

# Geopolitical Reconfigurations in the Middle East and South Asia: The Impact of Shifting Alliances, Proxy Conflicts, and Economic Diplomacy



*Abraham Ename Minko* \*

## **Abstract**

*The geopolitical landscapes of the Middle East and South Asia are undergoing significant reconfigurations driven by shifting alliances, proxy conflicts, and economic diplomacy. This research explores how global powers, such as the United States, China, and Russia, alongside regional actors like Iran, Saudi Arabia, India, and Pakistan, are recalibrating their strategies to secure influence in these regions. They are already vulnerable to enduring conflicts. This research critically examines the impact of economic diplomacy, particularly through initiatives like China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on trade routes, infrastructure development, and resource management. It further delves into the role of proxy conflicts, particularly in Yemen, Afghanistan, and Syria, in destabilising the regions and altering the security architecture. By analysing the intersection of energy politics, religious sectarianism, and diverse security threats, including terrorism and cyber warfare, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the new geopolitical order. Ultimately, this research will highlight these regions' challenges and opportunities in navigating a multipolar world while underscoring broader global peace and security implications.*

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\* Abraham Ename Minko is a Senior Researcher and Policy Analyst in Peace, Security, and Conflict Resolution; Türkiye. He can be reached at [abrahamminko@gmail.com](mailto:abrahamminko@gmail.com).

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*Abraham Ename Minko*

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## **Introduction**

The geopolitical landscape of the Middle East and South Asia has been in constant flux, marked by a series of upheavals, multiple conflicts, and shifting alliances. Since the recent past, these regions have become focal points for international power struggles, primarily driven by competing interests among regional actors like Iran, Saudi Arabia, India, and Pakistan, and external states such as the United States, China, and Russia. The confluence of historical rivalries, religious tensions, economic interests, and external interventions has created a complex web of geopolitical interactions that continues to shape political and security dynamics in these regions.

The study of shifting alliances and their implications is critical, given that these regions are no longer defined by the Cold War-era alliances but rather by fluid, pragmatic partnerships. A notable example is the realignment of the Middle Eastern states in response to shifting US policies, particularly under the first Trump administration, where the Abraham Accords marked a significant shift in Arab-Israeli relations.<sup>1</sup> These accords, which normalised ties between Israel and some Arab states, including the UAE and Bahrain, disrupted long-standing regional dynamics and challenged the traditional Arab solidarity with Palestine. It, however, is a stark reality in today's Gaza and Lebanon. This mutuality altered the geopolitical calculus for actors like Iran, which sees the new alliances as a direct threat to its regional influence.

Similarly, in South Asia, the longstanding rivalry between India and Pakistan is further complicated by their respective alliances. India's growing strategic partnership with the US, as part of the Indo-Pacific strategy, is largely aimed at countering China's influence in the region, while Pakistan has increasingly leaned towards China ever since. It is particularly benefiting from the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh Macdonald, "Geopolitics in the Middle East," *Geopolitics* 6, no. 3 (December 2001): 177–85. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14650040108407734>.

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(CPEC), a key component of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>2</sup> This is not to deny the fact that the Indo-US relationship often witnesses tensions given Delhi's persistent bilateralism with Moscow along with Islamabad's critiqued relationship with Washington through their respective *khaki* (military) channels. These shifting alliances are not merely based on military and political interests but are deeply intertwined with the economic strategies that seek to leverage infrastructure projects, trade routes, and energy resources for long-term influence.

Economic diplomacy has also played a pivotal role in these geopolitical reconfigurations. China's BRI is a prime example of how economic initiatives are being used to expand geopolitical influence. Through massive infrastructure projects and financial investments, China has created a sphere of influence that extends across these two Asian regions. In the Middle East, countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran view the BRI as an opportunity to diversify their economies away from oil dependency. However, the increasing presence of the Chinese influence also raises concerns among traditional powers like the US, which has historically maintained significant control over regional trade and energy routes.<sup>3</sup> These shifts in economic power create new layers of geopolitical complexity, especially as countries like Russia and India also pursue their economic diplomacy initiatives, seeking to gain influence through energy agreements, arms deals, and trade partnerships.

This research is grounded in these real-world examples to highlight the critical nature of the changes taking place in both the Middle East and South Asia. These regions, long characterised by their internal conflicts and external interventions, are at the heart of new global power struggles that will likely define the next phase of international relations, even after

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<sup>2</sup> Shivshankar Menon, "Some Thoughts on India, China, and Asia-Pacific Regional Security," *China Report* 53, no. 2 (April 21, 2017): 188–213. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0009445517696634>.

<sup>3</sup> Kayhan Barzegar, "Iran's Understanding of Strategic Stability: In the Light of Relations with the U.S. in the Middle East," *The Geopolitics of Iran*, 195–214. Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2021. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-3564-9\\_8](http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-3564-9_8).

the leadership change in the White House.<sup>4</sup> As these alliances and alignments shift, understanding the driving forces behind these changes is essential for predicting future trends. This study attempts to explore these complexities, focusing on the intertwined nature of political, military, and economic diplomacy in shaping the new geopolitical order.

## **Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

### ***Geopolitical Theories and Concepts***

Geopolitical theories and concepts provide a foundational framework for analysing the evolving dynamics in our two case studies. Traditionally, geopolitical thought has been dominated by classical theories like Mackinder's Heartland Theory, which argued that whoever controls Eastern Europe and Central Asia controls the world, and Spykman's Rimland Theory, which emphasised the significance of coastal regions in global dominance. While these theories developed during the periods of European imperialism and Cold War rivalry, they still resonate in contemporary geopolitics, especially when considering how regional powers and global actors engage in these areas today.<sup>5</sup>

In the Middle East, the concept of geopolitical "chokepoints" is particularly relevant.<sup>6</sup> The region's control over strategic waterways, such as the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab-el-Mandeb, remains critical in the

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<sup>4</sup> Shumilin, A, "Middle East Conflicts Today: Between Religion and Geopolitics," *World Economy and International Relations* 65, no. 1 (2021): 50–60.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.20542/0131-2227-2021-65-1-50-60>.

<sup>5</sup> Mukherjee, Anindita, and Mallicka Banerjee, "Reconstruction of European Geopolitics with a Special Reference to Mackinder's Heartland Theory," *International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development* Volume-2, Issue-2 (February 28, 2018): 291–98. <http://dx.doi.org/10.31142/ijtsrd8353>.

<sup>6</sup> Muir, Richard, Christopher Rundle, J. E. Peterson, David Logan, Peter Clark, J. E. Peterson, and Michael Burton, "Middle East." *Asian Affairs* 41, no. 1 (March 2010): 90–100. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03068370903474732>

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global energy politics.<sup>7</sup> Nearly one-third of the world's oil and gas supplies pass through the Strait of Hormuz, making it a focal point for the US military presence, Iranian influence, and international concerns. Iran has repeatedly used its geographical position to threaten shipping in the region, often as a response to the US sanctions and international pressure, exemplifying how control over chokepoints can be leveraged for geopolitical gains. This aligns with Mahan's Sea Power Theory, which underscores the importance of maritime dominance in global strategy.<sup>8</sup> Today, threats from Iran to close the Strait reflect a broader geopolitical maneuvering that seeks to offset its regional isolation while projecting power in the face of Western and Arab adversaries.

In South Asia, geopolitics is often analysed through the lens of power balancing and the concept of "buffer states." Afghanistan, for instance, has historically been viewed as a buffer state between great powers, particularly during the British imperial rivalry with Russia in the 19th century, known as "The Great Game."<sup>9</sup> This idea of buffer states continues in modern geopolitics. For instance, Afghanistan frequently becomes a battleground for influence between regional powers like India and Pakistan, and global actors such as the US and China. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, demonstrated how quickly the geopolitical balance can shift when external powers disengage. The rapid takeover by the Taliban created a vacuum that is now being contested by various actors, including Pakistan, as it seeks to influence Afghan politics. India, on the other hand, is wary of increased *Pakistani* control and the rise of Islamist extremism. Iran and Central Asian Republics maintain their

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<sup>7</sup> Koch, Natalie, "Desert Geopolitics," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 41, no. 1 (May 1, 2021): 88–105. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/1089201x-8916953>.

