Research Units	06 sites	Indian Coast Guard for the Bhabha Atomic Research Center & CISF
Strategic Installations	Information not available	Information not available
Border Surveillance	Null	Individual frontier agencies

Table 1: Source (Thakkar, 2021)

In the incident at the Madras Atomic Power Station in Kalpakkam, the head constable of the same security team murdered his immediate senior and two other force members by firing his service rifle (The Times of India, 2014). The incident served as a new illustration of the grave deficiencies that exist in the nuclear security unit that is entrusted with guarding one of the biggest arsenals of fissile materials and nuclear explosives in the world. It also raised doubts about whether a nation with a turbulent past had taken the necessary safety measures to protect its vital infrastructure and prevent individuals with malice or, in the worst-case scenario, ties to terrorist organizations, from stealing the components of a devastating nuclear weapon. The Nuclear Threat Initiative's (NTI) Nuclear Security Index ranked India below the median, which measures things like accounting and regulating procedures, preventing insider threats, and general security culture.

5. Cybersecurity and Nuclear Infrastructure

The digitization of the nuclear sector has led to an increase in the sophistication and prevalence of cyber threats to nuclear infrastructure, despite efforts by states to develop new defence strategies. Due to the plant's ignorance of its vulnerabilities, the Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant (KKNPP), an Indian nuclear-powered station, was the target of a concerning cyberattack in 2019. The network was not connected to any other external networks, according to the KKNPP, which first disputed that an attack had taken place. The attack's features, including the use of Dtrack malware, had been utilized for financial institution attacks in the past. Given that it only affected the plant's administrative network and spared its control systems, this tragedy could have been far worse. Nevertheless, it demonstrates how urgently India's nuclear enterprise needs to upgrade its security procedures and framework.

Nation-states, cyber criminals, terrorists, hacktivists, and insiders are some of the sources of cyber threats to the nuclear enterprise. Their malicious behaviour may lead to increased regulation, economic losses, environmental harm, public health risks, and a decline in public trust in nuclear power in general, as well as the nuclear facility specifically, furthermore threatening the stability of the South Asian region with a nuclear threat looming (Kapur, Rajagopalan, & Wueger, 2024).

6. India's Privatization of the Nuclear Sector

India's decision to privatize certain parts of its nuclear sector is another important but little-discussed issue. As India's finance minister, Nirmala Sitharaman confirmed in February 2025, during the budget presentation, that the government is planning to modify two important nuclear energy laws, including the Civil Liability of Nuclear Damage Act of 2010 and the Atomic Energy Act of 1962, to facilitate the privatization process (GOVERNMENT OF INDIA, 2025). Though India considered this a significant change, a step towards energy development and modernization, it has substantial consequences. Given New Delhi's nuclear safety and security record, the privatization of nuclear sector would be disastrous. The recorded nuclear theft incidents in India since 1990s signal towards the presence of nuclear black market in India. The nuclear smuggling would further aggravate following the privatization of nuclear sector that prefer profit to safety. The chances of mishaps would intensify in private sector that fosters lack of responsibility. The centralized control over the sensitive material would be undermined by the involvement of private sector, that might open up possible gaps for illegal entry, diversion or theft of radioactive material. (Sheikh, 2025). The change in civil nuclear liability law would encourage investment whilst the accountability would be reduced, this policy change would be threatening under the weak nuclear safety and security in India.

All of the nuclear power reactors of India are not under IAEA safeguards such as Kakrapar 1 and 2, Narora 1 and 2 nuclear power reactors are working without IAEA inspection that hinder international regulatory control mechanism. (Futter, 2021) With a weak international control over nuclear sector, privatization of this sector would further endanger regional and international stability. International trust in India's nuclear governance could be damaged by privatization without explicit safeguards, especially as India is not a member of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and depends on special exemptions granted, like the 2008 NSG waiver. India's nuclear sector privatization needs to be closely examined both domestically and internationally if nuclear safety is to continue to be a non-negotiable global priority. Furthermore, keeping in view the associated risks it must be ensured that the privatization is limited to civilian and non-sensitive segments of the nuclear sector, excluding uranium enrichment, plutonium handling, and spent fuel reprocessing. In addition, it should also be ensured that the Atomic Energy Regulatory Body (AERB) is a fully independent statutory body with oversight over both public and private nuclear entities.

7. India's Violation of Nuclear Legal Frameworks

Under the IAEA's authority, India has signed and ratified the Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material (CPPNM), its 2005 Amendment, and the United Nations Convention on Nuclear Safety, the main universal legal framework for nuclear security. Under the CPPNM, the Parties are bound to cooperate internationally in cases of robbery, theft, or any other illegal taking of nuclear material, or in a situation in which there is an adequate fear of such taking; to make certain nuclear-related crimes illegal; and to physically safeguard nuclear material sent abroad for peaceful aims. The Convention requires that parties make sure that nuclear materials for peaceful objectives are protected at the appropriate levels when being transported internationally across their territory or on ships or planes that are solely under their control (as defined in IAEA INFCIRC/2251 and classified in Annexes I and II of the Convention).

Additionally, in some circumstances, radioactive material used domestically for peaceful aims—including its transit and storage—is covered by the Convention. Unless they receive guarantees that nuclear materials would be safeguarded throughout universal transportation in compliance with the

levels of protection specified by the Convention, parties commit to not exporting, importing, or permitting the transit of nuclear materials through their territory. The parties also agree to exchange information on lost nuclear materials to expedite their recovery.

India is primarily responsible for ensuring strong security measures, especially when handling sensitive material, as a signatory to the CPPNM since 2002 and 2005. However, within the past thirty years, there have been over twenty recorded attempts in India to steal uranium and materials that are radioactive materials. India must fully implement and strengthen compliance with the CPPNM, especially post-2005 amendment that enhances security obligations.

India supposedly adheres to the nuclear security culture, which is of the utmost importance. It has, however, fallen short in safeguarding its nuclear material and fighting the repeated arrests of illicit uranium and radioactive material trafficking. Furthermore, according to the 2009 agreement reached in cooperation with the IAEA, India possesses approximately twenty-two nuclear power reactors, eight of which are exempt from IAEA safeguards (Iqbal, 2022). Stronger engagement of IAEA is required in order to urge India to expand the scope of IAEA safeguards and allow more robust, transparent inspections even for civilian-use facilities.

In 1970 NPT entered into force. The primary components of the NPT are: International efforts to advance nuclear energy for peaceful uses, stop the spread of nuclear weapons and related technology, and advance nuclear disarmament. Regarding disarmament and non-proliferation, this treaty is the most extensively complied with, having about 191 parties. As the inspection body for international safeguards established by Article III of the Treaty, the IAEA has a specific verification duty even though India is not a party to the Treaty (Zubair, Radkiany, Akram, & Ahmed, 2024). According to its statute, the IAEA facilitates the transfer of nuclear technology to its Member States for peaceful uses through a multinational mechanism (Alkiş, 2017). The IAEA found in a 2017 report that India's guarded nuclear power plants were "not in compliance" with international safety standards. The research also revealed that India has not taken the required steps to address the safety concerns at these facilities (Hafeez, 2023).

India does not have the comprehensive security measures that NNWS signatories to the NPT have, since it is a non-signatory. Only specific facilities are covered by safeguards, according to India's Additional Protocol. Under the Model Additional Protocol, information on research and development linked to the nuclear fuel cycle, nuclear imports, and uranium mining is shared, whereas the Protocol only requires India to submit information on exports connected to nuclear energy. Furthermore, the IAEA is unable to investigate undeclared sites due to supplementary access provisions that are absent from India's Additional Protocol. Even though the IAEA does not officially recognize India as a nuclear weapon state, it has ratified the Additional Protocol based on many of the voluntary safeguard measures that apply to nuclear weapon states (IAEA, 2024). India is not paying heed to the establishment of an independent regulatory body to supervise nuclear safety and security, which has been repeatedly suggested by international authorities. India's noncompliance with nuclear security protocols creates a significant danger to the security of the South Asian area due to the possibility of hazardous material getting into the wrong hands.

The safeguards agreement with India was approved by the IAEA. On March 3, 2009, the agency was granted additional authority to monitor India's nuclear-related civilian activities. An "India-specific" deal was made with the IAEA. In 2008, New Delhi, which is not a party to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), placed certain of its nuclear installations under safeguards while keeping other facilities open for use in India's nuclear weapons program. The adoption of an exemption for the sharing of nuclear technology with India by the 45-member Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) was made possible by that agreement.

IAEA should recommend India to align its domestic laws with international best practices by strengthening laws under the Atomic Energy Act and establishing stricter penalties and monitoring mechanisms. The international community should also uphold the non-discriminatory access to

peaceful nuclear technologies. In actuality, a state's commitment and capacity to simplify its nuclear security procedures should be a prerequisite for any meaningful integration into the international non-proliferation framework, such as membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), and it should not be state-specific (Ali, 2024). Any leniency in this regard would imply the credibility of the export control regime.

7.1 UNSC Resolution 1540

To prevent the proliferation and delivery of Weapons of Mass Destruction (such as nuclear, chemical and biological weapons) to non-state actors, United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1540. The states widely supported the implementation of this resolution, Pakistan's permanent representative to the UN not only endorsed the resolution and assures Pakistan's commitment towards safety and security of nuclear weapons but also demanded international investigation into the nuclear theft incidents and also insisted the UNSC to take appropriate measures to stop this illegal trade of radioactive material. He also highlighted that the frequent nuclear theft happenings signals towards the presence of nuclear black market.

Pakistan has fulfilled its responsibilities as a responsible nuclear country by fulfilling its commitments as per resolution 1540. To restrict the transfer of sensitive products and technologies, Pakistan has put in place: (i) a strong command and control structure; (ii) a strict legislative, administrative, and enforcement framework; and (iii) an extensive export control regime that adheres to the highest international standards (Ali, 2024).

Pakistan also raised concerns regarding the security and safety of nuclear weapons in its neighbouring country. The UN Security Council ought to be deeply concerned about the ongoing theft and unlawful sale of nuclear and Additional radioactive substances. Pakistan also brought up the recent nuclear theft incidents in India to the Security Council's attention, in which a group was discovered to be in unlawful possession of a significant amount of highly radioactive and toxic material, known as Californium, valued at \$100 million. The incidents also included three other instances of California theft that were reported in the same state in 2021 (Permanent Mission of Pakistan to the United Nations, 2024).

8. Nuclear Theft Incidents and Regional Concerns

The unprotected Indian nuclear arsenals irrevocably threaten the strategic stability of South Asia. The Brahmos Missile incident already raised doubts on India's Command and Control system, when a nuclear-capable missile misfired in Pakistani territory. It highlights India's inefficiency in handling its nuclear arsenal (Khawaja, 2022). India's incompetency in holding sensitive technology further endorsed by another incident took place in March 2023 where three surface to air missiles were misfired during Pokhran military drills near Pakistan border. (Khan, 2023) The recent May escalation between Pakistan and India where missiles were fired, the space for misfire is reduced. The nuclear brinkmanship in this volatile environment further threatens the stability of South Asia.

The danger of nuclear and radiological terrorism to India's facilities would rise as its nuclear capabilities continue to develop. India's nuclear facilities are susceptible to terrorist attacks, especially those located in areas where political unrest or insurgencies are still present. To guarantee more stringent controls and monitoring, the international community, particularly the US, should reevaluate India's Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG) waiver.

China and Pakistan have both voiced serious concerns about the possibility of a black market for dual-use, sensitive minerals in India. They fear that the ongoing weakness in India's nuclear defences may enable non-state entities to target them. Pakistan has asked the whole community to look into and ensure the safety and security of nuclear materials (Latif, 2024). To lower security risks, China also requested that the international community, enforce more rigorous non-proliferation policies (Jun,

2024). With rising incidents of nuclear theft, India genuinely wanted to be integrated into the global non-proliferation architecture, which includes being a member of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). If international bodies are lenient toward countries such as India, other countries will view these international non-proliferation mechanisms as biased and misleading (Ali, 2024).

Ensuring the safety of their nuclear materials is of utmost importance for states possessing nuclear weapons. The states' increasing nuclear stockpiles, with a looming nuclear threat further endangering international peace and security. India is one of the countries whose nuclear arsenals increased in 2023, with an emphasis on long-range missiles. SIPRI Yearbook 2024 also highlighted concerns regarding the expanding number and types of nuclear weapons worldwide (SIPRI, 2024). India's entry into the military buildup without adequate safety and security measures will have an impact not only on South Asia but the entire world because its long-range missiles are also aimed at the US and Canada. The entire world has to demand a comprehensive probe into these frequent instances of nuclear theft. India needs to establish an independent nuclear regulatory agency that would be in charge of managing, controlling, and overseeing all issues about nuclear security and safety.

9. Politicization of Nuclear Narratives

India's provocative nuclear discourse is against the norms of responsible nuclear behaviour. Indian media outlets spread false rumours of a radioactive leak in Pakistan following the recent escalation between the two nuclear-armed neighbours, causing unnecessary fear and mistrust. IAEA had to intervene for clarity, refuting Indian media reports (The Express Tribune, 2025). Following these baseless claims, Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh made a statement expressing concerns over Pakistan's nuclear arsenal without providing any supporting evidence or IAEA consent (The Express Tribune, 2025).

Such conduct is not new, strategic stability in South Asia was undermined by senior Indian officials' covert nuclear threats during the 2019 Balakot conflict. Narendra Modi's statement following the 27 February Balakot Strike was "Qatal ki Raat." While in a rally, quoting, and "Nuclear weapons not being kept for Diwali (Yousaf, 2019)." India also runs campaigns to defame Pakistan's nuclear program, evident in John Bolton's statement questioning Pakistan's ability to handle nuclear weapons while ignoring rampant nuclear theft incidents in India. The fake news and nuclear rhetoric should be dealt with iron hand that breeds mistrust, threatening peace and security of the region. India should avoid politicizing nuclear discourse particularly for domestic or political point scoring at the time of crisis.

International community and the IAEA must take into account the nuclear theft incidents in India, the nuclear rhetoric by the leaders, and the nuclear safety and security in India. No nation should be exempted from responsibility if nuclear safety is to be addressed seriously.

10. Conclusion

The growing threat to South Asian peace and security is the nuclear program of India, with recurring nuclear theft incidents accompanied by regulatory flaws and security lapses. The situation further aggravated by India's non-compliance of international legal frameworks that aims to enhance nuclear safety and security, restricting illegal access to nuclear material such as the Additional Protocols of the IAEA, UNSC Resolution 1540, and the CPPNM and its 2005 Amendment.

Nuclear theft incidents in India exposed structural flaws in its command-and-control system. Instead of improving its security measures, India is privatizing the nuclear sector that would further weaken the safety and security of sensitive material might ended up in hands of rogue elements. The politicization of nuclear rhetoric by Indian officials such as its Prime Minister and other officials legitimize the illegal access to radioactive material and its misuse against the neighbouring states. The Brahmos misfire incident followed by another mishap during Pokhran military exercises raised

questions on India's ability to handle sensitive technology might be in rogue hands of RSS. If this were the case, the politicization of nuclear discourse would have disastrous impacts for the region and beyond.

Despite these concerning facts, India not being the member of NPT granted NSG waiver. It not only raised doubts on the legitimacy of international non-proliferation regimes, but also emboldened India to indulge in nuclear arms race where it is increasing its nuclear stockpiles with poor nuclear safety and security. To stop the nuclear catastrophe in South Asia, impartial, non-discriminatory, and legally based approach is required. Rule-based accountability is required to restore trust on non-proliferation regimes. All the states acquiring nuclear weapons must be held to the highest levels of accountability, transparency, and security.

India's weak nuclear command and control system with selective compliance to non-proliferation standards, growing nuclear theft incidents, and the politicization of nuclear rhetoric posed a significant threat to regional and international stability. These vulnerabilities could have devastating implications if left unaddressed. In addition to strengthening of global nuclear governance, an increased international scrutiny is required to maintain the strategic stability in South Asia.

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China's Soft Power Elements: Analysing Trends and Diplomatic Trajectories

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Article Information	Abstract
Received: Aug 29, 2025 Revised: Dec 27, 2025 Accepted: Dec 31, 2025	Soft power, as defined by Joseph Nye, refers to the capacity of a state to shape others' behaviour and perceptions through appeal and persuasion rather than coercion. Chinese soft power strategy encompasses various elements, such as cultural diplomacy, such as establishment of Confucius Institutes to promote language and cultural exchange worldwide, technology and innovation diplomacy, health diplomacy, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, infrastructure diplomacy, notably through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and climate diplomacy in order to enhance China's global influence. In response, the United States is strengthening bilateral relations, increasing economic and development assistance, engaging in cultural and educational diplomacy, as well as military cooperation and multilateral engagement in the Indo-Pacific. However, China's soft power faces substantial obstacles, including its authoritarian political structure and human rights concerns, which generate scepticism among democratic states, policymakers, and academics, and could impede its ability to foster a positive global image. By assessing these diverse facets of China's soft power, this research provides critical insights into how Beijing positions itself as a global leader in the 21st century. It also examines how this challenge to traditional Western dominance may shape the future of international relations.
Keywords <i>Soft Power,</i> <i>China,</i> <i>Cultural Diplomacy,</i> <i>Belt and Road Initiative,</i> <i>Challenges</i>	

1. Introduction

Soft power refers to the ability of one country to influence others using non-coercive means such as culture, diplomacy, and economic strength. The rise of China as a global economic powerhouse can be associated with an effort to increase its soft power at the global level. China, being the leading exporter and second-largest importer in the world, plays a vital role in global trade, which provides it a strong foundation for its broader cultural and diplomatic outreach.

China's soft power strategy is multifaceted and deliberately coordinated. Economically, initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Digital Silk Road (DSR) promote infrastructure development, trade integration, and digital connectivity across Asia, Africa, and Europe, strengthening

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China's influence among developing and emerging economies. In 2016, China introduced the RMB into the Special Drawing Rights (SDR) basket of the IMF, a major move towards improving China's position in global economic management structures (Akdağ, 2022). Through these programs, China not only advances its economic interests but also cultivates long-term diplomatic ties and regional goodwill.

Technologically, China's rapid advancements in AI, 5G, and digital infrastructure enable it to shape global standards in emerging fields, positioning it as a leading actor in the digital economy and innovation-driven global governance. In terms of global governance, China also plays an active role in multilateral frameworks such as the World Trade Organization, the United Nations, G20, BRICS, and regional forums such as the SCO, which enable China to shape global rules, norms, and decision-making processes in ways that align with its strategic objectives. Its participation in and support of such institutions strengthen its soft power as it struggles to influence world policies that can benefit its economic and political goals (Kivimäki, 2014).