<sup>8</sup> Koch, Natalie, "Geopower and Geopolitics in, of, and for the Middle East," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 2 (April 20, 2017): 315–18. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/s0020743817000071>.

<sup>9</sup> Malysheva, D, "Afghan Endspiel and Regional Security," *World Economy and International Relations*, no. 11 (2012): 16–23. <http://dx.doi.org/10.20542/0131-2227-2012-11-16-23>.

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vigilant interest in Afghanistan, as do China and Russia. The concept of buffer states highlights how fragile borders and state structures in South Asia continue to play a critical role in the geopolitics of the region.

Additionally, contemporary geopolitical analysis must incorporate the idea of "multipolarity" as global power shifts from a unipolar to a growingly multipolar world.<sup>10</sup> The Middle East and South Asia are prime examples of the regions where this multipolarity is becoming increasingly evident. During the Cold War, these regions were largely caught between the US and the Soviet influence, but today, the geopolitical landscape is far more fragmented. China's BRI illustrates the rise of economic diplomacy as a tool for expanding influence, challenging the traditional dominance of the US and its allies. The BRI's focus on infrastructure development in both these contingent areas represents a shift from the traditional military interventions to economic means of control. China's growing presence in Pakistan through the CPEC and in the Middle East through its deepening ties with the Gulf States highlights how Beijing is reshaping regional dynamics, using infrastructure and investment as geopolitical tools.

Another important concept is the notion of "soft power" introduced by Joseph Nye. In the context of the Middle East and South Asia, soft power has been deployed alongside more traditional forms of hard power. Other than oil and proximity with the West, Saudi Arabia, for example, has been using its religious eminence within the Muslim world and control over the holy sites of Makkah and Medina as forms of soft power to exert influence over both regional and global Islamic discourses. Iran, on the other hand, has cultivated a network of proxy militias, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen, as an extension of its influence --

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<sup>10</sup> Shumilin, A, "Middle East Conflicts Today: Between Religion and Geopolitics," *World Economy and International Relations* 65, no. 1 (2021): 50–60.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.20542/0131-2227-2021-65-1-50-60>.

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though has not shirked in assisting Sunni Hamas in Gaza.<sup>11</sup> This blending of soft power with military and ideological influence challenges traditional geopolitical theories that focus solely on state actors and formal alliances. In South Asia, India's use of soft power through cultural diplomacy, such as Bollywood and educational exchanges, complements its growing economic and military presence, particularly in its competition with China for influence in neighbouring countries like Nepal, Bangladesh, Maldives, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka.

In sum, the application of classical geopolitical theories like Mackinder's Heartland and Mahan's Sea Power, combined with contemporary concepts such as multipolarity and soft power, and allows for a nuanced understanding of the complex geopolitical interactions at play in the Middle East and South Asia. These regions, with their mix of strategic resources, critical locations, and historical conflicts, continue to serve as battlegrounds for the competing regional and global powers. This is not to deny the fact that the regional states, to a major extent, also induct and instrumentalise external intervention either by choice or through their vulnerabilities. Understanding these dynamics requires not only reliance on traditional geopolitical thought but also turning towards modern concepts that reflect the changing nature of international relations, where economic influence, non-state actors, and soft power collectively help shape international and even internal politics.

### ***Shifting Alliances in International Relations***

Shifting alliances in international relations have become a defining feature of contemporary geopolitics, particularly in regions of the Global South like it used to be in post-Napoleonic Europe, where historical rivalries and power dynamics were transformed by varying global realities. The post-Cold War era has witnessed a move away from rigid alliances towards more fluid and pragmatic partnerships, often influenced by immediate

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<sup>11</sup> Abu Saada, Mohamed, "Geopolitics of the Middle East under the Deal of the Century," *Egypt Institute Journal* (check the title) vol. 5, no. 17 (May 21, 2020): 33–53. <http://dx.doi.org/10.36912/mpad.2020.92>.



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strategic interests rather than ideological alignment. This flexibility can be seen in the recent normalisation of relations between Israel and several Arab states, a phenomenon exemplified by the Abraham Accords. They were signed in 2020, during the first Trump administration. Countries like the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain have established diplomatic ties with Israel, primarily driven by a shared concern over Iran's regional ambitions and a desire for economic collaboration, signaling a significant shift in long-standing Arab solidarity with the Palestinian cause.

The evolving nature of alliances is also evident in the complex relationships among the South Asian nations, particularly between India and Pakistan. Historically, these two nuclear-armed neighbours have been defined by a deep-seated rivalry characterised by the territorial disputes, notably over Kashmir. However, in recent years, India's increasing alignment with the US, particularly under the Trump administration, altered the regional security architecture.<sup>12</sup> The US-India strategic partnership has been framed as a counterbalance to China's rise in the Indo-Pacific zone, with India emerging as a key ally in the American efforts to contain the Chinese influence. This shift prompted Pakistan to seek closer ties with China, resulting in the development of the CPEC, which aims to enhance connectivity and trade while bolstering Pakistan's economy.<sup>13</sup> Such developments underscore how alliances are not static but rather evolve in response to shifting power dynamics, regional challenges, and economic imperatives.

The recent warfare in Afghanistan has further illustrated the volatility of alliances in South Asia and the broader implications for regional security. Pakistan has sought to play a pivotal role in shaping Afghanistan's future, leveraging its historical ties with the Taliban to promote stability while

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<sup>12</sup> Gholizadeh, Ali, Seyedashkan Madani, and Saba Saneinia, "A geo-economic and geopolitical review of Gwadar Port on belt and road initiative," *Maritime Business Review* 5, no. 4 (April 29, 2020): 335–49. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/mabr-11-2019-0051>.

<sup>13</sup> Singh, Kanwal Deepinder Pal, "Strength and Challenges of OBOR Initiative: Indian Perspective," *Journal of National Law University Delhi* 6, no. 1 (June 2019): 65–77. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/2277401719857865>.

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countering India's influence in the region which has variably tried to seek proximities with Tehran. Concurrently, India has intensified its engagement with Afghanistan's Northern Alliance and other anti-Taliban factions, fearing a resurgence of extremist groups that could accentuate destabilisation. This rivalry reflects a broader trend where alliances are reshaped in response to real-time developments, illustrating that geopolitical interests often override historical animosities.

In the Middle East, the ongoing rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia exemplifies the dynamic nature of alliances.<sup>14</sup> The two powers have engaged in a series of proxy conflicts across the region, including in Yemen, Syria, Libya, and Iraq, each seeking to expand its sphere of influence. However, recent diplomatic overtures, such as the 2021 agreement, to restore ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia brokered by China, signal a potential shift towards reconciliation. This development not only highlights the fluidity of alliances but also underscores the role of external powers in mediating regional conflicts. The taxing Israeli war escalation in Palestine has, however, worked as a proverbial spanner in the works. China's involvement is particularly noteworthy, as it positions itself as a mediator in a historically complex rivalry, reflecting a broader trend of a non-Western power stepping into the roles traditionally held by the Western nations.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, the intersection of economic interests with shifting alliances has further complicated traditional geopolitical paradigms. For instance, the increasing importance of energy security has led many nations to forge new alliances based on economic cooperation rather than military

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<sup>14</sup> Batareseh, Feras A, "Middle East," In *Encyclopedia of Big Data*, 1–4. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-32001-4\\_400-1](http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-32001-4_400-1).

<sup>15</sup> Selby, Jan, "The Geopolitics of Water in the Middle East: fantasies and realities," *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (March 2005): 329–49. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0143659042000339146>.

partnerships.<sup>16</sup> The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), for example, has witnessed varying degrees of cooperation and conflict among its member states, particularly as they navigate the challenges posed by both Iran's regional ambitions and global shifts towards renewable energy. The normalisation of relations between Israel and the Gulf states, primarily driven by mutual economic interests in technology, security, and trade, for a while, reflected a significant departure from previous ideological positions. The Israeli onslaughts on Gaza and Lebanon have deflated the early enthusiasm on all sides so far, unless the new Trump administration induces some vital policy incentives and recreates the reconciliatory circumstances for all the parties.