Moreover, the cultural exchanges advocated by modern China, which include educational programs, Confucius Institutes, film, music, and gastronomy, have also emerged as vital instruments of its soft power projection. Global fascination with Chinese culture fosters a sense of cultural identity, thereby strengthening Chinese soft power (Herbert et al., 2021). Engagement with Health diplomacy, exemplified during the COVID-19 pandemic, further demonstrates China's use of humanitarian aid and medical assistance to foster goodwill and strengthen bilateral relations. Similarly, climate diplomacy and environmental initiatives enable China to advocate for sustainable development and project leadership on global challenges, while enhancing its international legitimacy.

Interestingly, the rise of China as an international player is credited to the realist approach of its leadership that portrays a profound understanding of geopolitical dynamics. By integrating traditional policies into the unique construct, China is emerging as a potential superpower in the twenty-first century. The influence of China's modernity has extended to its political *savoir-faire* and distinct soft power approach (Almotairi, 2021).

2. Literature Review

The current literature on China's soft power highlights the shift from culture-based appeal to a multidimensional instrument of diplomacy that is part of the wider strategic goals. Badawi and Wattar develop the notion of Chinese soft power diplomacy as an integrative approach that comprises non-interventionism, cultural outreach, and economic cooperation, especially in Asia and the Middle East (Badawi & Wattar, 2024). Their discussion places soft power within the process of Beijing's recalibration to the Western-dominated order and how narratives of peaceful rise and strategic partnership are being mobilised to reverse the image of China as a threat. However, the chapter is mostly descriptive, with no systematic tracking of shifts or diplomatic paths over time.

The research article by Kim et al. is a quantitative and methodological innovation, as it focuses on Chinese soft power in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, using big-data sentiment analysis and topic modelling based on English-language news coverage (Kim et al., 2023). They show that their overall sentiment is shifting toward politicised accounts, but at the same time, they report diversifying their sources of soft power into digital and social media. Notably, the article contributes to the development of the soft power theory by resolving the issue of quantitative operationalisation. However, its media-centric nature limits soft power measurement to perceptions without much understanding of the concomitant transformation of diplomatic intent and policy tools.

Huang and Meng discuss tech diplomacy, a new element of Chinese foreign policy (Huang & Meng, n.d.). They use historical-discursive approaches to show that Beijing has institutionalised technology-based diplomacy to challenge Western hegemony and justify alternative global norms. Although this

work sheds light on the ideational and institutional aspects of soft power's influence in the field of technology, it mostly focuses on the formation of discourse rather than integration across domains.

The existing literature examines isolated aspects of soft power, regional diplomacy, media perceptions, and technological narratives in China. There is a significant gap in the systematic examination of how these elements work together over time to form consistent diplomatic pathways. This gap has been addressed in this research study through an integrated analytical framework.

3. Objectives of Research

The primary objective of the research is to critically examine the concept of soft power in China and the ways it has evolved over the years. The study seeks to find the recent changes in the Chinese diplomatic affairs, including cultural diplomacy, trade relations, the role of media, and technological penetration. It attempts to analyse the role of these tools/elements of soft power in the Chinese foreign policy as well as its foreign image. The other objective is to contemplate geographical and theoretical contrasts in the way China has enacted soft power, and the trend is contextualised within the greater argument of shifting power and the governance of the international system. The paper also aims to bridge the gaps in the study in terms of theoretical and empirical studies.

4. Research Methodology

The methods used in this study are qualitative and analytical, which are based on a literature review and discourse analysis. Peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and credible academic sources on Chinese soft power are analysed critically. It is based on the thematic research that the study classifies the significant soft powers and traces their diplomatic courses of action in different spheres. Through comparative analysis, the continuities and developments in Chinese soft power over time are analysed. This methodology enables the way of looking at trends, patterns, and strategic implications in situating them together.

5. Conceptualising Soft Power of China

As formulated by Joseph Nye, soft power is the “ability to attract, co-opt, and shape the preferences of others rather than coerce them, and it primarily stems from intangible resources such as a country’s culture, political values, foreign policies, and the perceived legitimacy of its actions.”(Nye, 2004). According to Nye, it is the ability to influence others in the way one wants without using coercion. A significant source of soft power is that of culture. According to Lee Kuan Yew, a former Singaporean senior minister, soft power is achieved when other countries envy and even want to emulate aspects of the civilisation of a certain nation(Foo, 1996). China has been using soft power practices to enhance its economic expansion in reaction to changes in the international economic and political arena. China has specific privileges that make it easier to augment its influence. The grandeur of China attracted an unceasing number of diplomats, merchants, religious leaders, and scholars to seek power, riches, inspiration, and guidance over an area of nearly three thousand years.

Over decades, soft power has been one of the primary approaches of China to reinforce the economic and geopolitical partnerships with the states of the region and countries far away. China has resolved many of its territorial disputes, joined several treaties, and taken part in several international and regional bodies, such as ASEAN, SCO, G20, and BRICS, among others. China has tried to establish a constructive role in the problem of the North Korean nuclear dilemma, the Darfur crisis, and the global climate disaster. In addition, China has significantly increased its involvement in international peace-making activities. The diplomatic approach, commonly referred to as smile diplomacy in China, has seen a lot of Chinese officials visiting foreign countries. Moreover, China has been at the forefront of promoting the Chinese language to the rest of the world, based on the fact that the language is important in the enhancement of cultural attractiveness. Over the years, China has inaugurated Confucius Institutes in numerous countries to expand its culture and language.

6. Analysing China's Soft Power Elements

The Chinese government has undertaken to become more appealing to the foreign world in the past decade. According to the former Chinese President Hu Jintao, the rich Chinese culture will flourish along with the massive renaissance of the Chinese nation(2018). Analysing the Chinese soft power tools such as educational exchanges, cultural diplomacy, economic diplomacy, and media image, this section delves into understanding how China applies soft power to influence international relations.

6.1 Cultural Diplomacy of China

Cultural diplomacy can be defined as the strategic use of culture, which includes language, art, exchanges, and customs, in strengthening the relationship with countries and boosting the soft power of a particular country in the international arena. China is employing cultural diplomacy as a key strategy for expanding its global influence, while leveraging its rich history and varied cultural heritage. Classical Taoism and Confucianism, key guiding principles of Chinese philosophy, promote harmony, mutual respect, and sharing ideas. These ideals are deeply rooted in modern China, as it focuses on collaboration and mutual understanding across cross-cultural boundaries.

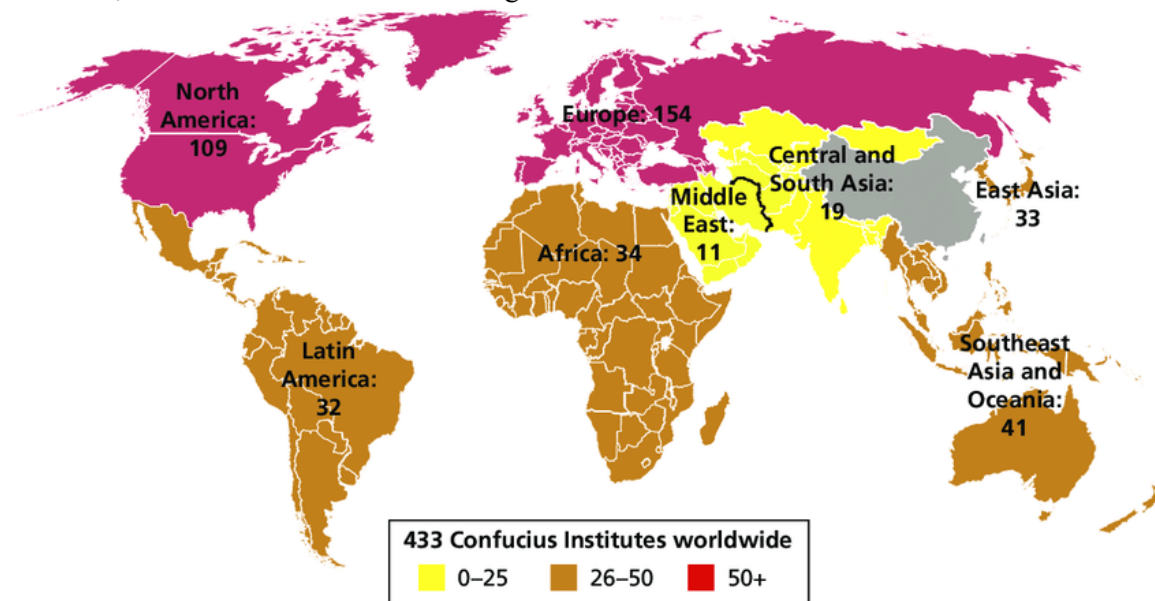
The idea of soft power, conceived by Joseph Nye in 1990, has been deeply applied in the political and intellectual discourse of China(Sweet, 2017). On the one hand, Zhang noted that the people-oriented ideology, major challenges, and central spheres of Chinese cultural soft power are quite distinct from those of Joseph Nye. Some of the differences raised by Zhang include how the concept of soft power conceptualises principles, power, and culture, the latter being just one element of culture. He argues that Nye's definition of culture is too narrow, as culture is required to formulate political beliefs and foreign policy. China sees culture as the basis of its soft power and the source of its national might. One of the most important soft power instruments, culture helps China reinforce its image worldwide through cross-cultural exchanges, helping convince the rest of the globe that China is a civilised, trustworthy nation. The importance of culture has grown to the extent that soft power and cultural power are equivalent.

As the importance of culture as a soft power tool has increased, the term is often used to refer to cultural soft power, with culture comprising not only Western cultural elements adapted to the Chinese cultural context, but also socialist and Marxist principles that are entirely Chinese(Becard & Menechelli Filho, 2019). The leaders of China have realised that their country needs to develop soft power and a strong national identity to be a great player in the 21st century. Foreign policy is informed by the internal political goals of the Communist Party of China (CPC), which considers culture and cultural projection to be a key resource. Among the long-term goals of the CPC in enhancing domestic administration and the global standing of the PRC are increasing the state's cultural security and cultural soft power. The effectiveness of the PRC's cultural diplomacy can be further demonstrated by the establishment of what could be defined as the CPC's ideological carnival(Becard & Menechelli Filho, 2019).

6.1.1 Confucius Institutes

One notable endeavour of the cultural diplomacy by China to promote the Chinese language and cultural appeal to other nations is the Confucius Institutes. They facilitate academic interaction and international knowledge and have become an important part of the policy of Chinese soft power. The Chinese government established the Confucius Institutes in 2004, which are founded on the concepts of the ancient Chinese philosopher. Such organisations provide educational courses, language lessons, and workshops to enhance the understanding and perception of the Chinese culture by the participants. The Confucius Institutes have swept the world after their establishment. They collaborate with foreign bodies and colleges to build them, and this offers them a huge market and facilitates cross-cultural communication and human relations. The Confucius Institute, being present in over 149

countries as of 2024, proves that the Chinese government is serious about solidifying its soft power and promoting global awareness (Mandarin, 2015). This is one of the objectives of the newly created network of Confucius institutes alongside the Goethe Institute, the British Council, and Maison française, which aims to offer a better image of China to the rest of the world.



Source: Scobell et al. 2020 Publication

The Confucius Institutes are aimed at restraining the influence of Taiwan by advancing forms of Chinese interpretations made by Beijing and extracts of the Beijing-centric viewpoint, rather than the traditional Chinese scripts employed in Taiwan (Gill & Huang, 2023). One of the primary areas of concern of these Institutes is the Chinese language instruction, mainly in Mandarin. The language programs are useful to students and professionals who want to learn Chinese for various reasons, such as academic goals and business. The institutes also host concerts, cultural activities, and exhibitions, which give a holistic experience of the Chinese culture. Confucius Institutes have a severe impact on the global image. These institutes offer an alternative narrative to the mainstream preconceptions and biases of the nation by providing the real information about the Chinese culture, language, and traditions.

6.1.2 The Chinese International Education Foundation (CIEF)

CIEF is sponsored by the Chinese government and managed by the Ministry of Education to fund Confucius Institutes. This source of funding assists in making their operations sustainable, and the Chinese culture and language are always advertised. The Confucius Institute is regarded by many host schools as an avenue for collaborating with China in educational initiatives. Alliances such as this can assist nations to move closer as they can share students, research, and collaborate on courses. The fact that higher education in China is getting increasingly globalised does have its disadvantages and advantages, though.

On the one hand, it contributes to the increase of Chinese higher education on the global level and market acceptance of the quality of its programs. Conversely, it has caused concern among the neighbouring countries that Beijing is brainwashing its citizens through its power (Nye, 2004).

6.2 Technology and Innovation Diplomacy

In the contemporary era, technology and innovation have emerged as significant contributors to the influence of a nation in the world. China has acknowledged that technology and innovation policy could serve adequately as a way of enhancing its soft power. It is currently one of the technological leaders in the world due to its spectacular advancement in AI, 5G technology, and space research.

These achievements have been smartly exploited by the leaders of the country to enhance relations with other nations, demonstrating the innovativeness of the country. The trend of technical diplomacy in China demonstrates the desire of the country to promote its influence by exchanging technological advancements (Mingjiang, 2019).

6.2.1 Economic Technologies

The BRI, the main foreign policy of China, serves as a platform of creative and technological diplomacy. The BRI has five dimensions of connectivity, which include infrastructure connectivity, policy coordination, financial integration, Trade and Investment Facilitation, and people-to-people interaction. By incorporating technology cooperation into the BRI framework, China has made it possible to transfer digital connectivity, advanced infrastructure, and e-commerce solutions to the partner countries. This plan of action increases the image of China as a generous donor of technical development in the world. Within a globalised environment, the technological and scientific potential of any country would determine its strategies and socioeconomic position in the world, particularly in science, technology, and innovation (STI). The institutionalisation and creation of STI in China began in the middle of the 20th century through the CPC.

This is aimed at promoting manufacturing-based economic growth and strong and viable industrial growth. The CPC political elite proposed to focus on the STI-related investment projects in China because the country faced constant conflicts, and negative attitudes toward other countries were a certain historic value, and other domestic and societal disintegrations. The STI diplomacy of China was formed in the context of an economic, social, and political system completely different from that of the US and Europe. This has been influenced by the economic, social, and intellectual interactions of China. (Reghunadhan, 2021).

6.2.2 South-South Cooperation in Technology

The South-South Cooperation (SSC) notion has acquired essential significance in the developing nations in recent decades, so that it would be possible to cooperate and share knowledge, resources, and skills. China is a significant participant in international affairs and has been striving to sell the South-South Cooperation of technological orientations to other Third World countries. The involvement of China in SSC could be traced back to the Bandung conference of 1955, which represented the spirit of mutual aid, non-interventionism, and equality. Gradually, China has transformed over time from a recipient of international aid into a contributor based on technological advancement and economic development. Such a change has witnessed the development of powerful SSC programs in other fields, and technology is one of them (*China South-South Cooperation Network*, n.d.). China has a significant location of technology in the SSC of this country.

It deals with the transfer of technological skills and expertise to the recipient nations by building capacity seminars, training, and technology transfer agreements. Second, the individualisation of the projects depending on the needs and goals of the partner countries is carried out to create a sense of proprietorship and sustainability. Further, the Chinese SSC in its technology transfer is not a solitary idea but has a connection of information sharing, promotion of innovations, and capability forming concerning the research and development facet. Implementation of technology-oriented SSC in China has many ways. These are joint research programmes, establishing technology parks and dispatching Chinese specialists to the partner nations. These schemes stimulate exchange of ideas and experiences, localise technology, and form cross-border forums. Despite its success, the presence of different administrative systems, technological disparity between partner nations, and the fear of intellectual property rights pose challenges to this endeavour.

6.2.3 Thousand Talents Program of China

The Thousand Talents Program (TTP) is a mass and disputable Chinese initiative that is meant to introduce foreign expertise. In other countries, the skilled Chinese workers were draining out of their universities; hence, the program was launched in 2008 to counter this brain drain, and this was the Thousand Talents Program. The ultimate aim of the Thousand Talents Program is to repatriate high-quality researchers, professors, and professionals of Chinese origin back to China or to bring in foreign talent to enhance the scientific, technological, and economic growth of China. This is done using multiple incentives such as funding research, competitive payments, accommodation allowances, and state-of-the-art research facilities. The TTP has three key types: the Thousand Talents Plan of Professionals, Thousand Young Talents Plan, and Overseas Experts Recruitment Program, which cover different classes of specialists(2023b). TTP has brought numerous professionals worldwide and has enhanced the academic and research environment in China by bringing new perspectives, approaches, and a network to intellectual China. The programme has also enabled the returnees to collaborate with the local researchers and brought immense scientific discoveries and advancements. (Lewis, 2023).

6.3 Health Diplomacy as Soft Power Tool

Health diplomacy can be described as political practices aimed at attaining the enhancement of international relations and global health promotion. It highlights inherent connections between foreign policy and the health sector, as well as constitutes a significant component of novel diplomacy that began to develop during the Cold War, with the penetration of foreign policy into the majority of spheres and concerns. (Jing et al., 2011).

Beijing views developing countries and third-world countries as its key allies, and health diplomacy is one of the critical instruments that can be used to forge international partnerships. The health diplomacy of China has been built over a long period of time. Many Chinese provinces have established strong relationships with some nations over the past decades through the financing of medical teams. Moreover, health cooperation enabled China to gain the support of its former colonies and was a strategic approach to seek membership in the UN, which was achieved successfully in 1971. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the capabilities of China to interact with other countries. Beijing emerged as a very crucial donor to underdeveloped countries, and Chinese vaccines had a massive impact on the global immunisation efforts despite their comparatively low effectiveness rates.

The contribution policy of China was significantly influenced by geostrategic reasons, whereby the promoters were focused on the neighbouring countries and the main players in the BRI. Health diplomacy was an important factor in the interactions of China with the rest of the world. The Chinese approach to matters regarding health in the world has undergone a significant transformation over the last half-century. The new awareness of the Chinese leadership that it participates in worldwide health programs enhances the international credibility of the country as a contributor to world welfare. (Huang, 2010).

6.3.1 China's "Health Silk Road" Strategy

The Health Silk Road (HSR) is a project in the framework of China's BRI dedicated to the promotion of the healthcare industry and facilitation of global collaboration in the sphere of public health. The main goals of the HSR are to enhance the Chinese global health impact, global health partnership, and healthcare infrastructure(Yuan, 2023).

China was the first nation to adopt the HSR strategy in the course of the Ebola outbreak between 2014 and 2016. It showed a rapid and strong response, which was much more effective than the activities of the numerous countries that are members of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). In addition, China has significantly increased the funds it provides to foreign health agencies, including Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, WHO, and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS,

Tuberculosis, and Malaria. These donations underscore the effort of China to fund international health and collaborate with other countries on international health.