The phenomenon of shifting alliances in international relations underscores the increasingly complex and interdependent nature of global politics, particularly in the regions marked by historical rivalries and power struggles.<sup>17</sup> As geopolitical landscapes continue to evolve, understanding these shifting alliances will be crucial for predicting future interactions and developments on the world stage.

### ***Economic Diplomacy and Global Power Dynamics***

Economic diplomacy, as highlighted above, remains a pivotal tool in shaping global power dynamics, particularly in the Middle East and South Asia's context.<sup>18</sup> In an increasingly interconnected world, nations leverage economic diplomacy to secure strategic advantages, foster partnerships, and counter rival influences. The significance of this approach is evident in various regional dynamics, as countries navigate the complexities of

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<sup>16</sup> Aras, Bülent, and Şaban Kardaş, "Geopolitics of the New Middle East: Perspectives from Inside and Outside," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 23, no. 3 (February 18, 2021): 397–402. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2021.1888251>

<sup>17</sup> Evered, Kyle T, "Beyond Mahan and Mackinder: Situating Geography and Critical Geopolitics in Middle East Studies," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 2 (April 20, 2017): 335–39. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/s0020743817000125>.

<sup>18</sup> Sevilla, Henelito A, "Middle East Geopolitics and China-India Strategic Interaction in the New Era," *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, 14, no. 2 (April 2, 2020): 179–93. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2020.1760541>.

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their economic relationships while simultaneously addressing broader geopolitical considerations.<sup>19</sup> For instance, BRI seeks to enhance connectivity and economic integration across Asia, Europe, and Africa. In South Asia, countries such as Pakistan have embraced the BRI as a pathway to economic development and infrastructural investment. The CPEC, a key component of the BRI, aims to improve trade and investment between the two nations by developing critical infrastructure, including roads, railways, port facilities, and energy projects.<sup>20</sup> While CPEC is positioned to spur economic growth in Pakistan, while increasing financial dependence on Beijing, it also serves China's strategic interests by providing access to the Arabian Sea and enhancing its influence in the region.

In the Middle East, economic diplomacy plays a crucial role in shaping alliances and rivalries. The GCC countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have increasingly utilised their wealth from oil exports to establish themselves as regional power-brokers along with diversifying their services' sectors. Their investments in various echelons, including technology and renewable energy, have placed them as key players in the global economy. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 initiative exemplifies this strategic approach, as the Kingdom aims to diversify its economy away from oil dependence by investing in areas like tourism, urban development, entertainment, and technology.<sup>21</sup> This diversification effort not only reflects a proactive approach to economic diplomacy but also aims to strengthen Saudi Arabia's global standing reducing its

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<sup>19</sup> Sedghi, Hamideh, "Trumpism: The Geopolitics of the United States, the Middle East and Iran," *Socialism and Democracy* 31, no. 3 (September 2, 2017): 82–93. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08854300.2017.1388039>.

<sup>20</sup> Rahman, Zia Ur, Asghar Khan, Wang Lifang, and Ibrar Hussain, "The geopolitics of the CPEC and Indian Ocean: security implication for India," *Australian Journal of Maritime & Ocean Affairs* 13, no. 2 (January 26, 2021): 122–45. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/18366503.2021.1875807>.

<sup>21</sup> Elbortokaly, Amira Abdelrazik, and Noorhan Mustafa Hanafi, "Saudi Vision 2030: a New Mind-set of City Future Moving from Strategic Planning to Sustainable Development based Vision," *Ekistics and the new habitat* 81, no. 2 (February 19, 2022): 3–9. <http://dx.doi.org/10.53910/26531313-e2021812557>

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vulnerability to fluctuations in oil prices. The economic leverage gained through such initiatives allows Riyadh to exert influence over neighbouring states and international actors, reshaping the geopolitical landscape in the neighbourhood.

Moreover, the interplay of economic diplomacy and soft power is evident in the relationships between the Middle Eastern countries and South Asia. The UAE and Saudi Arabia have cultivated strong ties with India, driven by mutual economic interests. The UAE, for instance, is one of India's largest trading partners, and the two countries have forged strategic partnerships in sectors like technology, energy, and investment. The bilateral trade between India and the UAE reached over \$60 billion in recent years, highlighting the significance of economic ties in shaping diplomatic relations.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, the UAE's investments in Indian startups and infrastructure projects reflect a strategic commitment to fostering long-term partnerships that enhance both countries' economic prospects. Such collaborations, without forgetting public diplomacy through a sizable Indian diaspora, not only strengthen bilateral ties but also influence the broader geopolitical dynamics in the region, as India seeks to counterbalance China's growing influence while maintaining its relationships with the Gulf states.

However, economic diplomacy is not without its challenges, particularly in the context of competition and rivalry. For instance, the US-China trade war has heightened tensions and uncertainty in global economic relations, impacting everyone. South Asian nations, caught in the crossfire, must navigate their relationships with both powers carefully. India's attempts to assert itself as a counterweight to China have led to increased military and economic collaborations with the US -- though without completely

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<sup>22</sup> Kumaraswamy, P. R., and Md Muddassir Quamar, "UAE," In *Persian Gulf*, 211–33. Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2020. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-1432-6\\_9](http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-1432-6_9).

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shunning its trade with Beijing.<sup>23</sup> The signing of the US-India Strategic Partnership Agreement and the introduction of initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework exemplify India's efforts to preferably strengthen ties with Washington while projecting its security concerns<sup>24</sup> vis-a-vis China and Pakistan. This strategic pivot underscores how economic diplomacy can be intricately linked to broader geopolitical objectives, as nations seek to balance their interests amidst global power shifts.

Additionally, the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have further highlighted the importance of economic diplomacy.<sup>25</sup> Countries in both the Middle East and South Asia have had to reassess their economic dependencies and seek new partnerships to bolster resilience in the face of global disruptions. For instance, India was actively engaged in vaccine diplomacy by providing COVID-19 vaccines to several countries in the Middle East and South Asia, reinforcing its image as a responsible global player while simultaneously strengthening diplomatic ties. This strategy demonstrated how economic diplomacy can be employed as a source of soft power, enhancing a country's reputation and influence in the international arena while addressing pressing global challenges.

### ***Proxy Conflicts: Definition and Historical Context***

Proxy conflicts have become a prominent feature of contemporary international relations, particularly in regions such as the Middle East and South Asia, where various state and non-state actors engage in indirect warfare to advance their interests without direct military confrontation. A proxy conflict occurs when one power supports a third party, often

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<sup>23</sup> Saeed, Muhammad, "From the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific: Expanding Sino-U.S. Strategic Competition," *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 03, no. 04 (January 2017): 499–512. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1142/s2377740017500324>.

<sup>24</sup> Kumar, R, *Indo-american bilateral relations*, SAGE Publications Pvt. Ltd, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9789354792847>

<sup>25</sup> Donthi, R.B.R., Ramannagari, B, Impact of COVID-19 Lockdown on Air Quality and Source Identification During Lockdown in Andhra Pradesh, India, *J Indian Soc Remote Sens* 51, 2311–2321 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12524-023-01770-5>

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providing military, financial, or logistical assistance, to fight on its behalf against a rival or to achieve specific political objectives. This approach allows states to exert influence and achieve strategic goals while minimising the risks associated with direct intervention. The historical roots of proxy conflicts can be traced back to the Cold War era, during which the US and the Soviet Union engaged in various regional conflicts by supporting opposing sides, demonstrating how ideological divides can give rise to complex proxy dynamics.