Besides, China offers low and middle-income countries technical and capacity-building aid to tackle a number of health concerns. Indicatively, China has been dispatching medical teams to most African nations since the 1960s to offer medical care and training prospects to the local medical professionals. The HSR has widened this project with thousands of Chinese medical professionals actively involved in over 50 countries around the world. China is also an active participant in giving humanitarian assistance and emergency response in the case of an international health emergency (Yuan, 2023). The way China reacted to the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic is indicative of the rising global health leadership of the country. China was willing to aid and assist nations in distress through the epidemic by providing medical materials, expertise, and funds to nations that were affected.

6.3.2 Chinese “Vaccine Diplomacy” during COVID-19

The notion of vaccine diplomacy has become a new aspect of Chinese foreign policy, which was conditioned by the COVID-19 pandemic as a part of its global health diplomacy. By early 2021, China had become one of the leaders in the COVID-19 vaccine manufacturing, producing more than 170 million doses as of March 2021. The concept of Chinese vaccine diplomacy dates back to July 2020, when Beijing exported to Brazil its first vaccines to test them. Therefore, it immediately signed agreements with individual partner governments, most of which are low- and middle-income countries. Egypt was one of the first to use vaccinations produced by Sinopharm, a Chinese business, in December 2020.

By June 2021, the spokesperson of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, Wang Wenbin, declared that Beijing had distributed 350 million doses of its vaccines to its overseas allies and had donated to more than 80 third-world countries in urgent need and sold to over 40 countries. At the very beginning, China targeted its vaccine diplomacy efforts at the governmental level, but later preferred to engage in the help through COVAX. Wenbin pointed out that the provision of Chinese vaccinations to COVAX will increase their efforts in the global response (Kobierecka, 2023). The epidemic provided China with an advantage in terms of strengthening its position as a leader, particularly through the application of health diplomacy as a soft power process (Gauttam et al., 2020).

Moreover, the mask diplomacy was also another strategic approach of China, which is combined with the distribution of the necessary medical resources, such as sanitisers, and financial support. The delivery of masks and supplies to the under-resourced hospitals and local charities has largely changed the image of China during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020).

6.4 Infrastructure Diplomacy and China’s Soft Power

Another area in which China has emerged as a formidable player of soft power is infrastructural diplomacy, which has become one of the core components of the Chinese foreign policy. In recent decades, China has specifically invested in infrastructure projects around the world, which stimulates the growth of the economy and the relations between China and other countries. This has provided China with access to key resources, markets, and trade routes. At the same time, it enhances its global image as a conscientious global citizen who is keen on supporting the economic progress of other states. The twofold nature of this approach enables China to manipulate and win the trust of countries that will benefit from its investments.

During the Asian crisis in 1997-1998, China gave affected nations financial support and maintained the fixed exchange rate of its currency, renminbi (RMB). The global community has therefore changed its attitude towards China and recognised its positive contribution. The Chinese leaders have continuously claimed in the past ten years that their rise in the world arena will be non-violent and that it will not lead to hegemony. According to Barry Buzan, peaceful rising is a special and

indigenous concept with strong roots in the reform and opening up in China, which sets the groundwork of the entire strategy. It means that China is likely to use coercive politics of threats and intimidation and avoid open warfare. It is also unlikely that it will conform to the current international order; rather, it will aim at adjusting it towards its advantage without engaging in expensive wars that will hamper its domestic growth and economic progress.

6.4.1 Belt and Road Initiative: A Chinese Soft Power Tool

BRI entails Chinese initiatives to promote the development of a number of nations with the assistance of six major economic corridors, to improve business, financial, and personal connections. According to the OECD, these areas are Mongolia, China, Eurasia, Russia, West and Central Asia, Pakistan, Indochina, and the Indian subcontinent countries. Also, the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road connects all these six sectors and provides connectivity via the Arctic Circle, Africa, and Europe. Asia is also known to have a lack of infrastructure investment, and China could take the opportunity to benefit both countries.

The BRI is able to show soft power through its exchange and trade programs. BRI connects China with many countries and creates a dynamic market where the member countries can exchange information and experience. The comprehensive infrastructure of the BRI will ensure that business, brands, consumer goods, and cultural commodities will proliferate, hence making distribution easier. BRI, as a soft power tool, enhances China's credibility through strategic investments in various non-military and non-development sectors like the media, publishing, education, and arts. Together with these funding programs, diplomatic outreach and host diplomacy are instruments used by China to establish itself as a major player in the world, gaining more prominence.

6.5 Climate Diplomacy and China

The entry of China into global climate governance is more prominent than ever since it ratified the 2015 Paris Agreement. This rise is being driven by the growing diplomatic and discursive influence of China in climate politics, which is expressed by its strategic alliances with countries in the global South. China is also driving industrial-scale afforestation as a natural solution to climate issues, exporting its economic model, and selling a techno-centric solution to climate challenges. As part of this multidimensional strategy, China is increasing climate finance, facilitating technology transfer, encouraging renewable energy, and infrastructure adaptation in countries surrounding the global South. (Abbasi & Liaqat, 2024).

Barry Buzan asserts that Beijing stands as a unique and valuable opportunity to take the leadership role in the world, given the lack of strong leadership on the climate change front. In 2013 and 2016, China and the United States (US) started collaborating to create momentum towards signing a deal at the 2015 Paris summit. However, in 2017, President Xi Jinping delivered an important speech, which aligned with the withdrawal of the US from the Paris Agreement, when he reiterated that China was leading in taking action on global climate. This is the time when China announced that it was planning to assume the global climate leadership.

The US withdrawal of the deal enabled China to exert its control further on the regulation of global climate. As a matter of fact, China is beginning to play a more significant role in developing responses to climate change on a global level. It has not been keen on making serious moves towards climate change in the context of the UN long enough. This opposition to hardline climate commitments was experienced over a number of decades. However, China began to adopt a new approach and gradually became increasingly involved in global climate talks and efforts, particularly in the lead-up to and following the 2015 Paris Treaty. The role of China has also shifted, which signifies a change of perception and an emergence of realisation of the role that China has to play in addressing global climate change issues (2021).

China takes an active part in the international clean technology cooperation and the green investments in infrastructural systems of the economically disadvantaged states as a part of its decarbonization efforts. In this endeavour, China and France have included civilian nuclear energy, biodiversity conservation, climate change, and land degradation as important areas of cooperation. The two nations have engaged in pledging their obligations under the Paris Agreement and the Global Biodiversity Framework. French enterprises and Chinese State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) have formulated major deals, which are based on decarbonization. Such agreements involve numerous low-carbon innovative projects, such as the dealings between the EDF and the State Power Investment Corporation of China and the joint venture between the French CMA CGM and the Chinese COSCO Shipping and Shanghai International Port Group to supply port-based green methanol(2023a).

7. US Response to Chinese Soft Power Diplomacy

South Asia has been a key area of influence in the struggle between the US and China over the last few years. The swift growth of soft power in South Asia is raising more and more concerns in Washington about the possibility of China shaping the political, economic, and cultural landscapes of the countries in this region. The US has come up with countermeasures in relation to the soft power of China in the region.

The most important strategy is to strengthen the bilateral relations with South Asian nations. In its bilateral trade agreements, cooperation in security concerns, and cultural exchanges, the United States has enhanced its diplomatic relations with countries such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and India. The rationale behind these programs is to exert more American influence in the region and build confidence.

The United States has also increased its funding and investments towards South Asia, funding infrastructures, health education, and services. The US-led Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or the Quad, is another significant diplomatic and security formation in the Indo-Pacific region. The Quad, which comprises Australia, the US, India, and Japan, is also a significant instrument in addressing the problems regarding security in the region and promoting stability through limiting the expanding influence of China. Cultural diplomacy should be part of the efforts the United States makes to combat the soft power of China.

The US government also finances educational and cultural exchanges to empower interpersonal relationships and promote American ideals, concepts, and culture across the region (Gupta, 2013). The United States and its allies in South Asia have strengthened their military alliance because of the security issues in the area. To offset the military influence and military strength of China, this is achieved through intelligence dissemination, joint military operations, and the sale of arms.

The multilateral participation is also one of the weapons of the United States against the soft power of China. The United States of America (US) supports South Asian countries to participate in regional entities and initiatives such as the Quad (comprised of the US, India, Japan, and Australia) that promote democracy and economic collaboration. The United States is actively strengthening cybersecurity and countering attempts at misinformation as China develops its digital presence all over South Asia. These efforts would maintain the information ecosystem and protect the region against over-intervention by other countries (Gupta, 2013).

8. Challenges to Chinese Soft Power

China is confronted with numerous challenges as it seeks to gain more worldwide power. To begin with, the Chinese political system, being authoritarian, might pose a greater challenge to Beijing in encouraging a positive international image, especially in democracies where issues related to human rights are highly scrutinised. Also, the weakness of the soft power of China is the way the

international community criticises its domestic policies, especially its treatment of the minorities and its attitude towards Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Second, mistrust exists toward the intentions of China because of its aggressive foreign policy, in particular, in the South China Sea, and its economic policies, including debt diplomacy within the framework of the BRI. Despite the contribution of these programs to gaining influence in developing countries, due to the common rise of the question about economic dependence and neo-imperialism, they reduce the appeal of China's soft power.

The Chinese influence is also blocked by ideological and cultural rifts. Regardless of its intentions to spread the Chinese culture and language, Confucius Institutes have been met with criticism and distrust in different countries, thus leading to the shutting down of such institutions because of concerns of political influence and propaganda.

Finally, due to government regulation and cultural barriers that restrain the innovative aspect needed to reach international markets, the media and entertainment industry, which is a significant tool in the soft power strategy, cannot be easily extended internationally.

9. Conclusion

China's soft power policies are a complex and dynamic means of promoting international cooperation, shaping public opinion, and furthering domestic goals. China has shown a significant desire to increase its soft power internationally. The patterns and trajectories of China's soft power indicate a complicated and dynamic environment with essential ramifications for diplomacy and international relations. China's capacity to strike a balance between advancing its culture, economic interests, and values, addressing foreign issues, and acknowledging the range of global opinions will determine the success of its soft power measures. China's soft power will probably change over the next several years due to shifting international dynamics; its ability to succeed will rely on its flexibility, openness, and capacity to forge connections with diverse nations and cultures. Soft power will remain an essential part of China's foreign policy toolkit as it becomes increasingly involved in international affairs. It will shape its contacts with other countries and affect their opinions and attitudes toward China. China's soft power is not without its difficulties and disagreements, however. Human rights, censorship, and transparency issues have clouded China's soft power initiatives, leading to conflicting views around the world. Over time, China's soft power strategy will depend on how well it handles these worries and responds to scepticism worldwide. Furthermore, China's soft power trends would be greatly influenced by the global geopolitical environment. China will face competition from other superpowers, such as the US, in its efforts to gain more clout and advance its ideals internationally.

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From Clicks to Conflicts: The Impact of Social Media Narratives on Political Polarization

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Abstract

Background: Social media has turned out to be one of the most influential dynamics in modifying the political discourse and general opinion in Pakistan. Despite increasing the accessibility of political news and political participation, such platforms have also increased biased narratives, misinformation, and the choice of selective exposure, hence promoting political polarization.

Objective: The current qualitative research study focuses on (1) mechanisms of how people get political information on social media platforms, (2) the role of biased narratives in the shaping of political attitudes, and (3) the impact of digital political polarization on social relations.

Methodology: The study relies on the Agenda-Setting Theory, Framing Theory, and Selective Exposure Theory to explain these findings through interviews carried out on sixteen semi-structured participants who engage in active or passive consumption of political content on Facebook, TikTok, WhatsApp, and YouTube.

Findings: Findings show that social media are an agenda-setter because they give priority to some political topics in user feeds. Interviewees observed that such content is frequently biased with implications of such framing strategies that enhance the reiteration of partisan views. There was also selective exposure because most participants only listened to the content that reaffirmed their prior political ideologies, thus forming echo chambers that further polarized them. Others considered social media space as a friendly area of connection and some people said that the internet made online political disagreements add to the breakdown of connections offline. It seemed that awareness of misinformation was widespread, and interviewees often checked the news with their peers, family, or even international media.

Conclusion: All of these findings together undermine the assumption that social media is a two-edged sword that, on the one hand, allows people to become relatively easily accessible to political discussion, and, on the other, fuels divisiveness and mistrust. The theoretical perspectives that Agenda-Setting Theory, Framing Theory, and Selective Exposure Theory provide are sufficient to explain the process of political polarization in Pakistan's Digital space. Increased media literacy, ethically responsible journalism, and political content regulation, thus, become instrumental efforts to address the issue of polarization and lead toward healthier democratic practices.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Social media, however, did not always used to be a major platform of politically oriented discussions: only in the past ten years has it been switching to this role, leaving behind the audience of informal interpersonal communication. With the spread of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, political narratives were spread at a faster pace, and as a result, influenced the views of individuals as well as aligned them with ideological frameworks (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021; Safdar, et al., 2025; Safdar et al., 2015; Safdar et al., 2015a). In Pakistan, especially, the growth of online politicking, online activism, and politically charged content, including factual journalism, fake news, and propagandistic content, has been demonstrated.

Political polarization has been augmented by the selective exposure and the entrenchment of pre-existing belief systems that are reinforced by increasing algorithmically curated content distribution (Spohr, 2017; Shabir et al., 2015; Safdar and Abbasi, 2020; Safdar et al., 2018). Evidence supporting this theory is that empirical investigations show that users are increasingly relegated to so-called echo chambers, environments where they maintain little exposure to opposing views and consequent polarization of ideas (Bail et al., 2018). In Pakistan, social media discourses are not just a reflection of existing political discrimination, but they also propagate and build it, which in most cases, leads to increased intolerance and fighting (Mehran & Iqbal, 2023; Shabir et al., 2015a; Shabir et al., 2015b).

The convergence pattern of geographic boundaries is evidenced when looking at the digital communication platforms. Lee et al. (2022) state that the dissemination of social media and messaging content in the United States is linked positively with affective polarization. Meanwhile, countries like India and the Philippines, in Asia, have seen politically flavoured memes and other viral content take the role of ideological persuasive techniques (Garcia & Luces, 2019; Pathak, 2023). All these observations lead to the conclusion that, despite the undoubted expansion of political involvement due to social media, it also creates the fertile soil in which misinformation and extremism can develop (Langraw & Zaman, 2023).

1.2 Problem Statement

Regardless of the historical prominence of political rhetoric, modern analytics indicate that the speed, geographical distance, and emotional appeal of social-media stories have elevated the level of political polarization to an unprecedented level (Levin et al., 2021). In the Pakistani case, where the partisan affiliation is deeply rooted in cultural and social identities, the online debate often transforms into the offline hostility that can be manifested in the form of harassment and defamation and can go as far as direct violence (Riasat et al., 2025). Although there is an increasing literature on the relationship between social media and political participation, there remains a gap in the literature in the form of theoretical research that focuses on rich qualitative research on the experiences and perceptions of Pakistani social-media users on such polarizing discourse. The task of filling this gap needs empirical research that goes beyond statistical correlations and questions the human aspect of polarization, clarifying how powerful stories are received, interpreted, and performed. As a result, the present study employs in-depth interviews as a comprehensive qualitative tool to create rich data, allowing for an understanding of how social media contributes to the strengthening of political leanings and fosters division.

1.3 Research Objectives

- Examine how social media narratives affect political polarization between Pakistani users.
- Explore the role of misinformation, Selective exposure, and echo chambers in shaping political biases.
- Examine how users observe and respond to opposite political narratives online.

1.4 Research Questions

- How do Pakistani social media users observe the impact of online political narratives on their political views?
- What role do misinformation and selective exposure play in reinforcing political polarization?
- How do individuals respond to exposure to opposing political perspectives on social media?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This paper adds to the emerging literature on the role of social media and its effect on political polarization by focusing on the case of Pakistan, where a relatively high political participation level is combined with a record rate of digital adoption. Its results will be used by policymakers, media regulators, and civil society organizations to realize the psychological and societal process of how polarization is established in the digital age. Also, by referring to first-hand accounts, the study is going to outline possible avenues that can be used to minimize the divisive nature of online discourse, including facilitating media literacy and exposure to differing opinions (Osmundsen et al., 2021).

2. Literature Review

The issue of political polarization has become one of the most significant socio-political issues of the digital age, where social media plays a critical role in exacerbating and enhancing political disparities. Polarization has been studied on an international scale, and results have shown that the nature of social media drives selective exposure and supports beliefs already held and generates an environment to promote people to expose themselves to like-minded opinions (Levin et al., 2021; Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021). The algorithms of engagement programmed into these platforms are prone to favour emotionally charged, partisan messages, at the cost of the rational and meditative ones, hence fuelling the perceived severity of political disputes (Spohr, 2017; Bail et al., 2018).

Polarization is also institutionalized in such ecosystems through misinformation. Studies also demonstrate that false information, which is consistent with the political identity held by an individual, easily convinces and passes through, making the misleading stories more widespread and influential (Ribeiro et al., 2017; Osmundsen et al., 2021). According to Langraw and Zaman (2023), the psychological consequences of fake news do not become visible only with the immediate consumption of false news, but they form long-term attitudes and beliefs. There exists the third-person effect as well, which complicates the situation and refers to the tendency of the user to not recognize each other as vulnerable to misinformation but rather think of other people as susceptible to misinformation, creating a sense of ethical superiority and social separation (Yang and Tian, 2021).

The correlation between social media and political polarization has been researched in different contexts around the world, exposing both global and local trends. Indicatively, Hong and Kim (2016) noted that political polarization on Twitter leads to the grouping of like-minded members, whereas Lee (2016) pointed out that the severity of polarization on Twitter is sensitive to political events and news cycles. In the United States and Japan, Lee et al. (2022) established that both social media and private messaging services caused affective polarization, meaning that it is not limited to the usual exposure in the public sphere. Likewise, Banks et al. (2021) demonstrated that perceptions can be manipulated, and ideological boundaries can become stronger due to the framing effects and selective exposure in the digital feeds.

The aspect of cultural and regional contexts in determining the manifestation of polarization is of special relevance. Garcia and Luces (2019) have reported how political memes made in the Philippines act both as instruments of satire and means of ideological reinforcement when young adults express political ideologies through memes, simultaneously facilitating partisanship. Pathak (2023) studied the role of regulated social media platforms on the perceptions of users in India and concluded that policy fixes can adjust, as opposed to eradicate, the grounds of polarization in online discussion.

The past few years in Pakistan have seen the heightened polarization of politics on social media as the combination of a high level of political participation, partisan news creatorship, and the spread of viral-digital narratives has come together (Maqsood et al., 2024). According to the results of research by Riasat et al. (2025), disinformation campaigns can be listed among the strongest contributors to political bias, as partisan organizations can utilize channels, such as Twitter (X) and Facebook, the usage of which can allow them to promote the narrative that is more beneficial to their agenda. Mehran and Iqbal (2023) also noted that online political conversation can easily be translated to intolerance, hostility, and harassment, and broken boundaries between online and offline hostility. This is in line with the previous research findings by Muzaffar et al. (2019, 2020), which found that social media is an important instrument of political awareness and mobilization, especially during election times. Such was the case with the 2018 Pakistani general elections, where the use of social media campaigns was used to mobilize youth voters and further divide the partisan lines at the same time.