One of the salient examples of proxy conflicts can be seen in the ongoing civil war in Syria, which erupted in 2011. The conflict began as a peaceful uprising against President Bashar Al-Assad's regime but quickly escalated into a multifaceted war involving numerous actors with divergent interests. The Assad government received substantial support from Iran and Russia, which provided military aid and resources to maintain the regime's grip on power. In contrast, various rebel groups, including those affiliated with Al Qaeda and ISIS, received backing from a coalition of Western powers, Turkey, and Gulf States such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Qatar. The involvement of these external actors has complicated the prospects for a peaceful resolution, as their conflicting agendas and support for rival factions have perpetuated the cycle of violence.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, the conflict in Yemen, which began in 2014, serves as another illustration of proxy warfare in the region. The Houthi movement, a Shia-led group, gained control over the Yemeni capital, Sanaa, prompting a military intervention led by Saudi Arabia and supported by the US, while aiming at the restoration of the internationally recognised government of President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. Saudi Arabia views the Houthis as an extension of Iranian influence in the Arabian Peninsula, leading it to engage in a protracted military campaign. Iran's support for the Houthis, through arms supplies and military advisory roles, exemplifies how proxy

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<sup>26</sup> Mitton, J. L. (2019), "Lessons in deterrence: Evaluating coercive diplomacy in Syria, 2012–2019," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 45(3), 411–438.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2019.1692659>

conflicts can manifest through asymmetric warfare. The humanitarian consequences of the Yemeni conflict have been devastating, resulting in widespread suffering, famine, and displacement, highlighting the dire ramifications of external interventions and the dynamics of proxy warfare.<sup>27</sup>

In South Asia, the longstanding conflict between India and Pakistan features proxy dynamics, particularly regarding Kashmir and Balochistan without forgetting the erstwhile East Pakistan's decline. Since the partition of British India in 1947, both countries have claimed the Himalayan princely state, leading to multiple wars and ongoing tensions. Pakistan's support for militant groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba, Hizbul Mujahideen, and Jaish-e-Mohammed has been framed as a means of countering India's influence in Kashmir and its claim over the territory. These groups have also been allegedly involved in various attacks on Indian soil, including the 2001 Indian Parliament attack and the 2008 Mumbai attacks, which exacerbated tensions between the two nuclear-armed nations. India's response to these proxy attacks has included military strikes across the Line of Control along with selective assassinations, highlighting how proxy conflicts can escalate into confrontations. The cycle of violence and retaliation perpetuated by these dynamics poses significant challenges to regional stability and peace.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, the historical context of proxy conflicts is also evident in the involvement of external powers in Afghanistan. The Soviet-Afghan War in the 1980s marked a significant moment in the history of proxy warfare, as the US, Pakistan, and other allies provided substantial support to the Afghan Mujahideen in their fight against the Soviet forces. This intervention not only contributed to the Soviet Union's eventual withdrawal but also laid the groundwork for the rise of extremist groups,

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<sup>27</sup> Cormac, R. (2012), "Coordinating Covert Action: The Case of the Yemen Civil War and the South Arabian Insurgency," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 36(5), 692–717.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2011.651534>

<sup>28</sup> Ladwig III, W. C. (2015), "Indian Military Modernization and Conventional Deterrence in South Asia," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 38(5), 729–772.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2015.1014473>



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including the Taliban, which would later become a significant player in Afghanistan's ongoing turmoil. The US engagement in Afghanistan, which transitioned to post-9/11 direct military involvement, has evolved into a complex situation characterised by shifting alliances and the enduring presence of proxy dynamics, as various factions vie for power amid the withdrawal of international forces.<sup>29</sup>

The above examples of Syria, Yemen, Kashmir, and Afghanistan illustrate the diverse manifestations of proxy warfare, highlighting the dire humanitarian consequences and the challenges posed to regional and global peace. As nations continue to navigate the intricacies of proxy conflicts, understanding their historical roots and contemporary implications will be essential for developing effective strategies to address the underlying issues and work toward sustainable resolutions.

## **Regional Geopolitical Dynamics**

### ***Middle East: Shifts in Alliances and Power Struggles***

The Middle East has long been characterised by shifting alliances and power struggles, driven by a complex interplay of geopolitical, sectarian, and economic factors. In recent years, these dynamics have become increasingly pronounced, as traditional partnerships have evolved, and new ones have emerged, reflecting the region's changing power landscape. One significant factor contributing to these shifts is the reconfiguration of relationships among regional actors, influenced by external powers and resultant security threats.

The Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry is rooted in both sectarianism and geopolitical competition for regional dominance. Iran, a predominantly Shia Muslim country, seeks to expand its influence across the Middle East by supporting Shia militant groups and allied forces in various countries,

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<sup>29</sup> Greentree, T. (2013), "Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: US Performance and the Institutional Dimension of Strategy in Afghanistan," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 36(3), 325–356. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2013.764518>

including Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen.<sup>30</sup> In response, Saudi Arabia, a Sunni-majority nation maintaining close ties with the West, has positioned itself as the leader of the Sunni world while actively countering Iran's growing influence. The Saudi-led intervention in Yemen, which began in 2015, like its erstwhile support for Afghan Mujahideen substantiates this concept of power struggle. The intervention aimed to restore the Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi government while simultaneously curbing Iranian influence through the Houthis. This conflict has not only resulted in a humanitarian catastrophe but has also drawn in other regional powers, further complicating the alliances at play in the Middle East.<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, the US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018, commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal, transmitted profound implications for regional alliances and power dynamics. The US re-imposition of sanctions on Iran has exacerbated tensions and created a sense of insecurity among regional actors. In the wake of the withdrawal, Israel has increasingly sought closer ties with the Arab states, recognising a shared interest in countering Iran's regional ambitions to the extent of egging on Washington into assuming an aggressive malfeasance towards Tehran.<sup>32</sup> The normalisation agreements, known as the Abraham Accords, signify a noteworthy departure from the traditional Arab stance toward Israel and highlight the prioritisation of economic cooperation and security concerns over long-standing ideological divisions.

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<sup>30</sup> Ahmadian, Hassan, "Iran and the New Geopolitics of the Middle East: In Search of Equilibrium," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 23, no. 3 (February 16, 2021): 458–72. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2021.1888247>.

<sup>31</sup> Farias, Igor H. Sabino de, "An Introduction to Middle East Politics," *Contexto Internacional* 42, no. 3 (December 2020): 709–12. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/s0102-8529.2019420300010>.

<sup>32</sup> Sabet, Amr G. E, "Geopolitics of a changing world order: US strategy and the scramble for the Eurasian Heartland," *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 8, no. 2 (April 1, 2015): 163–80. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17550912.2015.1018717>.

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Additionally, the ongoing civil war in Syria has played a crucial role in reshaping realignments within the Middle East. The conflict has drawn in various regional and international actors, each pursuing their partisan interests. Turkey, for instance, has sought to establish its influence in northern Syria by supporting various rebel factions, while simultaneously opposing the Kurdish groups that it perceives as threatening its territorial integrity.<sup>33</sup> Iran and Russia have rallied behind the Assad regime, viewing its survival as essential to maintaining their influence in the region. This multifaceted conflict has not only complicated the existing alliances but has also created opportunities for new partnerships and rivalries, as countries navigate their interests amidst the chaos of war.<sup>34</sup>

The emergence of non-state actors has also contributed to the shifting alliances and power struggles in the Middle East.<sup>35</sup> Groups like ISIS and Al Qaeda have exploited the instability in the region to establish their presence while challenging existing state authorities. The rise and fall of ISIS, for instance, showcased the vulnerabilities of state actors and highlighted the need for regional powers to adapt their strategies. In the aftermath of ISIS's territorial defeat, the group's remnants continue to pose security challenges, leading to evolving alliances among countries seeking to combat this persistent threat. The shared goal of countering terrorism has prompted unusual collaborations, such as the cooperation between Iraq and Iran in the fight against ISIS, despite their historical

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<sup>33</sup> Ivanov, S, "Rise of the Kurdistan Factor in Regional Geopolitics," *World Economy and International Relations*, no. 10 (2015): 84–93. <http://dx.doi.org/10.20542/0131-2227-2015-10-84-93>.

<sup>34</sup> Gökarıksel, Banu, and Anna J. Secor, "Affective geopolitics: Anxiety, pain, and ethics in the encounter with Syrian refugees in Turkey," *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 38, no. 7-8 (December 10, 2018): 1237–55. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/2399654418814257>.