Another issue that scholars have looked at is how exposure to counter-political views may ironically make polarization worse instead of uniting people. The results collected by Bail et al. (2018) have shown that encounters with conflicting opinions in social media usually have an effect of affecting opinions through solidifying positions held by people since they understand counter-arguments in partisan ways. Guess et al. (2019) have expressed methodological issues with the validity of self-reports on social media political activity, indicating that such an activity cannot be fully reflected as a result of monitoring activity in social media. Yang et al. (2016) added their voices to this debate when they addressed agenda-setting dynamics using the context of social media as having the capacity to push political attention quickly without necessarily having to engage a subject on the level of policy discussion.

Although other experts have studied the possibility of people sorting themselves by reading about depolarization with certain conditions (Kobayashi, 2020), the predominance of opinions indicates that the existing digital world is more likely to become polarized than united. The arrangement of platforms, the psychology of the individual users, and the strategic use of the content by political figures converge to form an ecosystem in which clicks usually result in conflicts. Pakistani reality is an excellent example of such a tendency, as polarized narratives not only determine political life in the online sphere but also have an impact on political life and the construction of discourses in the real world (Understanding the Impact of Social Media on Political Polarization, 2024).

3. Theoretical Framework

This research paper will be framed using well-defined media theories that explicate how social media discourses contribute to polarization in politics. This study has three frameworks, which are: *Agenda-Setting Theory*, *Framing Theory*, and *Selective Exposure Theory*. Altogether, they provide an in-depth insight into the process of creation, representation, and the consumption of content in ways that strengthen political differences.

According to *Agenda-Setting Theory*, the media does not necessarily inform people as to how to think; it can inform people as to what to think. Social media in the digital age has widened this ability and has allowed traditional media companies and individual users alike to establish the political agenda by creating viral content, propagating hashtags, and constant exposure to narrative (Yang et al., 2016). According to Bail et al. (2018), divisive political themes are frequently placed as the top priority of agenda-setting since they are more engaging. Maqsood and Riasat et al. (2024, 2025) in Pakistan identify centralized attention cycles formed online by political actors that strategically publicize specific issues with the tendency of creating polarization among individuals.

Framing Theory builds on the idea of agenda setting by including how the media not only picks the issues that it wants to bring to the forefront, but also how it presents them as well. Frames influence the interpretation process that includes the focus on selected parts of a narrative and the neglect of others, causing the determination of the legitimacy and morality of political stances (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021). The article by Lee et al. (2022) demonstrates that such processes as emotionally laden framing in politics, which prevailed on social media, bolster affective polarization because they

frame opponents as threatening instead of political opponents. Mehran and Iqbal (2023) note that it is common to present political leaders and their respective followers in immoral terms in the Pakistani digital arena, thereby intensifying animosity among them.

The *Selective Exposure Theory* can be applied to explain audience involvement in the polarization process, and according to it, people search and consume information that intends to support their ideologies and ignore the information that confronts them (Spohr, 2017). On social media, this process is enhanced with algorithmic curation, which ranks the content according to previous interaction, forming so-called echo chambers where people mainly see similar points of view (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021). Langraw and Zaman (2023) believe that not only does this environment reinforce political biases, but they are also supported by misinformation that appeals to group identities. Riasat et al. (2025) in Pakistan record the existence of political echo chambers due to selective exposure, which means that different stories are circulating within networks that lack ideological diversity, and communication between groups becomes more exceptional.

The combination of the three theories enables this work to consider polarization as a compound process. Agenda-setting describes the tendency of some political topics to prevail in an online setting, framing theory explains how various contextualization clues are constructed into these narratives, and selective exposure theory explains how audience consumption patterns further separate political groups into ideological units. Taken together, the mentioned frameworks offer a solid analytical filter to observe the interview data, which allows identifying the mechanisms through which the “clicks” on politically driven narratives turn into conflicts in the social and political realm of Pakistan.

4. Methodology

This chapter is a description of the methodology adopted in researching the role of social media narratives in creating political polarization in Pakistan. This study uses a qualitative research design that will enable it to develop a rich and textured understanding of what the participants experience, feel, and understand about political discourse that they encounter online through digital spaces. The research objectives and questions have been used to inform the methodological framework in the sense that the design, data collection, and data analysis exercises are consistent, orderly, and can be able to answer the essence of the study, which is to establish how trends in online political narratives add to the divide of political differences.

4.1 Research Design

The *qualitative approach* is considered to be most suitable due to the nature of the study, which is exploratory. As opposed to quantitative designs, which focus on generalizability and statistical measurement, qualitative methods are more concerned with depth of understanding as a way to represent the complexity of lived experiences of individuals (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021). The main method of data collection in this study is specifically the in-depth semi-structured interviews that are going to be used. *Semi-structured interview* is such a technique that enables both continuity because all the respondents wish to discuss the major focal points of the study, and the possibility to provide their insights and detail their life experiences.

The specific selection of the approach is justified by the earlier studies of political polarization and media influence, which highlight the importance of the qualitative inquiry in unravelling the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural online politics of opinion formation (Riasat et al., 2025; Maqsood et al., 2024). Moreover, the in-depth interviews would be especially ideal in gathering the effects of the range and dynamic nature of effects like the content curation algorithms, propagation of misinformation, and the framing effects on the perception of users.

4.2 Population and Sampling Strategy

The sample of the study includes active social media users in Pakistan and people who consume political materials on social media. The sampling methodology is based on the purposive sampling scheme, which is a non-probability strategy whereby participants will be chosen purposefully as they fit in particular inclusion criteria that are applicable to the research questions. In the given case, the inclusion criteria are the following:

- The respondent needs to be an active user of social media, consuming political stories as part of Facebook, Twitter (X), Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube applications.
- It is necessary that the participant regularly or periodically observes the growth of politics in Pakistan through social media.
- The respondent can have any educational background because both the literate and illiterate take active participation in online political debates.
- The age of the participant is not limited, and younger, middle-aged, and older users can be included.
- The respondent can belong to any occupational category, such as university and college students, working professionals, unemployed individuals, and anyone working in some informal sectors.

The sample size of the study consists of 16 participants, all of whom represent a diverse range of socio-economic, educational, and occupational backgrounds. This variability ensures that the outputs will reflect a wide range of opinions about political polarization, rather than being limited to a single group of individuals. The inclusion of both educated as well as non-educated users is important: the political content in social media ranges beyond literacy lines and usually has been conveyed through video and memes, among other visual media formats that do not present any advanced literacy requirement.

4.3 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect the data, and this took around 40 to 60 minutes per interview. The interviews were conducted face-to-face or video/audio-linked interviews, depending on their time and availability of the participants. This flexibility made it accessible to people in various geographical locations as well as individuals in every occupation. The theoretical framework of the study was used to construct the interview guide, and which would contain factors of the Agenda-Setting Theory, Framing Theory, and Selective Exposure Theory. The guide was organized by themes:

- **Political Content Exposure:** How frequently do you do it, what sources are you using, and on what channels do you like to use it most?
- **Narrative Engagement:** The Type of narratives and the tone of the narratives reaching the participants are some of the acts of political exposure to the narratives.
- **Perceived Influence:** Participants' perception of how such narratives have shaped their political views.
- **Interaction with Opposing Views:** Reactions and coping strategies when exposed to differing political opinions.
- **Role of Misinformation:** Experiences with fake news and its perceived impact on political trust and relationships.

Probing questions were possible as a consequence of the semi-structured nature, which made it possible to clarify the meanings of some aspects, as well as to explore unexpected but interesting themes. The interviews were done using the language more familiar to the participants, either Urdu, English, or a combination thereof, so that they would be comfortable enough to give a natural response. Interviews were taped with the consent of the participants and transcribed later, followed by analysis.

4.4 Data Analysis

The research has carried out thematic analysis as explained by Braun and Clarke, and the steps are as follows:

- **Familiarization:** The reception of recordings, reading transcripts over and over, and stating the first impression.
- **Generating Initial Codes:** Assessing labels to relevant phrases, sentences, or paragraphs that capture key ideas.
- **Searching for Themes:** Grouping codes into broader themes, such as “echo chambers,” “moral framing,” “perceived bias,” and “political hostility”.
- **Themes Review:** refining, combining, dropping themes so that all themes properly reflect the data set.
- **Naming and Defining Themes:** Just to express in words the scope and nature of each theme.
- **Production of Reports:** synthesis of the themes into a coherent narrative addressing the research questions directly.

NVivo software was thought to be used in organizing and coding the data, but manual coding was eventually used to enable the researcher to be more involved in the material. Theoretical concepts of the agenda-setting, framing, and selective exposure perspectives were used throughout the analysis to explain the process of constructing, spreading, and internalizing political narratives.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

The research was carried out in terms of ethical integrity. The research objectives and procedures were explained to the participants, as well as their rights. Verbal and written informed consent were granted, wherein it was made clear that their cooperation was voluntary. The right to anonymity was ensured through the use of pseudonyms for all participants, and any information they provided was to be distinguished and not included in transcripts or reports. A sense of data security was achieved through saving recordings and transcripts in an encrypted form, which was only open to the researcher. Since the theme of the study was politically sensitive, further caution was grown so as to avoid the possibility of participants fearing persecution in sharing their opinions.

4.6 Limitations of the Methodology

Since the qualitative design is not statistically generalizing, it provides rich meaning of individual perspectives. The fact that the sample size is only 16 participants is a relatively small number, which implies that the results are only applicable to a specific context and are not necessarily representative of all the Pakistani users of social media. Additionally, the use of self-reported experience may imply the risk of recall bias or selective reporting by Guess et al. (2019) in similar studies. Despite that, the exclusive demographic mix of the sample increases the quality and universality of the derived insights.

5. Findings

The chapter reports the results of the in-depth interviews with sixteen participants on their interaction with social media, their exposure to politically-oriented content, their attitude to political campaigns, trust in information on the Internet, and the effect that this engagement produces on personal views and relations. Thematic analysis revealed five key themes, which will depict the functioning of political communication and polarization in social media within Pakistan.

5.1 Theme 1: Patterns of Social Media Usage and Exposure to Political Content

The respondents described various modes of social media consumption, including entertainment, seeking information, and interaction with news and politics. Social networks like Instagram,

YouTube, WhatsApp, TikTok, and Facebook were mentioned several times. One participant indicated:

“I have employed and use social media daily as a source of entertainment and as a mode of getting information” (Participant 3).

Another referred to the frequency of use:

This is because I engage in social media daily to interact with others, as an information tool, news, and even online shopping (Participant 14).

Participants who indicated it as the main source of their news updates argued that social media is their preferred source of news (or news updates). Some argued that it was their sole source of news updates. Others revealed that they used it more casually. For instance:

“I tend to utilize WhatsApp 3 to 4 times to view messages and status, YouTube 2 to 3 times to view dramas, news channels, and shorts only” (Participant 2).

Political content was exposed to passively and actively. Some of them said they had seen politics in their feed without seeking it out, but that, during major events, they deliberately sought it out.

“My feed is primarily a major source of political content to me due to my following news pages and journalists” (Participant 9).
“There are even times when political content appears in my feed, and I occasionally seek it out after others have mentioned it to me” (Participant 3).

The fact that algorithms, peer sharing, and self-directed searching influenced the political exposure of the participants demonstrates that all these factors contribute to the participants' political exposure.

5.2 Theme 2: Perceptions of Political Campaigns and Partisan Content

Respondents have repeatedly noted that social media is heavily used by political parties to conduct campaign activity. Most often, PTI and PML-N were mentioned, and some pointed at certain campaign strategies.

“Yes, they both do it, PTI and PML-N propagate their agendas through social media” (Participant 3).
“Yes, I’ve observed that many parties are conducting social media campaigns, e.g., PML-N video messages” (Participant 9).
“I believe that every political party goes into social media these days to advertise their ideas, mostly PTI and Noon League members” (Participant 14).

A majority of participants, however, believed that political material on the Internet was biased and partisan and hardly balanced or impartial.

“Social media is all biased. They all discuss their interests as there is no censorship” (Participant 3).
“One-sided, not balanced, people present the ideas in their favor and even cut videos on social media” (Participant 14).
“The political content is largely biased and tends to favor either side since parties concentrate on their agenda” (Participant 9).

Such a sense of bias speaks to participants aware of the selective framing and echo chamber of political actors on the internet.

5.3 Theme 3: Trust, Misinformation, and Verification Practices

The participants depict a high level of distrust of political information on social media. Most raised the concern that it was inaccurate due to misinformation and regulation.

“No, I do not necessarily trust political news and opinions on social media since nothing is censored there” (Participant 3).

“No, not everything that is in the news is accurate” (Participant 2).

“In the online world, there is a high speed of misinformation propagation” (Participant 9).

In response to this, mistrust participants used cross-checking with family, friends, and traditional media as verification practices.

“I would always check on other sources of information” (Participant 3).

“I go to the perceptions of acquaintances or relatives” (Participant 2).

“I look at the source, make a cross-check with trusted sources of news, and sometimes even talk with other trusted souls before I believe it” (Participant 9).

“I discuss it with my peers and family so that I can get more information, or I watch the news on television, and I confirm what I hear there” (Participant 14).

The results indicate that, although social media forms an extreme extent to which political information enters, participants tend not to engage with content at face value but mix it with offline trust circles and mass media to create a triangulation effect.

5.4 Theme 4: Impact on Personal Beliefs and Political Attitudes

Some of the respondents admitted that their political views and consciousness had been formed through social media. One brought to mind the effect of PTI's online mobilization:

“The previous social media campaign of Imran Khan influenced my views strongly, though those were the times when it happened and not at the present” (Participant 3).

Some pointed out that the exposure on social media had strengthened their convictions about the necessity of being transparent or inspired them to dig a little deeper:

“The use of social media has reinforced my beliefs, including the need to have a transparent political scene” (Participant 9).

“The political content may impact my thought process regarding some of the topics and motivate me to do further research” (Participant 9).

Meanwhile, certain participants reflected the lowest individual effect and considered themselves rather watchers than participants:

“I haven't. I believe I am a witness at most of the time” (Participant 14).

“No, I do not have a very big interest in politics” (Participant 3).

It means that political influence differs, but social media, nevertheless, have an important role in framing problems, causing contemplation, and strengthening previously held attitudes.

5.5 Theme 5: Effects on Relationships, Discussions, and Polarization

The interviews produced contrasting points of view regarding the art of political participation in social media. Some respondents disavowed involvement in online arguments expressly:

“No, I did not have any arguments or political content conflicts” (Participant 3).

“I have not experienced these circumstances, but I have witnessed people attacking one another as a result of parties” (Participant 14).

“No, I do not quarrel, but I have seen it happen with other people on numerous occasions” (Participant 9).

“Other people commented on noticing high tensions: In Pakistan, they tend to distance people more due to hatred towards other parties; they take it personally” (Participant 9).

“It is not the medium but the individuals; people do not want to be corrected and only want others to nod to their opinions; therefore, discussions alienate individuals further” (Participant 14).

Besides, the interviewees have reported on the consequences of offline relationships. One of the respondents reported a recent case:

“Friendship and family relations can be influenced because of the political discussions on social media. I recall the last political dialogue between my friends” (Participant 9).

“I have heard such news that there were people who killed their cousins or brothers due to clashes in political parties” (Participant 14).

However, some of the respondents associated social media activity with positive dialogue when performed with the respectful measures:

“Political discourse is developed through political discussion, which, in one way or another, is of importance in the present world” (Participant 3).

“People can be united with their help” (Participant 2).

Collectively, the results show that social media enables active political discussion, but it also increases polarization, emotional hostility, as well as heightened tension in interpersonal relationships.

6. Discussion

This current study identified the use of social media to influence political polarization in Pakistan through in-depth interviews with sixteen participants. The study was based on the theoretical premises of Agenda-Setting Theory, Framing Theory, and Selective Exposure Theory and attempted to define how political content on social media shapes perspectives, actions, and interactions among individuals. The results reveal that social media has a complex effect on political interest, exposure to politically biased messaging, opinion development, and polarization, validating and deepening what prior studies already showed (Riasat, Hussain, & Rasheed, 2025; Maqsood et al., 2024).

The participants reported having frequent usage of social media regularly, mostly to fetch news updates and be in touch with peers. They mostly used Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (X), and YouTube, which are similar to the tendencies amongst Pakistani youth, wherein digital-based platforms are the leading source of information when it comes to politics (Muzaffar, Yaseen, & Safdar, 2020; Mehran & Iqbal, 2023). The results also indicate that the political contents are often presented passively in the feeds of the users owing to the accounts and pages followed by individuals, but some actively seek political information on important occasions. This falls in line with the Agenda-Setting Theory that proposes that the media shapes not only what individuals think about, but also what issues are regarded as salient (Yang, Chen, Maity, & Ferrara, 2016; Pathak, 2023). In the Pakistani context, algorithmic codes on social media increase the appearance of politically conveyed information, highlighting issues that are of high interest to political players and media houses.

The exposure of participants to political discourses came along with unique reports of biasness. The most common claim that respondents mentioned is the use of social media by political parties and their allies to promote agendas, highlight successes and portray opponents in a bad light. Examples that were stated included slogans and campaign messages, memes, and videos generated and shared throughout the election processes. These observations agree with past studies showing how political parties are using social media strategically to shape community opinion and create select narratives (Muzaffar, Chohdhry, & Afzal, 2019; Garcia & Lucas, 2019; Levin, Milner, & Perrings, 2021). The Framing Theory holds that the informational presentation holds considerable influence over how an audience perceives the information and the experience of the social media participants enclosed a lot of the above-stated assumptions: the presentation of information historically casts framing in terms of

partisan loyalty, characterizes persons in political spheres as anti-heroes or villains, simplifies, and further solidifies the held partisan views.

Some trends among the behaviours of the participants revealed: people were inclined to share political messages that matched their already formed attitudes, and numerous people were willing to either check or complement the information presented via a number of other sources, rather than interacting directly with problematic content. Such an orientation corresponds to the Selective Exposure Theory that assumes individuals are seeking affirmative information and avoiding the presentation of the material that contradicts their ideas (Spohr, 2017; Riasat, Hussain, & Rasheed, 2025; Banks et al., 2021). According to the interviews, these practices only affirm the prior attitudes towards politics and, in some instances, fuel the polarization. The participants discussed that a prolonged experience with content that appealed to a specific party increased their political beliefs, and exchanges in the comment sections sometimes caused conflicts or social conflicts. Similar evidence can be found in the research on polarization on social media, where the existence of filter bubbles and echo chambers helps partisan attitudes become solidified (Bail et al., 2018; Yang & Tian, 2021; Kobayashi, 2020).