<sup>35</sup> Bishku, Michael B, "The Muslim Middle East and Northeast Africa: The Interaction of Geopolitics, Economic Interests, and Regional Rivalry," *Journal of Global South Studies* 36, no. 1 (2019): 1–22. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/gss.2019.0002>.

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rivalries.<sup>36</sup> An additional area of concern has been the ISIS Khorasan (ISIS-K), which has gained significant influence in parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Its activities have intensified security challenges in the region, prompting Kabul and Islamabad to seek cooperative approaches to suppress this terror faction. The threat posed by ISIS-K has pushed both countries, despite their complex and at times tense relationship, to collaborate on counterterrorism efforts to curtail the group's operations. Similarly, the collaboration between Iraq and Iran against ISIS, and the shared goal of countering terrorism continues to shape unexpected alliances across state boundaries in South and Central Asia.

The Middle East is a dynamic region marked by shifting alliances and power struggles that reflect the complex interplay of sectarianism, geopolitical ambitions, and external influences. As the region continues to experience profound changes, understanding these shifts in alliances and power struggles remains crucial in analysing future developments in regional geopolitics and their implications for global stability.<sup>37</sup>

### ***South Asia: Strategic Rivalries and Partnerships***

South Asia is a region classified by intricate strategic rivalries and partnerships that significantly influence its geopolitical landscape. The historical context of these rivalries is deeply rooted in colonial legacies, territorial disputes, and competing national identities, which continue to shape the relationships among South Asian countries today. India's focus on asserting its regional dominance and Pakistan's quest to counterbalance this power has created a cyclical pattern of hostility, where military posturing and diplomatic failures often exacerbate the situation.

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<sup>36</sup> Mabon, Simon, and Edward Wastnidge, "Transnational religious networks and geopolitics in the Muslim World," *Global Discourse* 9, no. 4 (November 1, 2019): 593–603. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1332/204378919x15718897501537>.

<sup>37</sup> Allinson, Jamie, "The Geopolitics of Counter-Revolution: Cross Regional Impacts of Domestic Dynamics in the post-2011 Middle East," *Bulletin for the Council for British Research in the Levant* 12, no. 1 (January 2017): 79. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17527260.2017.1556938>.

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In recent years, India has sought to expand its influence in South Asia and beyond, positioning itself as a regional power through a combination of military modernisation, economic growth, and strategic partnerships.<sup>38</sup> For instance, the establishment of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) involving India, the US, Japan, and Australia reflects India's intention to help counter China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region. The QUAD has been framed as a strategic alliance aimed at ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific, signaling a shift towards collective security arrangements that resonate with India's long-standing concerns about Chinese expansionism.<sup>39</sup>

Conversely, Pakistan, through CPEC aims to enhance connectivity between Pakistan's Gwadar Port and China's Xinjiang region. The strategic partnership between Pakistan and China is driven by mutual interests: Pakistan seeks economic development and security support in the face of Indian threats, while China gains access to critical trade routes and resources. This partnership not only highlights the shifting alliances in South Asia but also underscores how regional countries are leveraging external partnerships to navigate their security dilemmas.

On the other hand, Pakistan's historical ties with the Taliban position it as a significant player in shaping Afghanistan's future, though with understandable limitation given the presence of the TTP terrorists across the borders. Pakistan views a stable, Taliban-led government to secure its western border and counter Indian influence in the country as a panacea while reigning in the TTP and ISIS. The interplay of these strategic interests illustrates how Afghanistan serves as a battleground for several

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<sup>38</sup> Joshi, Nirmala, *Reconnecting India and Central Asia: Emerging security and economic dimensions*, Edited by Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program. Delhi: Pentagon Press in association with Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Silk Road Studies Program, 2011.

<sup>39</sup> Sharma, Shalendra D, *The Asia-Pacific in the new millennium: Geopolitics, security, and foreign policy*, Berkeley, Calif: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 2000.

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competitive constellations, with each seeking to assert its influence through alliances and proxy relationships.

In addition to the India-Pakistan dynamic, the regional rivalry is further complicated by the rise of other players, notably China and the United States.<sup>40</sup> The Sino-Indian rivalry has intensified in recent years, particularly following military confrontations along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Himalayas.<sup>41</sup> India's concerns about China's BRI and its growing military presence in the Indian Ocean have prompted New Delhi to strengthen its defense ties with the US and other regional powers. This evolving context of strategic rivalries has led to a complex web of partnerships, where nations are continuously recalibrating their alliances based on perceived threats and opportunities.<sup>42</sup>

### ***The Intersection of Middle East and South Asian Geopolitics***

The intersection of Middle Eastern and South Asian geopolitics presents a complex tapestry of interdependencies, shared challenges, competitive and even conflictive trajectories, and evolving alliances beckoning far-reaching implications for both these adjacent regions. This intersection is primarily shaped by historical ties, economic interactions, and security concerns, all of which influence how states in these regions engage with each other. For instance, the longstanding relationship between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia exemplifies how religious affiliations and historical alliances can drive geopolitical decisions. Both nations largely share a commitment to Sunni Islam, and Saudi Arabia has been a key ally for Pakistan, providing economic assistance and military support over the decades. However, this relationship has come under strain as Pakistan has increasingly sought to assert its independence in foreign policy, especially

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<sup>40</sup> Zilong, Che, "The Development of Sino-Indian Trade from the Perspective of "The Belt and Road Initiative," *Journal of Economics and Management Sciences* 4, no. 3 (September 6, 2021): p7. <http://dx.doi.org/10.30560/jems.v4n3p7>.

<sup>41</sup> Paul, Kapur S., ed, *India, Pakistan, and the bomb: Debating nuclear stability in South Asia*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

<sup>42</sup> Prifti, Bledar, *US Foreign Policy in the Middle East*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-45327-9>.

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about Iran, with which it shares borders and a complex historical relationship. Saudi Arabia too is developing closer mutuality with Delhi, often snubbing Pakistan.

The recent developments surrounding Afghanistan illustrate how the geopolitical landscape in South Asia can impact the Mideast, and vice versa. The Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan has raised concerns among Middle Eastern states, particularly Iran, which has historically viewed the Taliban with suspicion due to its Sunni Islamist ideology contrasting with Iran's Shia governance. Iran's involvement in Afghanistan, through support for various ethnic groups such as the Hazara, is part of its broader strategy to exert influence in a region where it faces the meddling of both US and Indian interests. Meanwhile, Pakistan, which has historically supported the Taliban, seeks to maintain a degree of control over Afghanistan to prevent instability that could spill over its borders. This dynamic has created a complex web of alliances and rivalries, with regional powers like Iran, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia all attempting to navigate their interests amidst the shifting political landscape.<sup>43</sup>

The role of energy resources serves as another critical intersection between the Middle Eastern and South Asian geopolitics. The Middle East, being a powerhouse of oil and gas reserves, plays a significant role in the energy security of South Asia. Countries like India and Pakistan rely heavily on energy imports to fuel their growing economies. As India positions itself as a major global economic player, its energy needs are expanding, driving New Delhi to seek diversified energy sources.<sup>44</sup> This has led India to enhance its relations with the Gulf countries, as evidenced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's state visits and bilateral agreements

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<sup>43</sup> Heynen, Nik, John Morrissey, Bob Schwarz, Mathew Coleman, and Sapana Doshi, *Long War: CENTCOM, Grand Strategy, and Global Security*, University of Georgia Press, 2017.

<sup>44</sup> Sumit, Ganguly, Shoup Brian, and Scobell Andrew, eds, *US-Indian strategic cooperation into the 21st century: More than words*, London: Routledge, 2006.

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aimed at securing energy supplies. Such engagements reflect not only economic motivations but also a strategic calculus aimed at countering China's rising influence which has raised concerns in New Delhi about energy and economic vulnerabilities.<sup>45</sup>

In terms of figures, India imported approximately 4.4 million barrels per day of crude oil in 2023, with around 60% of its oil supplies coming from the Middle Eastern countries.<sup>46</sup> Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE rank among India's top suppliers, collectively providing nearly 50% of India's total crude oil imports. Alongside Middle Eastern sources, India also receives energy supplies from Iran and Russia, diversifying its imports to maintain energy security amid geopolitical shifts. Since 2022, India has significantly increased its imports from Russia, which now accounts for nearly 20% of India's oil imports.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, India imports liquefied natural gas (LNG) from countries including Qatar, which supplies over 40% of India's LNG imports annually, while Iran remains a potential future supplier depending on international sanctions.<sup>48</sup> These energy flows underscore India's balancing strategy, seeking reliable sources across regions to meet its economic needs while managing global political dynamics.

Moreover, the geopolitical rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has significant implications for South Asia. The sectarian tensions that describe this rivalry often reverberate across the region, influencing domestic politics in countries like Pakistan, where Shia-Sunni divisions remain a persistent challenge. The Saudi influence, at one stage, was evident in the funding of Sunni madrassas, which only exacerbated sectarian tensions within Pakistan and contributed to the rise of extremist

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<sup>45</sup> Destradi, Sandra, *Indian Foreign and Security Policy in South Asia: Regional Power Strategies*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013.

<sup>46</sup> The Economic Time, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/energy/oil-gas/can-india-keep-its-oil-calm-while-the-middle-east-conflict-heats-up/articleshow/113936267.cms?from=mdr>

<sup>47</sup> The Economic Time...

<sup>48</sup> The Economic Time...



groups. Conversely, Iran's efforts to support Shia communities in Pakistan further complicated this delicate balance. This rivalry not only shaped bilateral relationships but also created a wider regional security dilemma, where proxy conflicts and sectarian strife kept threatening to spill over into South Asian states and may rekindle at some future stage as is the case with the Baloch insurgents on both sides of the border.

India has actively sought to enhance its defense cooperation with Israel while simultaneously increasing its economic ties with the Gulf States, particularly in technology, energy, and trade. This alignment has strategic implications for Pakistan, which has traditionally relied on its ties with the Gulf nations for economic support and /or diplomatic backing. The shifting alliances leaning towards Israel and India challenge Pakistan's traditional foreign policy narratives and compel it to reevaluate its relationships in the context of its rivalry with India.

## **Proxy Conflicts and Their Impact**

### ***Yemen and the Saudi-Iran Rivalry***

The conflict in Yemen has emerged as a critical arena for the ongoing rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, epitomising how regional power struggles can manifest in proxy wars with devastating humanitarian consequences. The war, which escalated dramatically in 2015, is rooted in a complex mix of local grievances, political aspirations, and sectarian divisions.

Saudi Arabia perceives the rise of the Houthis as a direct threat to its influence in the Arabian Peninsula, viewing the group as an Iranian proxy. Iran has, indeed, provided support to the Houthis, albeit to varying degrees. The involvement of Iran in Yemen reflects its broader strategy of countering Saudi influence throughout the region, and the conflict has further entrenched the sectarian divide, complicating prospects for a peaceful resolution.

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The Saudi-led coalition's military campaign has aimed to defeat the Houthis and restore the Hadi government, but it has faced significant challenges and criticism. The coalition's airstrikes have caused widespread civilian casualties and infrastructure destruction, contributing to what the United Nations has described as one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. Millions of Yemenis face food insecurity, lack of access to clean water, and struggle with the consequences of a collapsing healthcare system. The conflict has thus transformed into a humanitarian catastrophe, with aid response hampered by blockades and continued violence, raising questions about the efficacy and morality of the Saudi-led intervention.<sup>49</sup>

Despite the coalition's military might, the Houthis have proven resilient, demonstrating their capacity to engage in asymmetrical warfare including their drone and missile strikes on Israel besides impacting the shipping in the Gulf of Aden. They managed to launch missile attacks into Saudi territory, targeting key infrastructure, including airports and oil facilities, which has further highlighted Saudi vulnerabilities. Notably, the September 2019 attack on Saudi Aramco facilities, which temporarily halved the Kingdom's oil production, was attributed to the Houthis, showcasing their ability to strike at the heart of Saudi economic interests. This incident not only heightened tensions but also underscored the interconnectedness of regional security dynamics, as the US and its allies viewed it as a direct challenge to their interests in the region.

In recent developments, there have been attempts at negotiations, including UN-brokered talks aimed at reaching a ceasefire and initiating a political dialogue. These efforts underscore a growing recognition of the need to address the root causes of the conflict and the dire humanitarian situation. However, the deep-seated animosities and competing interests between Saudi Arabia and Iran remain significant obstacles to achieving

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<sup>49</sup> Al-Saidi, Mohammad, Emma Lauren Roach, and Bilal Ahmed Hassen Al-Saeedi, "Conflict Resilience of Water and Energy Supply Infrastructure: Insights from Yemen," *Water* 12, no. 11 (November 21, 2020): 3269. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/w12113269>.

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lasting peace. The challenge lies in reconciling the divergent goals of regional powers while addressing the legitimate grievances of the Yemen population, which have been overshadowed by the broader geopolitical rivalry.

The Yemen conflict essentially serves as a microcosm of the Saudi-Iran rivalry, illustrating how local conflicts can be shaped and exacerbated by regional power dynamics which may result in the involvement of other external factors such as the US and Israel. The humanitarian crisis resulting from the protracted war, highlights the consequences of foreign intervention and the complexities of proxy warfare. As the international community grapples with the ramifications of this conflict, finding a pathway to peace requires not only addressing the immediate needs of the Yemeni people but also navigating the intricate web of alliances and rivalries that have fueled the war. The outcome of this conflict will have lasting implications for the balance of power in the Middle East and the prospects for stability in the region.

#### ***Afghanistan and the Regional Implications***

The return of the Taliban to power raises critical questions and diverse security scenarios impacting Afghanistan, as well as the broader strategic interests of the neighbouring countries such as Pakistan, India, Iran, and China.

The regional implications of the Taliban's return to power extend beyond immediate security concerns. The new regime has the potential to influence broader geopolitical dynamics, including the ongoing rivalry between the US and China. The withdrawal of US troops and the subsequent takeover by the Taliban have led to debates within Washington about the future of its foreign policy in South Asia.

Moreover, the shifting dynamics in Afghanistan initially raised alarms about the resurgence of terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda and ISIS. The potential for Afghanistan to once again become a haven for extremist

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organisations could bode far-reaching consequences for regional and global security. Neighbouring countries remain vigilant, concerned that instability in Afghanistan may lead to cross-border terrorism, refugee crises, and increased radicalisation.<sup>50</sup>

As neighbouring countries navigate their interests and concerns, the interplay of alliances and rivalries will shape the future of Afghanistan and its role in the region. The challenge lies in fostering stability and security while addressing the myriad local grievances and international dynamics that continue to define Afghanistan's trajectory.

### ***Syria: Global and Regional Actors in Proxy Warfare***

The Syrian conflict, now over a decade old, has transformed into one of the most significant examples of modern proxy warfare, drawing in both global and regional actors with varying, often conflicting, interests. What distinguishes Syria from other conflicts is the level of external intervention, with multiple states and non-state actors becoming deeply involved, turning the country into a battleground for broader geopolitical struggles.<sup>51</sup>

At the global level, Russia and the US have played pivotal but contrasting roles in the conflict. Russia's involvement, which began decisively in 2015 with a military intervention, was motivated by several strategic interests. Moscow sought to preserve its long-standing alliance with Assad, maintain its access to the naval base in Tartus, and project power in the Middle East as a counterbalance to Western influence.<sup>52</sup> Russia's military support, including airstrikes and ground assistance, has been

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<sup>50</sup> Ullah, AKM Ahsan, "MENA: Geopolitics of Conflicts and Refugees," In *Refugee Politics in the Middle East and North Africa*, 29–58, London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/9781137356536\\_2](http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/9781137356536_2).

<sup>51</sup> Albasoos, Hani, "An Overview of the Conflict in Syria," *International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science (2147-4478)* 6, no. 1 (January 20, 2017): 47–54. <http://dx.doi.org/10.20525/ijrbs.v6i1.670>.