The current study examines to which misinformation and distrust are rife in social media content. Participants were significantly sceptical of political news due to their views on exaggerated/misleading posts, edited videos as well and biased information. In order to counter these risks, they applied some techniques of verifying the credibility of the news: to cross-check multiple trusted news sources, ask friends or family, to consider the language and presentation of each piece carefully. Such practices are reflective of a broader movement towards the increased perception of the hazards of both fake news and selective framing (Langraw & Zaman, 2023; Ribeiro et al., 2017; Osmundsen et al., 2021). The results align with the international literature that misinformation not only creates a false sense of knowledge but also politically polarizes individuals by reinforcing a partisan bias/selective attention (Guess et al., 2019; Lee, Rojas, & Yamamoto, 2022; Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021).

The current research explains the social consequences of the consumption and creation of political content in interpersonal contexts. Respondents noted that online communication that focuses on politics often causes sharp communication between friends, family members, and business colleagues in case conflicting arguments emerge. Even as some of the participants argued that online civil dialogue can be used to foster understanding between people, the general observation made was that such communication usually isolates people. The results align with the current research on the role of affective polarization as the result of social-media engagement, especially the cases when persons involved interpret the political disagreement as a personal insult (Hong & Kim, 2016; Levin et al., 2021; Maqsood et al., 2024). The information also shows that the rhetorical usage of political memes and emotionally loaded content increases polarization with the help of humour, mocking, and moral judgment, which correlates with Garcia and Luces (2019) on the persuasive effectiveness of political memes to influence opinion forming.

Empirical data have overwhelmingly shown that the role of social media in electoral polarization is disgorged via user behaviour, platform algorithms, and framing of content. Identifying social media as a problem is understood because, despite the possibility of quick access to information and the enhancement of civic participation, the emergence of selective exposure, ideological confirmation, and the confrontation between people are promoted. These dynamics confirm the theoretical expectations and provide context-sensitive information on the Pakistani political arena, which underlines the dual nature of social media as a tool of both engagement and polarization (Riasat, Hussain, & Rasheed, 2025; Maqsood et al., 2024; Lee, 2016).

The evidence highlights the implications of social media usage in Pakistan as one complex arena of political polarization, which is governed by the interconnected agenda-setting, framing, and selective exposure processes. The sheer volume of political material being served to users simultaneously empowers them and places limitations on the users by creating echo chambers and one-sided narratives, and misinformation. Such dynamics point to the necessity of being critically media literate, having clear content moderation postures, and an increase in algorithmic awareness. Future research is needed to assess the effectiveness of interventions to reduce polarization, examine the long-term

effects of prolonged exposure to political social media, and develop cross-cultural comparisons with the intercultural similarities and peculiarities of online political activity, along with its global dynamics (Goyal & Goyal 2023; Banks et al. 2021; Spohr 2017).

7. Conclusion

The current exploration examines the complex relationship between social media and political polarization in Pakistan, explaining the experiences of the participants in the digital realm within the frames of Agenda-Setting Theory, Framing Theory, and Selective Exposure Theory. The research makes it clear that social media has become the main vehicle for delivering political news and a platform where people discuss politics and produce and dispute it at the same time. Some data show that the medium, despite providing a unique access to political information, also deepens the existing divisions as it amplifies the biased discourses and promotes the existing selective patterns of engagement.

The empirical data indicate that the study participants turned to the digital platforms in the majority to access political information; these are YouTube, WhatsApp, TikTok, and Facebook platforms. Engagement of some users was intentional, and some users came across political content through algorithmic curation and feeds. These trends serve to support the agenda-setting power of social media; social media not only highlights political issues but also determines the issues that capture the greatest level of attention in society. At the same time, the participants were always able to notice that the information they observed contained a biased point of view, whether it advocated a particular political organization or criticized another one. Such observations are supported by the Framing Theory, which further asserts that how news and commentary are framed matters in terms of interpretation by the audience and in enhancing partisan orientation.

The current research confirms that political discourses reported in the media presented on social networks had a great impact on the views and attitudes of the participants involved. The respondents claimed that constant exposure to one-dimensional reporting slowly but certainly altered their attitudes to political matters and the viability of specific politicians or parties. These findings are consistent with the Selective Exposure Theory, and they suggest that, rather than trying to expose users to alternative views, the underlying trend is to provide users with content that reinforces their prior opinions and consequently creates an echo chamber that contributes to political polarization. Besides, even though the availability of uninterrupted political discourse was significantly increased using social media, the users displayed a low level of trust in the credibility of the medium. They regularly triangulated news items with friends, relatives, or scoured through mainstream media, implying a lack of belief and consciousness of false news, such as being published in digital venues.

Another prominent aspect of the results is in regards to the societal consequences of cyberspace political discussion. Respondents indicated that polarization often leaked into their off-screen relationships with disagreements over online content, creating tension with friends and family. These observations show that online polarization does not exist in the virtual world; instead, it has offline observable outcomes that destroy social cohesion. Even though the participants believed that social media is indeed a uniting tool that helps in bringing people together, many of them emphasized its ability to separate when political inclinations are at the forefront.

By following the strictly established research goals, the study managed to outweigh the shapes of social media interaction in search and transmission of political information, record the frequency of biased and unilateral stories, and prove their impact on political attitude and action. It also shed light on the verification tactics that users use when faced with issues of credibility, and revealed that polarizing forces that are evident in Internet situations cross over into physical, offline social settings as well. Overall, each of the research questions was answered, and the general research question about political polarization was completely informed by the findings.

In theory, the paper strengthens the explanatory power of the guiding models. The Prioritization of political themes on online communities backs up Agenda-Setting Theory; Framing Theory can be observed in creating perceptions by omitting information and focusing on stories; and Selective

Exposure Theory is confirmed in appeals to audience desires to read what conforms to their ideas based on prior knowledge. Taken together, these frameworks provide a rich narrative around the ways that social media enhances and exacerbates the extent to which politics is polarized.

The current study provided a number of practical implications. To media workers, it further justifies the need to report with balance and about the ethical utilization of digital platforms. To policy-makers, it highlights the pressing need to censor political content and curb misinformation. On the part of audiences, it requires them to have a stronger media literacy and critical evaluation of political sources of information in the creation of opinion or involvement in debate. Essentially, future research on the topic should elaborate on the existing results by examining larger data sets and utilizing mixed-method designs to explore the algorithmic feedback loops perpetuating polarization on a greater scale. On the whole, this study shows how social media in the Pakistani context works as a two-edged sword: it amplifies access to political information and engages people in it; it also intensifies bias, solidifies selective exposure, and undermines social harmony. Online political polarization not only exists in the digital, shaping the way individuals perceive and experience politics in real-life situations and construct an opinion. Addressing these issues requires a combination of media organizations, regulators, and citizens' efforts so that social media can be used to serve the purpose of the informed debate in politics rather than increase division.

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Contesting Citizenship: Hindutva, the CAA, and Minority Communities in India

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Article Information	Abstract
Received: Oct 05, 2025 Revised: Dec 22, 2025 Accepted: Dec 31, 2025	Hindutva is an ultra-nationalist philosophy grounded in Hindu religion and mythology, has gained significant traction in India that poses challenges for religious minorities. These religious minorities include particularly several of them but mainly Muslims, Christians and Sikhs. While India has historically supported secularism, the rise of Hindutva has raised concerns about the erosion of religious freedom and equality. The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of 2019 by the Modi regime accelerated citizenship for non- Muslim refugees from neighbouring countries is widely criticized for institutionalising religious discrimination. In this context this study examines the impact of Hindutva ideology and the CAA on minority communities in India. It tries to trace the historical evolution and its political manifestation through Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The analysis is based on qualitative content examination of academic literature, legal documents, media reporting, and selected case events. It critically assesses societal challenges posed by the CAA, highlighting its implications for India's secular framework and democratic values. Findings indicate that there is a substantial shift toward majoritarianism, raising concerns about the future of minority rights and social cohesion. This research aids to the broader discourse on nationalism, religion, and politics in contemporary India, offering insights into the intersections of power, identity and governance in a pluralistic society.
Keywords <i>Hindutva,</i> <i>Moditva,</i> <i>Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA),</i> <i>Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP),</i> <i>Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS),</i> <i>Minority Communities</i>	

1. Introduction

India a nation known for its rich diversity, historical commitment and secularism, has faced back lash from the rise of Hindu nationalism in recent years. The nationalism is mainly the rise of Hindutva, the saffronization, and the glorification of Hindu nationalism. The genesis of Hindutva ideology can traced back to Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, who created the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in 1925. Hindutva refers “Hinduness”, an identity that emerged in response to a perceived threat to Hindu culture and unity under British colonial rule and partition of India. One of the leading proponents of Hindutva ideology was Vinayak Damodar Sawarkar, who explained the cultural nationalist aspects of Hinduism, advocating an integrated Hindu identity that transcended religions in his book, “Hindutva: Who is Hindu?” published in 1923 (Sawarkar, 2021). Hindutva ideology sought to assert the importance of Hindu culture and tradition in India. This positions Hindus as original land

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inhabitants and advocating, protecting and developing followed by Hindu values. It aimed to unite Hindus under one cultural and national identity distinct from religious pluralism (Ejaz & Ilyas, 2021). Over the years, Hindutva evolved into a political ideology whose beliefs adopted by the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, later the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP). The idea gained prominence in the late 20th century, catalysing the rise of Hindu nationalist politics in India. The BJP, as the political party of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) has actively embraced the ideological principles and politics of Hindutva. Under leaders like Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Narendra Modi, the BJP stood for the welfare of the Hindu majority by emphasising Hindu culture and religious unity. The electoral success of the BJP in the late 1990s and early 2000s further solidified the influence of Hindutva in Indian politics. Narendra Modi, who became prime minister in 2014, has implemented policies aligned with Hindutva principles, such as promoting Hindu culture, reviewing history books, and advocating for single civil code (Anderson, 2020). The construction of the Ram temple at a controversial site further solidified the image of BJP as a strong proponent of Hindu nationalism (Reuters, 2024). This ideological stance is further reflected in legislative actions such the Citizenship Amendment Act.

The Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 is recognized as a turning point since it established religious discrimination in citizenship law. This turning point was the cause of huge protests all over the country and discussions that lasted about India's secular and democratic foundations. The statute of the Citizenship Amendment Act in 2019 was a major turning point that not only legalized religious discrimination in citizenship laws but also incited huge protests and discussions revolving around India's secular and democratic foundations. All religious minorities, except for Muslims who entered India before December 31, 2014, from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, are allowed to apply for Indian citizenship only through this law.

In support of the Citizenship Amendment Act, the BJP government took a position to make sure the security of religious minorities in neighbouring countries and to provide them a way to become Indians by citizenship. Safdar and Mushtaq (2019) pointed out that the law has caused a lot of discussions regarding citizenship, secularism, and religious identity in India. This brought out the complexities of the diversity of the socio-political landscape. By introducing a religious criterion into the citizenship laws, the Act has tested the secular fabric of the country. The CAA has sparked nationwide protests in India, with the opposition demanding its repeal and warning that it could be applied alongside the National Register of Citizens (NRC) to target and segregate Muslims (Gupta, 2019).

The Hindutva ideology is still an important factor causing debates in the Indian political arena and the people are talking about and discussing nationalism, religion and identity. The ideology asserts the majoritarianism of the ruling Hindu and disempowerment of the other religious and cultural groups in the shape of secularism which is opposes Hinduism. The present research traces the historical evolution of Hindutva from ideological and political through the BJP and RSS, while also looking at its effects on minority groups through the CAA as a case study. The authors of the paper critically assess the social problems relating to the CAA, pointing out to its consequences for India's secularism and democratic values. The paper puts forward a critical argument as to how the Hindutva ideology has been politicized and the Citizenship Amendment Act implemented causing an escalation of harassment and violent acts against minorities, mainly Muslims and Christians, in India. The present research is qualitative, argumentative, and focuses on specific events -the Kathua incident, the Shaheen Bagh incident, and the Aligarh University incident- to shed light on the threats faced by minorities. The research adopts a content analysis approach with inputs drawn from academic articles, government reports, and media coverage. With this regard, the study is guided by three research questions:

1. How has Hindutva evolved from a cultural movement into a political ideology embedded within the Indian state?
2. What ideological assumptions underpin the CAA, and in what ways do they reflect Hindutva's majoritarian framework?

3. How have the CAA and broader Hindutva-based politics affected the rights, security, and social belonging of minority communities in India?

1.1. Problem Statement

The Hindutva ideology continues in the Indian politics and rests to ignite discussions about the concepts of nationalism, religion, and identity in the nation. It favours the majority and at the same time, breaks the secular character of India by putting the needs of Hindus first and the interests of the rest of the religious and cultural groups last. The research is done to understand how the Hindutva ideology and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) are affecting the minority communities of India through their historical evolution via the ruling party BJP and the religious group RSS. It does so by looking into the CAA and pointing out its implications for India's secularism and democracy. This paper uncovers the linkage between the politics of Hindutva and the CAA, and the increase in minority harassment and violence, particularly Muslims and Christians, in India. The research is qualitative and adopts an argumentative approach, primarily through the lens of three events: the Kathua incident, the Shaheen Bagh incident, and the Aligarh University incident. The study used content analysis, academic literature, policy papers, and primary news researching.

1.2. Objectives

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To trace the historical development of Hindutva ideology from its cultural origins to its political institutionalisation through the RSS and BJP.
2. To analyse the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of 2019 in the context of Hindutva politics and assess its implications for citizenship and minority inclusion.
3. To examine the impact of Hindutva ideology and the CAA on minority communities in India, focusing on patterns of exclusion, social conflict, and challenges to minority rights.

2. Literature Review

This part is a basis in the academic writings about Hindutva, Hindu nationalism, Citizenship Amendment Act giving a thorough understanding of the subject. It is carefully sorted into different parts, ending with the identification of research gaps. The literature review intends to delve into and combine the research related to the birth of Hindutva in India. One of its main goals is to clarify the Citizenship Amendment Act through a critical analysis of the theoretical frameworks and views, especially that of Anthony Smith on ethnic nationalism, to comprehend that ethnicity is linked to the ethnic core of any nation.

2.1 Hindutva and the Indian society: An Overview

The term Hindutva, which means "Hinduness," was introduced by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in 1920 (Ejaz & Ilyas, 2021). Savarkar's thought heeded that India is a Hindu nation fundamentally and he was pushing for the religious and cultural integration of all people living in India into one Hindu ideology. This dream of Savarkar gained organizational strength with the founding of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in the year 1925. The RSS became a Hindu nationalist organization for the assistance of Hindutva with paramilitary activities. The whole thing was about emphasizing the Hindu cultural revival, the established hierarchical social order, and so on. The critics of the RSS have pointed out the organization's paramilitary activities and its involvement in violent incidents as proof of its undemocratic behaviour. The RSS, along with its allies such as Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Bajrang Dal, has played a central role in shaping the socio-political landscape in India (Jaffrelot, 2010).

The BJP's ascendance, along with its strong connection with the RSS, has empowered the advocates of Hindutva. The party's political rise, primarily after the Ram Janmabhoomi movement and the destruction of the Babri Mosque in 1992, was a drastic movement towards the domination of the majoritarian rule. The electoral victories of the BJP, which ended with Narendra Modi's becoming Prime Minister in 2014, made the presence of Hindutva in the government and policies even stronger. Critics believe that the BJP's language and actions are sometimes directed against Muslims, thus making a climate of fear and insecurity prevail (Kumar, 2013).

Hindutva's ideology has a multifaceted relationship with violence. In the words of Sanjeev Kumar, "the ideology can give a right to those using it to commit violence against nonbelievers or even to those who are simply perceived as threats. The Hindu fanaticism around cows goes even further, as Muslims are only suspected of cow slaughter, and they are attacked by Hindu mobs. Besides these incidents, large-scale communal riots have also occurred frequently in the country's history. The demolition of the Babri Masjid, a mosque built on the site believed by Hindus to be the birthplace of Lord Rama, by a Hindu mob in 1992 has been a turning point in history." (Raja, 2021)

Christophe Jaffrelot provides a significant perspective on the influence of Hindutva ideology (Jaffrelot, 2010). Walter Andersen and Shridhar D. Damle (2019) argue that the extremist Hindutva ideology has led the Hindu majority in India to adopt a harsher stance towards the country's minorities. This analysis highlights the impact of ideological movements on societal attitudes and intergroup relations within India. The supporters of Hindutva sought to protect the native Hindu cultures and traditions to the extent that the ideology has now been politicized. Although the constitution of India still professes secularism, yet for the past three decades, political trend in India increasingly indicates its slide towards Hindutva motivated Hindu extremism (Andersen & Shridhar, 2019). Hindutva as an ideology has pushed most Hindus to adopt a more repressive, brutally authoritarian attitude toward minorities. Christians in India are also currently the target of right-wing Hindu extremists in the context of ongoing violence against Muslim minorities. Attacks against the small Christian minority that are motivated by religion have increased in the past two decades especially since Narendra Modi took helm of affairs in New Delhi. Constituencies represented by BJP and its affiliates are witnessing a sharp increase in violence directed against the Muslim and Christian communities.

The adoption of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in 2019 can be seen as a noteworthy step in the Indian legislative process. The Act simplifies the process of acquiring citizenship for non-Muslim minorities from the stated countries of Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan. The Act is considered by many as an act of discrimination against Muslims because it does not allow them the privilege of citizenship on an expedited basis. Further, the critics of the CAA contend that it is another move in the direction of a Hindu-dominated India and thus a denouncement of the secular and inclusive character of the nation's values.

The Citizenship Amendment Act, which came into effect in December 2019, is one of the most controversial and hotly debated legal measures taken by the Modi government. CAA especially alters the 1955 Citizenship Act significantly by producing one road to citizenship for non-Muslim immigrants from the three neighbouring countries: Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan. More precisely, CAA gives citizenship to the Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi and Christian migrants who came to India before the end of 2014, citing religious persecution as a reason for their movement. The official purpose of the CAA is humanitarian – to shield the oppressed minorities in the Islamic states neighbouring India. However, the law outright excludes the Muslims, which not only raises questions about its unfairness but also about its compatibility with the secular character of the Indian constitution. Opponents argue that the CAA along with the proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC) could disenfranchise large numbers of Indian Muslims effectively, thus rendering them non-citizens and exposing them to detention and deportation. (CAA, 2019)

CAA has sparked widespread demonstrations and litigations throughout the country. The critics claim that the Act is directly violating the secular tenets of the Constitution since it is based on the religious distinctions. Moreover, the Act is seen as a danger to the multi-faceted character of the Indian populace and as a precursor to the religious-based citizenship criteria. (Safdar & Mushtaq, 2019).

Students and civil society groups have been the main drivers of the protests which have raised the alarm that the CAA, together with the NRC, is an instrument for the marginalisation of Muslims. Along with this, critics have raised a point that although the Act claims to be the panacea for religious persecution, it turns a blind eye to the sufferings of the Muslim minorities in the neighbouring countries, for instance, the Rohingyas in Myanmar. Besides, the execution of the NRC in Assam, which led to the exclusion of close to two million people, the majority of whom were Muslims, from the citizenship rolls has intensified these concerns.