<sup>52</sup> Korolev, A. (2017), "Theories of Non-Balancing and Russia's Foreign Policy," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 41(6), 887–912. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2017.1283614>

critical in turning the tide in favour of Assad's regime, allowing it to reclaim significant territories from opposition forces. This intervention has not only solidified Russia's influence in Syria but has also placed it as a key power broker in the region. With the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, and the lightning intrusion of non-state actors at the helm of affairs, power dynamics are changing.

The US, on the other hand, has pursued a more fragmented and often inconsistent strategy. Initially backing opposition groups to overthrow Assad, the US shifted its focus toward counterterrorism, particularly after the rise of ISIS in 2014. This led to an uneasy alliance between the US and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a Kurdish-led militia, which played a critical role in the defeat of ISIS. However, the US policy in Syria has been marred by contradictions, particularly regarding its support for Kurdish forces, which strained relations with Turkey, a NATO ally. Turkey views the SDF as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a Kurdish separatist group considered as a terrorist organisation. This tension illustrates the complexity of the Syrian conflict, where alliances often shift based on the evolving priorities of external actors.<sup>53</sup>

Turkey's role in Syria has been shaped by its concerns over Kurdish autonomy and its desire to expand its influence in northern Syria.<sup>54</sup> Ankara, while hosting millions of Syrian refugees, has not shirked from launching multiple military operations aimed at pushing back both the ISIS and Kurdish forces, creating a buffer zone along its border. These interventions have placed Turkey at odds not only with the Kurds but also with the Syrian government and its Russian backers. Despite this, Turkey has worked with Russia in various diplomatic forums, such as the Astana Peace Process to negotiate ceasefires and de-escalation zones, underscoring the fluid nature of alliances in the conflict.

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<sup>53</sup> Alahmed Nadia, "The Shape of the Wrath to Come," *James Baldwin Review* 6, no. 1 (September 29, 2020): 28–48. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7227/jbr.6.3>.

<sup>54</sup> Birol Başkan, *Turkey and Qatar in the Tangled Geopolitics of the Middle East*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2016. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-51771-5>

Iran, another key regional player, has been deeply involved in supporting Assad, driven by its desire to maintain the "Shia Crescent," a corridor of influence extending from Tehran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon. Iran has provided both financial and military aid to Assad's forces, including deploying the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and mobilising Shia militias from Lebanon, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Hezbollah, a Lebanese Shia militant group backed by Iran, has been particularly instrumental in defending Assad's regime and fighting against both Syrian opposition forces and ISIS. Iran's involvement in Syria is not only about preserving its regional influence but also about countering Saudi Arabia and Israel, both of whom view Iran's presence in Syria as a direct threat to their security.<sup>55</sup>

Israel, while not a formal participant in the Syrian war, has conducted numerous airstrikes on Iranian and Hezbollah positions within Syria, aiming to prevent the transfer of advanced weaponry to Hezbollah and to limit Iran's military entrenchment near its borders.<sup>56</sup> These strikes underscore Israel's broader strategy of containing Iranian influence in the region while avoiding direct involvement in Syria's internal conflict. The Israeli interventions have occurred with a tacit understanding from Russia, reflecting the delicate balance of power between external actors in Syria. The involvement of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States, particularly in the early stages of the conflict, further highlights the regional dimensions of proxy warfare in Syria. The Gulf States, led by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, provided financial and military support to various opposition groups, aiming to weaken Assad's regime and counter Iranian influence. However, the fragmentation of the opposition and the rise of extremist factions, such as Jabhat Al-Nusra (an Al Qaeda affiliate) and ISIS,

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<sup>55</sup> Fozia and Lubna Abid Ali, "Iran-Saudi Relations: From Rivalry to Nowhere," *Global Social Sciences Review* III, no. IV (December 30, 2018): 49–67. [http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gssr.2018\(iii-iv\).04](http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gssr.2018(iii-iv).04).

<sup>56</sup> Yeşiltaş, Murat, and Tuncay Kardaş, "Introduction: The Phenomenon of Non-state Armed Actors and Patterns of Violent Geopolitics in the Middle East," In *Non-State Armed Actors in the Middle East*, 3–20. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-55287-3\\_1](http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-55287-3_1).

complicated the efforts of the Gulf States, leading to a reduction in their involvement over time. The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran played out in Syria, reflects the broader sectarian and geopolitical struggle for dominance in the Middle East.

Syria illustrates how domestic conflicts can be transformed by external interventions into prolonged, intractable wars. The involvement of global and regional powers has not only exacerbated the humanitarian crisis but also created a geopolitical quagmire. As external actors continue to pursue their interests directly or through proxy forces, the prospects for a lasting peace in Syria remain elusive, and the conflict will likely continue to shape the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East for years to come.<sup>57</sup>

### **Economic Diplomacy and Geo-Economic Shifts**

Economic diplomacy has become a central component in shaping the geo-economics shifts that define the global power dynamics of the Middle East and South Asia.<sup>58</sup> In recent years, economic diplomacy has increasingly served as a tool for countries to assert influence, secure strategic resources, and strengthen political alliances without direct military intervention. By leveraging trade agreements, investments, and financial aid, states aim to advance their geopolitical interests in an interconnected global economy, where the line between economics and politics is increasingly blurred.

The Middle East's geo-economics landscape has long been shaped by its vast oil and gas reserves. However, as global energy demands shift and the world begins to embrace renewable energy sources, countries in the region, particularly the Gulf States, are reorienting their economies

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<sup>57</sup> Li, Xiaobing, "Postwar Geopolitics and Self-Reliant Defense," In *New Directions in East Asian History*, 47–78. Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2019.  
[http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-981-32-9675-6\\_3](http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-981-32-9675-6_3).

<sup>58</sup> Omid, Ali, "The Evolutionary Feature of Turkey's Soft Power in the Middle East, 2011-2020," *Turkey's Grand Strategy* 23, Fall 2021 (December 10, 2021): 11–25.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.25253/99.2021234.1>.

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through ambitious economic diversification strategies.<sup>59</sup> Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 plan, for instance, seeks to reduce the Kingdom's dependence on oil by investing heavily in infrastructure, technology, and tourism. The shift toward a post-oil economy is not just an internal reform but a form of economic diplomacy. Saudi Arabia aims to position itself as a leading player in global finance and technological innovation. It has pursued foreign investments and partnerships with major economies like China, India, and the US, reflecting its efforts to recalibrate its economic and political relationships in response to evolving global trends.

Similarly, the UAE has engaged in an aggressive form of economic diplomacy, becoming a global trade and finance hub. Through its free economic zones and favourable business climate, the UAE has attracted foreign investment and positioned itself as a gateway between Asia, Africa, and Europe. The UAE's strategic use of economic diplomacy is evident in its burgeoning relationships with Asian powers, particularly China. The UAE is a crucial partner in China's BRI, a vast infrastructure project to enhance global connectivity and trade routes. By aligning with China, the UAE has strengthened its economic ties with one of the world's largest economies. Still, it has also secured a vital role in the emerging geo-economic order, where Asia plays a more prominent role.

In South Asia, economic diplomacy is equally pivotal in shaping regional and global dynamics. India's rise as a global economic power has allowed it to wield significant influence through trade and investment initiatives. More recently, India's involvement in the QUAD, alongside the US, Japan, and Australia, reflects its strategic use of economic diplomacy to counter China's influence in the Indo-Pacific region. By fostering trade relations and investing in regional connectivity, India aims to solidify its position as a counterweight to China's growing dominance in Asia.

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<sup>59</sup> Yossef, Amr, and Joseph R. Cerami, *The Arab Spring and the Geopolitics of the Middle East: Emerging Security Threats and Revolutionary Change*, London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/9781137504081>.



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CPEC, which includes a network of roads, railways, and energy projects, is expected to enhance Pakistan's infrastructure and economic connectivity with China. However, it has also raised concerns about Pakistan's increasing economic dependence on China, leading to questions about the long-term strategic implications of such projects. While CPEC promises significant economic benefits, critics argue that it could exacerbate Pakistan's debt burden and give China undue influence over its domestic and foreign policy.