Muslims, who make up approximately 14.23% of India's population, were the primary victims of this Hindutva wave (Soutik, 2019). Systematic discrimination in housing, employment, and education is their lot, and they are often the objects of communal violence. The implementation of the CAA and the NRC is viewed as part of a larger plan to marginalise Muslims by putting their citizenship and loyalty to the country under question. Christians, who account for around 2.3% of the population, have also faced more intense persecution. Reports have come in of attacks on churches, forced conversions, and the harassment of Christian missionaries, especially in BJP-ruled states (Jaaved, 2019).

The Sangh Parivar's aggressive preaching campaigns, characterized by their attempt to "re-convert" Christians to Hinduism through the "*Ghar Wapsi*" (homecoming) program, have further estranged the Christian community. The Modi government has thus created an atmosphere of fear and insecurity among the minorities with its socio-political environment. The promotion of Hindu supremacy through legal and illegal means has become a major threat to India's secular and democratic values. The CAA and the overall Hindutva movement not only challenge but also threaten to alter the core identity of the nation by gradually eradicating the pluralism and diversity that have been its hallmark traits through the ages (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

2.2 Ethnic Nationalism: Theoretical Foundations and the Case of Hindutva

The analysis employs the political ideology and nationalism scenario theorists' framework, i.e. Anthony D. Smith, which conflict researchers have already recognized as a basic framework for understanding nationalism based on ethnicity and cultural identity. Smith, in his theory, considers ethnic nationalism as a community consisting of people who share kinship, culture, language, and history; hence, a nation is viewed as a community rather than a political entity (Smith, 1991). On the account of Smith, the ethnic nationalism draws based on an ethnic core that is usually made up of:

1. Shared ancestors or mythical lineage
2. Similar historical memories or events
3. A mutual culture (language, religion, and customs)
4. Belonging to a significant territory
5. A sense of unity among the people

This perspective affirms that the country is not merely a political body but a collection of the old tribal identities which have survived and kept their existence through the bad times and long periods. Smith's idea is still considered an exceptionally powerful means to facilitate the unravelling as well as the coming to grips with the upsurge of Hindutva and its effects on Indian society and politics. In an ideological sense, Hindutva, a term that connects the RSS and BJP in the political domain, endorses the identification of Hindus, both religiously and culturally, in the country. The idea uses cultural narratives and emblems to show the Indian national identity which is mainly Hindu-centred. Smith's rationale leads to the idea that the main goal of character-based nationalism is the announcement and protection of the cultural and ethnic identity of the ruling group within the nation-state's borders. Furthermore, Smith's model greatly aids the examination of the political fights and policy shifts in India influenced by Hindutva. The Hindutva proponents by asserting Hindu cultural values and identity as the centre of their position, aim at the passing of laws that may be unwise towards religious minorities, and thus the whole situation affects the solidarity and administration spheres of society. This perspective underlines the need to view nationalism as a political doctrine and as a cultural and historical phenomenon that influences the society's interactions and the policy outcomes in a way that is not only output but also input. Thus, Anthony D. Smith's theory of ethnic nationalism doesn't only present an approach to

comprehend the ideological underpinnings of Hindutva in contemporary India but also indicates its impacts on the fabric of society and its influence on power politics and administration in the country.

2.3 Research Gaps

Hindutva has been extensively covered through the lenses of majoritarianism, religious extremism, and authoritarian populism; nonetheless, there is still a large gap in the systematic application of Anthony D. Smith's ethno-symbolist approach within the Indian scenario. Besides, the historical and mythological underpinnings of Hindutva are usually mentioned as a matter of fact; however, very few works empirically follow how modern Hindu symbols and civilizational narratives are being used in today's political discourse and state policies, including laws like the CAA and temple-centric politics, from a long-durée perspective. The issue of banning cattle slaughter and other incidental violence remains an area where the Hindutva-driven ethnic nationalism has been institutionalized through everyday governance practices such as citizenship regimes, bureaucratic procedures, policing, and welfare access beyond ideological rhetoric. Moreover, the coexistence and gradual displacement of India's civic-secular nationalism by ethnic nationalism have not attracted sufficient attention, despite Smith's assertion that these forms often overlap. The views and experiences of minorities are still only studied to a limited extent within this ethno-nationalist framework, particularly regarding symbolic exclusion, boundary-making, and identity insecurity. The violence linked to Hindutva is mostly seen as occasional or radical rather than being understood as a mechanism of ethnic boundary enforcement constituting the very structure of society. Lastly, there has been little empirical research into how Hindutva.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This research applies a qualitative research design that is based on interpretive and critical analytical methods to explore the extent to which Hindutva ideology and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) have affected the minority communities in India. The study intends to trace the interaction of that state supported allegorical narratives and ideological policies to social relations, the rights of the minorities, and the incidence of violence. The researcher intends to uncover and evaluate the historical roots and the ideological and institutional foundations of the political and social outcomes of today by bringing Hindutva to light in its evolution through the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The case study method is applied to get a thorough understanding of certain happenings that demonstrate the wide-spread trends of exclusion, harassment, and resistance that are engaged with Hindutva politics in a very intimate way. The research utilizes a theory-informed qualitative methodology that relies on the frameworks of ethnic nationalism and political ideology for the interpretation of the results. The set-up facilitates the contextual analysis of the events, yet it preserves the rigor and coherence of the theory at the same time.

3.2 Data Collection

The research primarily adopts qualitative content analysis of secondary data as the main method of data collection. The set of sources for the study comprises academic literature including peer-reviewed journals, books, and critiques of public and policy debates that are dealing with Hindutva, nationalism, minority rights, and Indian secularism. In the process, governmental documents and legal texts were also examined, including the Citizenship Amendment Act (2019), parliamentary proceedings, court decisions, and official reports. Media coverage accounted for another crucial source, which consisted of articles from credible national and international newspapers, digital platforms, and investigative reporting that were documenting communal violence, protests, and government reactions. Furthermore, the reports produced by human rights organizations and civil society groups were scrutinized to gather evidence of the ongoing mistreatment, violence, and marginalization of minority communities.

3.3 Case Study Analysis

The study looks into three significant instances in order to depict the concurrence of Hindutva politics, the state policies, and the religious minorities' experiences. The three cases were picked as they represent various aspects of the negative impact of Hindutva on the minority groups: the first being the murder and rape case in Kathua which caused direct violence, the second being the protest against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) which took place in Shaheen Bagh, and the third being the institutional pressures on education that the Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) had to face. The three together offer a comprehensive understanding of the interrelationship between the ideology, the policy, and the state machinery regarding the matter of minority rights and their social participation.

1. The Kathua Incident

The Kathua case is considered a religiously motivated conflict where the religious identity, political backing, and ideological mobilization were mixed up. One of the main points of the research is the influence of Hindutva narratives on public debate, political reactions, and interactions with the Muslim victim community, therefore, it shows how ethnic nationalism was powerful enough to legitimize violence.

2. The Shaheen Bagh Protest

The protest at Shaheen Bagh is perceived as a combination of small minority opposition and large-scale civil disobedience against the CAA. The case illustrates how Muslim women, while subjected to ethnic nationalist policies, eloquently claimed constitutional principles and secular nationalism as their values. The writer depicts the state's conduct, the media's portrayal of the protest, and the Hindutva ideology's undermining of the demonstration.

3. The Aligarh Muslim University Incident

The Aligarh case is presented as a main example of the criminalization of dissent and the removal of educational areas for minorities. The authors investigate the police, politics, and media to illustrate that government institutions can be viewed as the impositions of the dominant ideology.

3.4 Rationale and Analytical Approach

These incidents have been taken to show varied manifestations of Hindutva influence; for instance, the direct violence in Kathua, the civic protest at Shaheen Bagh and the institutional pressures in AMU. Qualitative content-analysis of literature, legal documents, media reports, and civil-society records is done to find common themes like exclusion, securitization, and contestation of rights. Thus, the investigation can look at the details of each instance in the light of its social and political context and at the same time point out the larger patterns that cut through the instances.

4. Data Analysis

4.1. Analysing the Intersection of Religion, Politics, and Constitutional Debates on the Citizenship Amendment Act

The CAA, or Citizenship Amendment Act, is a legislation passed in India which allows very specific religious persons coming from neighbouring countries (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan) to gain Indian citizenship. Among these groups are Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, and Parsis. One thing that has been criticized about the Act is the exclusion of Muslims, which has been interpreted as against the very principle of equal treatment. The law has stamped the participants with their respective religions, and this has continued to erode the secular foundation of India. Opponents argue that the Act is anti-Article 14 of the Indian Constitution, which states that no one is to be discriminated against and everybody is to be treated equally. Furthermore, from the moment it was

enacted by the Indian Parliament in December 2019 (CAA, 2019), CAA has turned into a hot topic, a source of social conflicts and a reason for the courts to be busy. Its subject matter was directly related to identity, religion, and basic rights. The Act had a very complex relationship with Indian society: it won Hindu nationalist supporters but also created a lot of resentment among and opposition from the minorities, especially Muslims, who are very afraid of the whole thing. After all, supporters of the Bill argue that it is a just recognition of the rights of the persecuted minor groups, while the critics interpret it as a direct attack on the Muslim population and India's secular character. This situation has led to a confrontation over the question of the religious politicization of citizenship laws. The coupling of the CAA with the NRC, which has been advocated as a way to pinpoint illegal aliens in India, is one of the main reasons for the fears, especially among Muslims, of being left out and of being pushed to the fringes. It has only made the situation worse, as some groups, particularly Muslims, are now left with nobody but themselves who are scared of being indecently excluded. The citizens' religious involvement in politics has caused the fault lines to deepen and has put the question of how inclusive and diverse India's democracy really is.

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Tolerance of one religious community over others in the issue of citizenship has made people worried about the equality of all citizens and the safeguarding of the rights of minorities in India. Hindutva supporters have claimed for the CAA that it indeed offers asylum and citizenship to anyone who is a persecuted minority from the neighbouring countries, especially Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians. They present the Act as a tangible measure to guarantee the rights of these communities and to compensate for the historical injustices inflicted on them in large numbers, notably in the Muslim-majority countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan. By advancing the cause of these religious minorities, Hindutva groups not only seal their constituency but also take one step further in their vision of a Hindu-centred nation.

The CAA has been a tool in the hands of the Hindutva gangs to emphasise the already existent narrative of protecting Hindu interests and therefore, Indian culture. The organisations that are aligned with Hindutva consider the Act a step forward to assert and even enhance the presence of Hindus in the national discourse while also pointing out the injustices done to Hindu refugees. Theoretically, these forces allied with the CAA are trying to combine their power, drawing support from their respective constituents and manipulating public opinion for policy that is financed through ideology-based suggestions. Their enactment of the CAA has further strengthened the Hindutva's plan of a majority Hindu India wherein the rights of the non-Muslim minorities would be defended thus, altering the political landscape of the nation. This intricate relationship of religion, politics, and identity is revealed in the citizenship and nationalism discussions.

The RSS, BJP, VHP, Bajrang Dal, and Hindu Sena have been among the Hindutva-affiliated groups that have vigorously endorsed the CAA as a tool for their agenda of establishing primarily Hindu India. They strategically target the Hindu vote, particularly in West Bengal and Assam. The BJP made the CAA one of its pre-election promises, thereby attracting voters on the lines of identity and security. Nonetheless, protests the CAA broke out all over the country with students, activists and

citizens making their dissent known. The legal proceedings maintain that the Act goes against the secular spirit of the Constitution and is therefore discriminatory against Muslims.

In addition, the CAA has widened the chasm between the various religious groups and has turned them into adversaries. These debates on the Citizenship issue have gone public and they have even influenced the social unity. With the CAA, India has become very much talked about globally, and most of the time, it is a negative way, as this event has even led to a major review of India's secular democracy status. Critics object to the CAA on the grounds that it is unfair to Muslims and that it erodes the secular character of India. The fact that Muslims are not included within the scope of this Act has resulted in some people attributing this to the government's pretentiousness when it comes to equality through inclusiveness and thus it has been a factor to escalate debates on religious politicization of citizenship. This political backdrop has not only caused but also resulted in the isolation of parts of the society and the different opinions about the Act have become integral to public discourse and political rhetoric (Al Jazeera, 2024).

The design of the Act is not well-founded and sets eligibility criteria in an arbitrary manner. The Act offers a route to Indian citizenship for migrants coming from countries like Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan who are non-Muslim, but Muslims are specifically mentioned as the excluded community. This exclusion on the basis of religion has become a matter of dispute since it contradicts the secular principles of India.

The association of the CAA and the National Register of Citizens (NRC) is another discriminatory feature. Illegal immigrants in the country are the target of the NRC and when the CAA is added, the whole situation becomes scary and soon it would be possible to say that the Muslims would be the ones most affected and marginalised. This, in turn, has raised fears of discrimination and the targeting of a particular religious group. The NRC exercise in Assam, for example, resulted in 1.9 million people being excluded from the list, including both Hindus and Muslims. The BJP government's attitude towards the NRC and CAA has raised issues about selective inclusion and exclusion (BBC, 2019). In addition, the CAA has been branded as discriminating behaviour for the very reason that it establishes differing religion-based citizenship standards. As it brings forward certain religious groups and discriminates against others, it has been condemned for being against the principle of equality before the law and non-discrimination. Besides, the eligibility criteria and conditions laid down by the CAA lack valid reasoning and independence. Detractors assert that it weakens the Indian constitution. Detractors in fact argue that the Congress Party's inclusive citizenship policy during the formative years of India was to some extent influenced by ethnic-religious biases.

The CAA passing protests and discussions have been a very loud affair and thus this matter brings forth the conflict between religion and democracy in India. The question is how to blend the national character with the equal rights of all, regardless of their religious belief. The CAA is a matter of dispute mainly because it reflects the painstakingly subtle and complex negotiation between religion, law and politics. As India is in a period of approach and retreat through this hard era, it should not only be that the democratic values are preserved but that the real human problems are also given the priority they deserve.

4.2 Impact on Minorities: Analysing the Case Studies

4.2.1 Kathua Incident

The Kathua rape and murder incident is the name given to the extremely cruel act of raping and killing an eight-year-old girl from the Bakarwal Muslim community in Kathua, which is a part of the Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir, in January 2018. The little girl was kidnapped, given drugs, gang-raped, and then killed in a temple. It is said that the crime was planned beforehand and was meant to force the nomadic Bakarwal community out of that area. The case brought the whole country to a boiling point and raised the issues of religiously motivated violence, crimes against women, and the legal system being manipulated by politics. The charge sheet mentioned eight people

who were implicated in the crime, which included police officers and a temple caretaker. In June 2019, the court found six persons guilty and sentenced three of them to lifetime imprisonment and the other three got five years in prison for tampering with the evidence (Sharma, 2025).

Though the case of Kathua is now in the past, it is still widely recognized as one of the worst examples of delayed justice and the wide-ranging impact of communal tensions in India. The very nature of the crime, being one of the worst acts of violence based on religion, led to its coverage both nationally and internationally. There were many protests and candlelight vigils held all over the country as a response to the incident. It was a wake-up call for society to exercise greater caution in protecting children and other vulnerable groups. Additionally, it highlighted the need for a solution when it comes to tensions between religion-related issues and at the same time, bringing to justice those who committed such dreadful acts. The legal action taken against the culprits involved among others, the prosecution, arrests, and trials. This case not only raised the issue of violence against minorities but also the need for justice and protection for the affected communities. It was a case that brought to the limelight the vulnerability of the marginalised community and the need to protect their rights. Further, consciousness was raised about the extent of commission of such heinous crimes and the urgency to address them effectively through legal and social measures within a stipulated timeframe of strong laws and mechanisms to nip sexual violence and responses to it in the bud, with due punishment to the perpetrators of the crimes. However, more impeaching was how the authorities failed to protect the victim's rights and ensure effective and timely justice. The delayed response and the mishandling of the case have resulted in a host of questions regarding the protection of people in vulnerable categories in areas affected by conflict. This event served as a spotlight to the issue of gender violence, caste discrimination, and communal discord. The horrible nature of the crime and the implications of the different religions involved in it provided sufficient reason to investigate and try to resolve the issues stemming from discrimination, violence, and lack of accountability. The backing that some of the accused received from certain local officials of the Bharatiya Janata Party was one of the factors that increased the nationwide outrage already present.

The Kathua incident, in this context, was a clear example of Anthony D. Smith's theory of ethnic nationalism, above all, it demonstrated how ethnic identity and cultural symbolism could be turned to support exclusionary or even violent actions. The Hindutva narratives that were built around the case not only framed the crime as an isolated act but also as a sequence of communal tensions, thereby strengthening the sense of the Hindu majority being victims, and hence, they were united. These symbolic constructions were unveiled through media coverage, political discourse, and public demonstrations, which revealed the capacity of cultural nationalism to manipulate the perception of justice, to make violence acceptable, and to further the cause of minority communities' marginalization in both the social and legal spheres.

4.2.2 Shaheen Bagh Incident

The non-violent protest became a symbol of democratic resistance and women's power, as the elderly women, known as the "Dadis of Shaheen Bagh," were the ones leading the movement. Known as The Shaheen Bagh protest was a female-dominated, all-day, all-night sit-in that commenced in New Delhi in December 2019 and continued for over a hundred days. The protest against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), National Register of Citizens (NRC), and National Population Register (NPR) was thus conducted through which a considerable number of people feared that Muslim citizens would be treated unjustly and deprived of Indian nationality (Al Jazeera, 2024).

The movement was also endorsed by various sections of the society, the most active being students, activists, and civil society who were all together in spirit. The demonstration lasted till March 2020 when the police used the COVID-19 lockdown as a pretext to disperse the protestors forcibly. The Shaheen Bagh movement has left its imprint in the annals of protest history in India; it has further given a strong reminder of the values of secularism, constitutional rights, and popular struggles that have stood up against the Government's discriminatory measures.

The Shaheen Bagh protest is very much tied to the broader question of Hindutva ideology and the CAA affecting the religious minorities in India. The CAA along with the proposed NRC and NPR

were perceived to recast Indian citizenship in a manner that would be detrimental to the Muslims. The Hindutva agenda of converting India into a Hindu state was expressed through these policies and the matter of exclusion and discrimination became even more visible, hence the ringing cautions.

Shaheen Bagh's success and portrayal were that it created a strong and powerful counter-narrative to the ideology of discrimination and hate that contained, by its nature, resistance against a legal system that was seen as eroding the secular and pluralistic foundations of India. The predominance of women among the protesters also contested the patriarchal norms and boosted the concerns about inclusiveness and constitutional rights. The protests not only captured the whole country's attention but also highlighted the fears of the minority groups in the politically changing situation influenced by Hindu nationalism-oriented policies regarding their citizenship and belongingness.

The Shaheen Bagh protest illustrated the case where the minority communities claimed their rights and defended their position against the discriminatory policies, which were all done in the context of the ethnic nationalism. Using Anthony D. Smith's ideas, the protest brought to the front the contesting of the prevailing cultural narratives and the assertion of a new civic identity that was based on dare to the constitutional values. This instance displayed the conflict between the symbolic politics of the majoritarian and the agency of the minority, thus making it possible to look into the institutional pressures on the minorities, as was the case with the Aligarh Muslim University incident.

4.2.3 Aligarh University Incident

A conflict between law enforcement and students on December 15, 2019, was the main event that brought attention to the Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) incident. The AMU students who were against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) not only staged their protest through a rally but also showed their solidarity with the students of JMI, who were at that moment suffering from police violence (Al Jazeera, 2019). The demonstration at Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), which was taking place against the Indian government's Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and which also expressing solidarity with the students of JMI, the police attacked at that very moment by shooting tear gas and using batons to disperse the crowd. Many students were injured, some were arrested, and there were reports of police mistreatment during the detention. The internet got cut, and the university had to be closed for the time being.

The incident attracted widespread criticism, and the government was accused by its critics of employing violence through police and of suffocating dissent. The AMU campus emerged as a bastion of student resistance against the CAA, thereby affirming the universities' role in political oppositions as well as the state's brutal reaction to student protests. The event at AMU was one of the biggest incidents that occurred in the whole country during the protests against the CAA. The AMU incident not only emphasized the core issue of the protests that is, questions concerning citizenship, religious freedom, and minorities in India but also the demand for the protection of democratic values, the rights of all citizens to be respected and the existence of an atmosphere where diverse voices can be heard and respected. The university campus was involved in the discussions of the tensions surrounding the CAA and its implications for the rights and identities of the minority communities in the country through the intense demonstrations and clashes between the students and law enforcement authorities. Protests at AMU were part of the broader anti-CAA movement, which critics argued was discriminatory and contrary to the secular principles laid down in the Constitution of India. The students and faculty of this university, along with many other supporters, protested the law whose implementation would further marginalize the Muslim communities and also hurt the very ethos of inclusiveness of India.

One of the most significant and important events during the nationwide protests CAA was the one that happened at AMU. The whole episode at AMU brought to light the central issue of the protests against the CAA, not only the questions related to citizenship, religious freedom, and the minorities in India but also the demand for the protection of democratic values, the rights of all citizens to be respected, and the existence of an atmosphere where different voices can be heard and respected. The university campus directly participated in discussing the tensions surrounding the CAA and its impact on the rights and identities of minority communities in the country through the massive

demonstrations and even clashes between students and law enforcement. The protests at AMU were part of the larger anti-CAA movement which critics referred to as discriminatory, and a violation of the secular principles ingrained in the Indian Constitution. The students and the faculty members of the university along with many other supporters protested the law which was seen as a step to further marginalize the already marginalized Muslim communities and was going to be a blow to the very idea of India as an inclusive nation.

The event was a very clear sign of the major problems such as the rights of the small people and the social peace in India. The AMU incident, thus, makes one reflect on the hard socio-political struggles and the barriers to establishing and maintaining peace and inclusivity in any educational institution. This situation at AMU illustrated the socio-political problems that the government faces when it resorts to force in the control of protests and the necessity of understanding dialogues that expose the very essence of the grievances which lead to such confrontations. It is a common opinion that the matters of identity, citizenship, and religious pluralism in India are very complex and serve as a barrier not only to inclusivity but also to social unity. Furthermore, schools have been regarded as the most appropriate places to develop critical thinking, activism, and advocacy during the struggle for social justice.

The protests at Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) showed the way institutional frameworks turned out to be places for the imposition of ideological conformity under the rule of Hindutva. By using Anthony D. Smith's model, the incident revealed the impact of ethnic nationalism on the state's reactions, police operations, and media reporting, thus limiting the expression and participation of the minorities in the civic life. It exposed the intersection of the symbolic politics of the majority with the institutional power in such a way that the exclusion and marginalization of the minority communities were reinforced.

5. Conclusion

The Hindutva ideology has dramatically altered the entire political and social landscape of India. The principal players in this movement, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), possess a profoundly distinct and tactical perception of India as a land of Hindus. Among the primary government actions related to this ideology is the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) which allows citizenship to non-Muslim minorities from adjacent countries while Muslims are pointedly left out. This has very explicitly raised the question of secularism in India. The supporters of the CAA argue that it is a rectification of the historical grievances of the non-Muslim minorities in Muslim majority countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan that suffer from persecution. On the contrary, the attention of the critics is drawn to the fact that the Act is discriminatory towards Muslims, hence, causing a situation of isolation and marginalisation.

The Kathua case, the Shaheen Bagh protests, and the violence at Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) incidents have all been regarded as indicators of the social repercussions of the CAA and the larger Hindutva agenda. The Kathua case demonstrated the vulnerability of the minority communities to be the first ones affected by such violence. The protests at Shaheen Bagh, which were largely driven by women, were a silent but forceful opposition to the CAA that pointed to the Act's threat to the secular nature of India in the eyes of some. Likewise, the AMU protests and demonstrations reflected the participation of the student community in the struggle for social justice and the resistance to the guidelines that disenfranchise the minorities.

The ascendance of Hindu nationalism alongside the enactment of the CAA can be interpreted as the reflection of a bigger trend in the Indian political field, namely the increased reliance on religion, identity, and citizenship as political manoeuvres. The repercussions of the CAA on national unity, minority rights, and India's global image have highlighted the urgent need for laws that not only comply with the constitutional principles but also promote the growth of a diverse and tolerant society. This legislative act, though drastic, has effectively exacerbated the already existing divisions in society and has raised the fears of further alienation of groups, together with the decline of India's secularism. The debate is still ongoing; nevertheless, it is not the government to take the first step to

involve the public in these matters through openness, legal safeguards, and policy measures that are in accordance with the tenets of equality and justice.

The CAA, which was put forward as a solution for the suffering of persecuted minorities, is in direct opposition to and is simply eroding the constitutional commitment to secularism and identical treatment for all citizens in India. The Act's discriminatory attitude and the possibility of stripping certain Muslims of their voting rights bring up very serious issues regarding India's democratic principles. To deal with these difficult problems, a careful approach that protects the rights of all citizens is needed, no matter their religious affiliation, while at the same time upholding the democratic and secular ideals that India stands for.

CAA has a highly significant socio-political influence that even goes beyond the borders and attracts global attention and criticism. Discriminatory nature of the Act and its adverse impact on India's secular democracy have been highlighted by human rights organizations and foreign governments, who all express their concerns. The association of CAA with Hindutva ideology along with the BJP's political manoeuvring of seeking the Hindu vote, has deepened the divide in politics and hence, leading to heated arguments on citizenship, identity and national security. While analysing the intersection of politics in Hindutva and CAA, it is imperative to recognize the tricky relations between faith, politics, and citizenship in India. Hindutva's stressing of the syncretism of Hindu's cultural and national identity has significantly altered the policy and public discourse, redefining the narrative of who is entitled to the Indian state. The BJP's mounting pressure to realize their Hindutva project by means of legal instruments like the CAA mirrors their perception of India where one religious community enjoys precedence over others, thereby raising basic questions about equality, inclusiveness, and the safeguarding of minorities' rights.

Moreover, the global response to the CAA has a negative impact on India's international relations as the country has been questioned by numerous human rights groups, foreign leaders, and governments about its commitment to democratic values. For India, it is fundamental to be perceived as a multi-faceted and tolerant nation to retain its soft power and global alliances. India must do and be very careful not to lose its identity while being able to promote democracy. The latter entails creating a situation where citizenship policies are non-exclusive and non-discriminatory. The very principles of justice, equality, and constitutionality will significantly help the country's unity, social cohesion, and future global image.

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China's Authoritarian Ascendancy vs. US Democratic Dominance: A Comparative Analysis

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Article Information	Abstract
Received: Oct 14, 2025 Revised: Dec 26, 2025 Accepted: Dec 31, 2025	China's authoritarian ascendancy, characterized by state owned enterprises, technological development and dictatorial governance structure is contrary to US democratic dominance, enshrined in promotion of democratic norms and values, private owned enterprises, human rights and democratic governance structure. This paper is aimed to make a comparative analysis of both US and China's models by evaluating their domestic and foreign policies to identify the major areas of competition and cooperation such as global governance and institutional influence, economic statecraft and trade policies, soft power and cultural diplomacy, human rights, and democratic promotion. This study will examine the consequences of their competition on global security and conflict dynamics, democratic justice and human rights, international cooperation, multilateral control, the future of U.S.-China relations, and global governance. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the effectiveness of each approach in achieving its respective goals, taking into account regional and international norms, domestic political contexts and legitimacy. The paper will examine the complex dynamics of great power competition highlighting the challenges and opportunities produced by the interplay between authoritarian vs democratic dominance, in the light of neoliberalism. The research methodology of the paper is based on comparative analysis. Finally, this research offers recommendations for policymakers navigating the evolving global authoritarian vs democratic landscape to promote for a peaceful and stable order.
Keywords <i>US Democratic Dominance,</i> <i>Chinese authoritarian ascendancy,</i> <i>Neoliberalism,</i> <i>Global Governance,</i> <i>Human Rights</i>	

1. Introduction

The emergence of China as a global superpower has intensified scholarly debate regarding the comparative strengths and weaknesses of authoritarianism and democracy as governing systems. The longstanding dominance of the United States, grounded in liberal democracy and market capitalism, is confronted by the sustained challenge of China's one-party, state-led model. This study seeks to systematically evaluate which governance system, liberal democracy or state-led authoritarianism, produces more effective outcomes in international politics, economics, and society. Employing neoliberalism as an analytical framework, this research critically analyses the influence of each system on human rights, economic statecraft, and global governance.

The paper has explored the answers to these research questions:

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- (1) How China's authoritarian rise and the US's democratic dominance frame their approaches to global governance, economic statecraft, and soft power?
- (2) What are the consequences of the Sino-US competition for international cooperation, multilateralism, and global peace?

The study has used a comparative and analytical approach, analysing primary and secondary sources regarding specific areas of competition and cooperation, such as, economic statecraft, global governance and soft power.

The paper is divided into following sections:

The first section is about Theoretical Framework, the second one discusses Sino-US Divergence vis-a-vis Authoritarianism vs Democratic Dominance: A Comparative Debate, the third section is about the Governance Structure: China's Authoritarian vs. US Democratic, the fourth section is about Economic model: China's State-led vs. US Market-led/ Economic Statecraft and Trade Policies, the fifth one is about individual freedoms: China's Limited vs. US Protected Human Rights and Democratic Promotion, the sixth section covered the Global Influence: China's Expansionist vs. US Promotional Strategies, and the last section is about Opportunities and Challenges: Interplay between Authoritarian Ascendancy and Democratic Dominance and Conclusion.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

Neoliberalism, a theory of international relations, has been applied to this paper as prime theoretical framework that is based on free market economy, open trade and investment, liberal financial institutions and economic interdependence. Furthermore, the cooperative and competitive dynamics that underlie the US-China interactions are the core concepts of neoliberalism.

The connection between two states is recognized as interdependence in the economy. Global financial institutions like the World Bank and IMF have significant impacts on how the US and China act and participate in international politics. There is a slight balance between collaboration and rivalry in China-US relations, particularly in the areas of commerce, security, and worldwide influence. The geopolitical dispute between the US and China is characterized by intricate strategic and political conundrums that defy explanation by a single theory. For the current research, the theoretical framework of neoliberalism provides a valuable insight and a deep understanding of the economic aspects of this geopolitical contention. China and the US are well-connected and integrated in global supply chains and China is the major hub for manufacturing to the US market. This deep integration according to Ma et al. (2021) is key to the global economy. Historically, China-US relations are driven by increasing trade and investment activities. The US is a great trading partner of China with potential investment in various manufacturing sectors. Brown (2021) explained that this relationship benefited both the US and China and because of China leveraging access to cutting-edge technologies and the US capitalizing on China's competitive manufacturing costs.

Neoliberalism has over surfaced the complex interplay between China's authoritarian ascendancy and the US democratic dominance while concentrating on the implications of this competition. China's economic model is based on state-led authoritarian control which is opposite to the neoliberal approach based on free market objectives with limited state intervention etc. China's model of authoritarian completely negates the privatization and liberalization of trade and investment policies. Contrary to this, the US model is based on liberal economy with a capitalist approach to enhance privatization and free financial and liberal economic industry.

The rivalry of Sino-US is further marked by their different approach to enhancing human rights and democratic ideals. American foreign policy is based on global democratic norms and individual freedom while China's foreign policy is based on authoritarian governance. Applying theoretical framework of neoliberalism on the contemporary Sino-US geopolitical competition explores the intricate divergence among economic integration, state intervention, and ideological differences. This theory proposes that economic connection between two rival states can strengthen stable political and

economic relations driven by geopolitical and economic factors.

2. China Authoritarianism vs US Democratic Dominance

China's centralized political system is characterized by limited political participation in national affairs. The Communist Party of China exercises complete control over the formulation of economic and political policies and decisions (Weaver, 2015). China's state is fully responsible for strict control, policy formulation, and implementation (Weaver, 2015). On the other hand, the United States has democratic governance structures with decentralized traits in addition to separation of powers, checks and balances, and indirect democracy. American citizens are equally involved in the decision-making process through balloting and adult universal suffrage. State-led Enterprises (SOEs) in China control the Chinese economy while playing an important role in critical strategic domains (Ferchen, 2013). Though China has incorporated the market dynamics, the State still regulates the key sectors.

There is limited political participation in China with strict control on freedom of expression and thought. China maintains strict surveillance and censorship on civil liberties (Chhabra, 2019). Contrary to China's political dissension, the US Constitution guarantees freedom of expression and thought, protection of civil and political rights, and independence of the judiciary. American Supreme Court maintains the rule of law to guarantee the protection of fundamental rights of citizens.

China uses BRI as its expansionist strategy to maintain its global role as a central power through trade and investment in international politics (Rolland, 2017). China's policy in the South China Sea is a clear indication of its hegemonic and expansionist designs. The US promotes its democratic dominance through its democratic norms, protection of human rights and values, and market-oriented economic model globally.

China's quest of preponderant influence in the Asia-Pacific region is motivated to counter the threats to its authoritarian rule by ideological contagion, external interference, and reputational damage. By establishing a sphere of influence that is dominated by autocratic states such as China, aims to insulate its authoritarian regime from the destabilizing effects of democratic diffusion, while reducing the likelihood of regional states cooperating with the United States to criticize China's human rights record. This strategy is supported by China's vision of a harmonious Asia, argued by Zhou and Esteban (2018) which seeks to reconfigure the regional order in a manner favourable to China's system of governance.

The emergence of authoritarian governance has been actively aided by China's strategic engagement in Central and Southeast Asia. China has bolstered authoritarian governments in Central Asia by offering military support, repressive skills, and other sorts of help. The danger of political instability has been lessened thanks to this assistance. Additionally, Beijing has pushed its form of administration in Southeast Asia which combines authoritarian principles with capitalist economics countries like Vietnam, Cambodia, and Myanmar. Brands (2018) argued that these countries are being given recommendations on how to implement policies like internet surveillance and strict regulations to suppress the opposition,

China considers that a world with more authoritarian governments will strengthen its authority and existence, and thus it helps authoritarian countries that are under threat. China hopes that other autocratic nations won't oppose its persecution of domestic opposition, protecting its image internationally. According to Brands (2018) that by cultivating relationships with other illiberal governments, China aims to create a favourable environment that promotes its interests and values.

Pautasso and Nogara (2023) mentioned that China's policies have been instrumental in supporting authoritarian regimes worldwide, effectively creating a network of like-minded governments. Through various strategies, China promotes illiberal values and weakens democratic influence. Economically, China provides no-strings-attached trade, investment, and loans to authoritarian regimes in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, allowing them to escape from the Western pressure on corruption, human rights, and governance issues. Militarily, China supplies weapons, intelligence, and military equipment to authoritarian governments in countries such as Angola,

Guinea, Iran, North Korea, Syria, Sudan, Venezuela, and Uzbekistan.

The United States is a liberal democracy with a government system based on free elections, separation of powers, and individual rights protection. The economy is driven by free market forces, with a focus on private enterprise and competition. The government has limited regulations, and even that is protected by an independent judiciary and free press. Moreover, the US liberal international order is based on a free-trade system, collective security, multilateral economic cooperation, and democracy. The last decade of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is taken as the golden years of the US in creating and maintaining a liberal global order. Its key achievements are the integration of major powers like Russia and China into key international institutions, European integration, NATO expansion, and a new wave of democratization as explained by Endaylalu (2022).

The post-Cold War international liberal order consists of three major pillars, liberal institutionalism, a complex web of interdependence, and spreading liberal democracy. Institutionalism is maintained through the US strengthening and creating liberal institutions with international membership, while the second pillar integrates various countries into the web of an open-world economy. The third pillar is promoting liberal democratic norms and values. These pillars are maintained and promoted through ordering mechanisms based on economic and politico-military tools (Endaylalu, 2022) as illustrated in Figure 1.

The liberal international order, established after World War II under the US 'hegemonic leadership, is a rule-based system centered on liberal democracy, collective security, human rights, multilateralism, and free trade. It includes institutions like the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the United Nations (UN), maintained by the US and Western powers as ordering mechanisms. The US has used these mechanisms to advance its interests (Endaylalu, 2022).

Liberal institutions indoctrinate illiberal actors about the inevitability, appropriateness, justice, and natural order of the prevailing order. They are normative instruments and mechanisms through which hegemony is expressed. Existing liberal institutions and norms are mirrors and byproducts of the US hegemonic power, reflecting its colour and acting as a priest of hegemony. Hegemonic fabricated institutions may serve as a baptizer and indoctrinator of hegemony (Endaylalu, 2022).



Source: Mazarr et al. (2016, p. 14).

Fig. 1. Elements and Engines of the Liberal International Order

3. Governance Structure: China’s Authoritarian vs. US Democratic Model

The United States' struggle to establish a global order reflective of its domestic values has been a longstanding imperative, driven by a pledge to promote democratic principles, human rights, and American geopolitical leadership. According to Brands (2018) this order-building project, articulated by ex-president of US George Bush in 2002, seeks to create a balance of power that favours human freedom, therefore, advancing liberal democratic values and US strategic interests.

Chinese officials believe that centralizing power serves as essential for projecting power across borders, protecting national security, and justifying internal persecution. Brands explains that they

pursue proactive foreign policy choices to revise global norms and expand military power. This strategy strengthens their authoritarian governance at domestic level while creating a conducive environment to legitimize their governance at international level. At present, global authoritarian leaders believe that there is interconnection among the international image, domestic stability and state power. Brands believes that building global image and reputation of a state as authoritarian enhances its capability to govern and control at domestic and regional domains.

China is actively working to establish an alternative institutional framework, driven by the objective of increasing authoritarian rule while rejecting Western influence. According to Halper (2010) these regimes seek to establish regional and international institutions to further their authoritarian goals. China's schemes, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), have emerged as rivals to the current international system, which is led by the United States and its democratic partners. China's economic policy is to increase reliance on other countries while decreasing dependency on the United States of America. The rapid expansion of China's economy may endanger democratic standards and liberal principles. Because of China's expanding influence in finance, trade, and communications, Beijing may be able to impose penalties, gather intelligence, hinder economic flows, and force policy reforms. This shift highlights the need for the United States and its allies to coordinate policy responses that defend national interests while preserving liberal ideals.

4. Economic Statecraft: China's State-led vs. US Market-led Model

Chinese economic structure has been considered an important example of state engagement since state-owned enterprises control a number of significant industries, including energy, financial services, and heavy equipment production. The main leader of the CPC is Xi Jinping, the president of China, who still has complete control over politics. According to Li (2016) the CPC's Politburo and Central Committee make significant choices with minimal input from opposition parties or members of civil society. The Chinese government has significant control over the liberties that citizens, the media, and civil society enjoy. Gohdes (2024) the government uses a range of tactics, including speech censorship, surveillance, and repression, to uphold social harmony and eliminate opposition. Further, the economic elements of Chinese strategic thinking are complex, as stated by Dar and Javid (2025). Regarding officials from the United States, the complex structure of US-China interdependence presents is a major problem. Chhabra (2019) claims that China currently operates roughly 800 guiding funds totalling between \$500 billion and \$1 trillion, with a significant amount going toward innovative industries and technologies like robotics, machine learning, and green energy that are included in the Communist Party of China's Made in China 2025 initiative.

Moreover Wang (2021), concludes that China's integration into the liberal international order has disappointed liberal expectations of democratization. China has been consolidating authoritarian values, promoting "internet sovereignty" and challenging global norms to strengthen its rule. This phenomenon has led to concerns for the US and its allies about China's impact on undermining liberal norms. So, its main aim to Protect autocracy which is a top priority for China, and it is taking steps to shield itself from what it perceives as an aggressive liberal world. Brands (2018) says that a Chinese government guidebook stresses the need for vigilance and countermeasures against hostile international forces aiming to Westernize and split it. To counter potential threats, China is increasing its military capabilities, modernizing armed forces, and developing innovative counter strategies. China's counter-intervention strategy as Brands (2018) mentioned in his paper is designed to deter or defeat US intervention. However, since a direct military attack on its homelands will not happen, but its efforts are focused on the political, ideological, and economic fronts. This multi-faceted defence strategy of China aims to protect its authoritarian regime from apparent liberal fears, while also building its economic endurance to reduce dependence on the global economy and mitigate possible economic sanctions from the west.

5. Individual Freedoms: China's Limited vs. US Protected Human Rights and Democratic Promotion

Indeed, China has increased political repression, targeted civil society organizations, human rights supporters, and dissident voices. Kleptocracy (2025) describes it as strict limits on media, NGOs, and internet freedom combined with increased ideological indoctrination through state-run media and education. The Chinese government maintains continuous control over its people by using cutting-edge technologies include social credit systems and facial recognition. These mechanisms further stifle dissension and free expression by allowing the state to monitor and penalize people who are thought to be politically unreliable. Nathan (2015) believes that China's attempts to mitigate the impact of international news have resulted in more censorship and propaganda, supporting authoritarian regimes and condemning liberal ideals. Under Xi Jinping's leadership, China's human rights conditions have become worse and are at their worst level since 1989.

A study by Piccone (2018), during 2015, China has increased its repression of advocates for human rights by limiting their freedom of movement, authorizing surveillance, and terrorizing their families. As a result, activists like Cao Shunli and Liu Xiaobo have been killed. China's growing involvement in human rights at the U.N. is an important aspect of a plan to change world governance that began in 2012 with the accession of Xi Jinping, a change from Deng Xiaoping's covert policy (Gill, 2022). Piccone (2018) describes China's policy toward Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang as showing contempt for the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, as proven by official regulations that prohibit strange beards, veils, and state television. Under the president Xi Jinping, China has shifted its focus from traditional human rights norms to development and economic growth, redefining human rights to prioritize development and economic growth. The BRI strategy expanded China's economic reach and thus promoted its development model, without considering human rights or environmental concerns (Wang, 2019).

China is determined to change global governance its public image through its active participation in human rights issues at the U.N.O., usually at the expense of conventional human rights standards and principles. This includes silencing opposing views, restricting criticism of human rights records, and emphasizing economic growth over individual rights (Gill, 2022). A core challenge for US policymakers is to promote democratic institutions and democratic norms in traditional allies, especially in Europe and Asia, to prevent the dominance of hostile powers. Such dictatorship mindset, stated by Chhabra (2019) is inspired by an awareness that democracy is in peril and that US involvement is necessary to stop the descent and preserve the development of freedom and democracy.

Arnold Wolfers distinguished between possession goals and milieu goals. Possession goals the first one refer to valued national possessions, such as physical territory, whereas milieu goals the second one involve efforts to shape the nation's environment. Building on this concept, Stanley Hoffman argued that promoting and preserving values abroad, such as democracy and human rights, constitutes a milieu goal (Chhabra, 2019). Amidst intensifying geopolitical competition with authoritarian China, the promotion of democratic norms must become a paramount possession goal in the US grand strategy.

Biden claimed that the US was up against stiff competition with China and by our most serious competitor, China. He also said that if China intends to achieve hegemony, that is not going to happen on my watch. The US President targeted his Chinese counterpart, claiming that Xi Jinping does not have a democratic bone in his body. Xi Jinping, for his part, believes that attempts to erect walls or decouple run counter to the law of economics and market principle (Pautasso and Nogara, 2023). We must reject the Cold War and zero-sum mentality and oppose a new Cold War. Bossing others around or meddling in others' internal affairs will not get you any support. Biden and Xi claim they do not want a new Cold War, but the fact that they mention it is significant. And, in practice, they both seem committed to promoting it (Pautasso & Nogara, 2023).

6. Global Influence: China's Expansionist vs. US Promotional Strategies

The conflict between the US democratic dominance and China's authoritarian ascent includes both promoting and expanding tactics meant to strengthen each country's worldwide influence. Wang (2018) provides an important instance of an expansionist strategy i.e China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which intends to promote China as a key factor in international trade and construction of infrastructure.

By investing heavily in infrastructure projects across Asia, Europe, and Africa, China seeks to secure strategic trade routes and economic impact. China's military presence in the South China Sea reflects its expansionist approach, aiming to secure strategic maritime routes and project power in the region. BRI remains critical for President Xi to counter the American containment moves by reassuring its allies, telling the China story deterring other virtual rivals, and undermining American hegemony and influence. The BRI cooperation pursues development, aims at mutual benefits, and conveys a message of hope, President Xi says. American President Biden advises US allies that we should have, principally, a similar initiative, pulling from the democratic states, admitting the role that the BRI plays for China (Pautasso & Nogara, 2023).

China endorses state-led economic model as an alternative to Western capitalism, alluring to developing countries seeking rapid industrialization and economic growth. China engages in extensive diplomatic efforts with the west, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the AIIB, to promote its influence in regional and global governance. China promotes its cultural influence through Confucius Institutes and the global promotion of the Chinese language and culture, challenging Western cultural hegemony (Pan, 2013).

China used soft power as a strategic tool to enhance its global prestige and to achieve its national interests. Cultural diplomacy, strategic economic partnerships, technical advancements, and political and diplomatic engagement were used as strategic dynamics. Chinese President Xi said, while emphasizing the importance of soft power, they should increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better message through communication. Argued by Irfan (2024) the concept of soft power in International Relations was coined by Joseph, referring to the ability of a state to exert its influence on the actions and behaviours of other states by following persuasion as an alternative of coercion. The international power structure has converted from a traditional mode to soft power dynamics. Different states employ cultural, ideological, and institutional ways to attain their strategic goals. Five key areas of soft power were identified by Joseph, including economic interdependence, transnational actors, technology proliferation, explained by Pautasso and Nogara (2023).

China leveraged cultural diplomacy as a soft power tool by establishing Confucius Institutes and hosting cultural events. These institutes promoted the Chinese language and culture, promotion transnational exchanges. China also contributed in art festivals, film festivals, and sports exhibitions, fostering people-to-people connectivity and shaping its global image through education. A Beijing Television CCTV was established in 1958 and broadcast its international channel, CCTV-4, in 1992. President Xi Jinping urged the media to showcase China's role as a peace builder and use information age advancements to encourage the foreign public explained by Rahman (2019) vividly.

China used the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation to establish an efficient cooperation platform, create a closer partnership network, and balance the international governance system, signing a memorandum of understanding with 11 countries, cooperation documents with 9 organizations, and economic and trade agreements with 31 countries. China indorses the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) through media, including a documentary series and the announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Scholarship, which gives 10,000 scholarships annually to participating countries, promotion and strengthening soft power stance. American has traditionally promoted democratic values and a market-oriented economic model globally, using its cultural influence and diplomatic efforts to shape international norms (Robinson, 1996). Moreover, America promotes its innovation ecosystem and technological advancements as a model for economic growth and development, attracting talent and investment from the world.

The both states use a mix of promotional and expansionist strategies. The US keeps concentrating on promoting operations using its technology and cultural advantages, whereas China's expansionist objectives, which include the BRI are more prominent. These strategies have a significant impact on international trade, security, and government. As the two nations are trying to broaden their worldwide presence, there can be a chance that disputes and rivalry will increase in a variety of fields and spheres. In order to safeguard its power and influence, Washington has historically used expanding tactics, such as forming strategic alliances and a global military deployment. In an attempt to maintain its interests and influence, the United States maintains an important military presence over the world and forms alliances of strategic importance.

Moreover, the trade war between China and the United States, both countries are involved in cooperative mechanisms within the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), World Trade Organization (WTO), Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), and G20. China-US collaboration is evident in various issues such as climate change, nuclear proliferation, environmental challenges, terrorism, Afghanistan, and North Korea. As China is the largest trading partner of America, US allies are reluctant to choose between engagement and strict containment with China. In contrast to this cooperative interaction, competition remains predominant in USA-China relations. The Biden administration was not only mobilizing and channelling organizations like NATO, G7, AUKUS, and Quad, which China perceives as an Asian NATO, but is also spearheading the establishment of an anti-China democratic front as described by Pautasso and Nogara (2023). To counter China's soft power and cultural diplomacy efforts, the United States has used various strategies, including promoting democratic values and human rights, strengthening alliances and partnerships with ally countries, supporting independent media and journalism, encouraging people-to-people exchanges and educational programs, and opposing Chinese disinformation and propaganda efforts.

The American initiatives include the US Agency for Global Media (USAGM) to promote independent media and journalism and to engage and connect people globally in support of civil rights and democracy, counter Chinese disinformation, encourage independent media, and support democratic institutions. Its key programs as mentioned by Malesky (2021) include Voice of America (VOA) to broadcast news and information in multiple languages, Radio Free Asia (RFA) to provide news and information to countries in East Asia, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty to broadcast news and information to countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

According to Davydov and Pee (2023) the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) supports democratic institutions and civil society. Its mission is to support freedom around the world by promoting democratic institutions, civil society, and human rights, and to counter Chinese authoritarian influence, support democratic movements, and promote human rights. Its key program includes grants provided to non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society groups, and democratic institutions, and fellowships offered to democracy activists, scholars, and journalists (Nuruzzaman, 2016). Its mission is to promote mutual understanding and to foster people-to-people exchanges, promote cultural understanding, and support educational cooperation between the people of the United States and other countries. Its key programs include the Fulbright Scholarship to award students, scholars, and professionals for study, research, and teaching abroad. Fulbright Teaching Assistantships provide opportunities for young teachers to teach English abroad. The Fulbright Visiting Scholar Program brings scholars from abroad to the United States for research and teaching. The US Department of State's Global Engagement Center (GEC) (Weaver, 2015) to counter disinformation, counter foreign propaganda and disinformation, and promote US national security interests, counter Chinese disinformation, promote fact-based information, and support democratic institutions. Its key programs include Counter-Propaganda Programs aimed at countering Chinese, Russian, and other foreign propaganda efforts. Fact-based information Programs provide accurate and reliable information to counter disinformation. In an effort to encourage fact-based information, the Partnerships program works with NGOs, civil society organizations, and businesses in the private industry. These efforts aim to uphold American principles, thwart Chinese influence, and enhance ties with allies and neighbours.

7. Opportunities and Challenges vis-à-vis Authoritarian Ascendancy and Democratic Dominance

Especially in the backdrop of neoliberalism, the relationship between China's authoritarian rise and US democratic domination offers potentials as well as challenges. That is a realistic analysis. Accelerated growth, investment and trade opportunities, and China's integration into the international financial system have impacted the development of the economy of China. Its role in the global supply chain has helped to develop its economy. Chan and He (2019) believe that incorporating authoritarian China into the global supply chain can improve its effectiveness and lower prices, which will assist customers everywhere. Nevertheless, it could bring worries about labour rights and the impact on the environment.

The development of China as an authoritarian power further serves to provide an alternative system of governance in the multifaceted world, enhancing variation among the current political and economic systems and supporting greater creativity and competition in governance as different approaches evolve through tests and exercises. China's BRI is likely to expand China's market share and political-economic influence across Eurasia, Africa, and the Pacific, despite facing domestic challenges and potential shortfalls in achieving its economic and strategic objectives. China's authoritarian model maintains strict restrictions on political rights, assembly, the electorate, and association. It challenges the democratic fabric and persecution of ethnic minorities, such as Uyghurs, and the control of civil liberties in Hong Kong (Piccone, 2018). As prime examples, they undermine global norms on democracy and human rights, potentially leading to a decline in democratic governance worldwide. China's influence in promoting its authoritarian model has been observed in regions like Southeast Asia and Africa.

The combination of the neoliberal economic model with authoritarian governance can exacerbate social and economic inequality by offering favourable leverage to the elite, ignoring the general social welfare. It can contribute to the social unrest and political and economic instability in societies, as was the case in China's increased wealth disparities. State-controlled policies and decisions are generally not in consonance with market requirements, potentially leading to economic shocks, so the combination of an authoritarian economic model in the liberal global market can cause market volatility. The rivalry between Authoritarian and democratic regimes can lead to competition, destabilising the security architecture of the international order. China's assertive posture in the South China Sea and its military expansion in the region enhance geopolitical and strategic competition between the US and China as both countries claim their rights in Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZs) in the SCS (Zubair, 2023). Competing interests and ideological divergence between Authoritarian China and the Democratic US can increase the possibility of conflict in the region of their influence.

The US and its democratic allies face a daunting task in responding to China's strategic exploitation of the US's laissez-faire economic system (Muhammad & Jones, 2021). China has effectively compelled global businesses to make major compromises by using its huge market, putting immediate benefits ahead of possible conflicts with the Chinese Communist Party. This scenario poses an important question: will China retain its influence over American businesses, or will the US government regain control over them? Additionally, the result will have an important effect on Western culture.

Despite there are indicators of a growing awareness and realignment, the US is currently going through a crisis of trust in its democratic systems. More specifically, a group of Republicans have been advocating for industrial regulation, which is a major departure from their custom of laissez-faire. Despite the effects of the financial meltdown of 2008 and centuries of stagnating wages, Chhabra (2019) argued that this transition is mainly caused by the complexities offered by China, which could eventually give rise to a reconsideration of US financial regulation. The liberal international order has been divided over US's commitment to democracy and human rights. Critics believe that the US has used these democratic ideals as a tool of justification for intervening in the developing world, frequently in guise of promoting democracy and human rights. Critics are of the

view that by using slogan of democracy and human rights as justifications for governmental reform, the US is growing more hostile towards foreign civilizational entities. These may have antagonistic consequences, such as the continuing financial dispute in Damascus between both Washington and Moscow. The US has the capacity to both stabilize and undermine the liberal international order, as stated by Endaylalu (2022). In citing democracy and human rights as justifications for a change in leadership, the US has demonstrated animosity against alternative forms of governance. Libya and the ongoing financial disputes between the US and Russia in Syria serve as examples of the detrimental effects of this strategy, emphasizing US's dual capacity as a sustaining and weakening force in the liberal international order. Enhancing democratic resiliency in long-standing allies, particularly in Europe and Asia, wherever democratic decline is an imminent danger for US strategy. A study by Chhabra (2019) considering the volatile status of international democracy, American engagement is essential to preventing the decline of liberal ideas and barring hostile nations from influencing Eurasia's financial and technical centers.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

The relationship between China's authoritarian ascendancy and the United States' democratic dominance under neoliberalism presents complex opportunities and challenges. While economic growth and divergence of global governance offer potential benefits, ideological tensions, economic inequality, and security risks pose substantial challenges. The next phase in the relationship will depend on how authoritarian and democratic countries handle these situations in the prevailing international system. In the light of the rise of China to authoritarianism opposed to American democratic domination, both expansionist and promotional strategies are crucial for expanding global influence. Although United States depends more on marketing campaigns to maintain its dominance, China's expansionist approach aims to change the socioeconomic and political frameworks of the world. The ultimate outcome of this conflict will depend on how well both nations uphold their economic and ideological interests in the developing world system.

The conflict between the authoritarian ascendancy of China and the democratic dominance of the United States shows substantial differences in economic models, structures of government, individual liberties, and world dominance techniques. The free-market economy and democratically elected government of the United States contrast drastically with China's centralized economy and authoritarian power structure. Moreover, China pursues an expansionist strategy to enhance its global influence, the United States relies more on promotional efforts to maintain its leadership. These differences reflect fundamentally distinct visions for economic development and global dominance.

American strategy for the future must concentrate on safeguarding democracy and liberal principles from the growth of authoritarianism, especially in China. This requires viewing liberal ideals and democratic systems as possession goals deserving of sustained development and security. Strengthening democratic resilience in longstanding allies is a major problem for US strategy, especially in Europe and Asia, where decline in democracy is an important concern. American intervention is essential to preventing the degradation of liberal ideals and to avoiding the domination of Eurasia's financial and technological centers by opposing nations, given the dangerous state of world democracy. Some US projections of China might have overestimated China's economic challenges due to its rising energy dependence and high production costs.

Policymakers in the United States still have to take into account the possibility that China's authoritarian capitalism could continue to be sustainable and beneficial to other countries. Together with the unrest in the West, China's economic growth has made democratic capitalism less appealing and fostered the rise of authoritarians. Although other states could find it difficult to follow the Chinese Communist Party's specific style of state-backed investment and planning, Chinese success may nonetheless serve as an inspiration for governments with an authoritarian tendency.

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