The geo-economic shifts driven by China's rise have also had ripple effects across the Middle East. China's deepening economic ties with Iran, along with its growing presence in Central Asia, illustrate the strategic use of economic diplomacy to bypass Western stringencies and cultivate long-term alliances. In 2021, China and Iran signed a 25-year cooperation agreement, which includes Chinese investments in Iranian infrastructure, energy, and telecommunications sectors. For Iran, this partnership provides an economic lifeline amidst crippling US sanctions. For China, it secures access to Iranian oil and bolsters its geopolitical influence in the Gulf, challenging the traditional dominance of the US and its allies.

Economic diplomacy in the Middle East and South Asia is also influenced by global financial institutions and trade regimes. Countries in both regions have increasingly sought membership in organisations like the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and have negotiated bilateral trade agreements to enhance their access to global markets. Membership in organisations like the WTO has become increasingly attractive to countries in these regions as a pathway to gaining broader market access, enhancing their competitiveness, and adhering to international trade norms. The WTO framework, by offering a platform for trade negotiations and dispute resolution, allows countries to protect their trade interests while benefiting from more transparent and predictable trade practices. For many Middle Eastern and South Asian nations, WTO membership and collaboration with entities like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank are crucial in attracting foreign investment, ensuring

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economic stability, and securing financial assistance for developmental needs.

Beyond multilateral organisations, countries in both regions have prioritised bilateral and regional trade agreements to strengthen their economic positions and diversify trading partners. The Gulf countries, for example, have actively pursued trade agreements with the South Asian economies, recognising the economic growth potential and consumer markets in countries like India and Pakistan. Likewise, South Asian countries have sought closer ties with the Middle Eastern partners to secure energy supplies and expand trade opportunities. These agreements are often strategically crafted to boost economic exchanges and to foster closer political and cultural relationships, counter external influences, and navigate shifting global power dynamics. Through these economic partnerships, the Middle Eastern and South Asian nations are positioning themselves to capitalise on emerging opportunities in a highly interconnected world economy. These efforts are a part of a broader strategy to integrate more deeply into the global economy while safeguarding national interests. However, economic diplomacy is not without its challenges. The protectionist policies of major economies, trade wars, and the reconfiguration of global supply chains in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic have created uncertainties that complicate the efforts of the Middle Eastern and South Asian countries to navigate the evolving geo-economic landscape.

Economic diplomacy is a key tool that the Middle Eastern and South Asian countries use to navigate the shifting geo-economic order. As global power dynamics change, particularly with the rise of China and the decline of Western dominance, these regions are leveraging trade, investment, and financial diplomacy to secure their strategic interests through block politics. The interplay of economic policies, investments, and alliances reflects a broader recalibration of global power, where economic influence is increasingly tied to geopolitical ambition. These shifts will continue to shape the future of both regions as they respond to

the pressures and opportunities presented by a rapidly evolving global economy.

### **Emerging Security Threats**

Emerging security threats in the Middle East and South Asia are reshaping the strategic landscape and challenging traditional approaches to national and regional security. These threats encompass a broad spectrum of concerns, from cyberattacks and terrorism to environmental degradation and the proliferation of non-state actors. The complexities of these challenges require a rethinking of security frameworks, as states find themselves increasingly vulnerable to traditional and non-traditional forms of aggression, often exacerbated by regional instability, economic disparities, and the global power struggle.

Cyber security has emerged as a critical concern, particularly with the rise of digital infrastructure and the interconnectedness of economies. Both the Middle East and South Asia have seen a marked increase in cyber-attacks, often state-sponsored, targeting financial systems, energy sectors, and government institutions. Iran's development of cyber capabilities is one notable example. Following its increasing isolation due to Western sanctions, Iran has expanded its cyber operations to counterbalance its conventional military limitations. These operations have targeted both regional rivals, like Saudi Arabia, and global powers, as seen in cyber-attacks on the US and Israeli critical infrastructure. The growing threat of cyber warfare has prompted countries in the Gulf and South Asia to invest heavily in cyber-security, with Saudi Arabia and the UAE making significant strides in establishing digital defense mechanisms.

The rise of terrorism remains one of the most destabilising security threats across both regions. While groups like ISIS have lost territorial control in Syria and Iraq, their ideological influence persists in Southwest Asia. Extremist factions have spread into the Sahel and Afghanistan, fueling regional instability and complicating counterterrorism efforts. The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan has reignited fears of the country

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becoming a haven for terrorist organisations. Despite assurances from the Taliban leadership, there are concerns that groups such as Al Qaeda and the regional ISIS-K could exploit the vacuum created by the US withdrawal to regroup and strengthen their operations. The Taliban's governance, intertwined with hardline ideologies, limits the scope of international cooperation and raises serious concerns about the export of extremism across South Asia and into Central Asia.<sup>60</sup>

Moreover, South Asia faces its brand of extremism linked to both domestic politics and regional rivalries. The ongoing tensions between India and Pakistan, especially over Kashmir, have contributed to the persistence of militant groups like Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba. These groups, while ostensibly focused on the Kashmir issue, pose broader security challenges by potentially destabilising the region and undermining efforts for peaceful resolution. The unresolved conflict in Kashmir continues to act as a flashpoint for terrorism, encouraging a cycle of violence that extends beyond the immediate borders of India and Pakistan and threatens regional security more broadly.

### **Climate Change Factor**

Another emerging security threat that cuts across both the Middle East and South Asia is environmental degradation. Climate change is exacerbating water scarcity, food insecurity, and resource conflicts, especially in countries already experiencing political instability and weak governance. In the Middle East, the shrinking water supply from the Euphrates and Tigris rivers has heightened tensions between Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. The Turkish government's extensive dam-building projects have restricted water flow into Iraq and Syria, creating potential flashpoints for future conflict as water becomes an increasingly politicised and securitised issue. In South Asia, the effects of climate change are being felt acutely in the form of rising sea levels, increased flooding, and

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<sup>60</sup>Lebovic, James H, *Planning to Fail*, Oxford University Press, 2019.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190935320.001.0001>.

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irregular monsoon patterns, which have had devastating impacts on Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. These environmental challenges threaten food and water security and have the potential to drive mass migration and trigger regional instability.

In South Asia, the role of non-state actors is equally destabilising. Pakistan's border regions with Afghanistan have long been home to militant groups that operate with relative impunity, exploiting the porous borders and weak state control. These groups not only pose a direct threat to Pakistan but also to Afghanistan and India, as they perpetuate violence, extremism, and cross-border terrorism. The Taliban's resurgence has further emboldened such groups, raising concerns that the region could once again become a breeding ground for terrorism, with far-reaching implications for global security.

Emerging security threats in these regions are increasingly transnational, requiring cooperative approaches beyond traditional military solutions. Climate-related conflicts, cyber warfare, terrorism, and the influence of non-state actors demand multilateral coordination, yet regional rivalries often impede such efforts. For example, India and Pakistan's hostility prevents meaningful collaboration on counterterrorism or climate change initiatives, despite shared vulnerabilities. Similarly, in the Middle East, the broader geopolitical contest between Saudi Arabia and Iran stymies regional cooperation on cyber-security or environmental security, as each seeks to assert dominance through conventional and non-conventional means.

Emerging security threats in the Middle East and South Asia are multifaceted, encompassing cyber warfare, terrorism, environmental degradation, and the rise of non-state actors. These threats challenge state sovereignty and undermine regional stability, and global security. Addressing these challenges requires a recalibration of security strategies, moving away from purely military solutions to more holistic, cooperative approaches that integrate economic, environmental, and cyber dimensions into national security policies. Without such cooperation, both regions

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will remain vulnerable to the increasingly complex and interconnected threats of the 21st century.

### **Conclusion**

The shifting dynamics in the Middle East and South Asia reflect a complex and evolving geopolitical landscape where regional and global powers increasingly intersect and contend for influence. The strategic recalibrations of nations like the US, China, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, India, and Pakistan reveal a nuanced balance of cooperation and rivalry, often framed by economic diplomacy, energy politics, and deep-rooted religious and sectarian divides. Initiatives like China's BRI underscore the role of economic ambitions in shaping trade routes, infrastructure, and access to vital resources, thus reconfiguring both regional and international alliances.

At the same time, proxy conflicts in Yemen, Afghanistan, and Syria underscore the persistent instability that complicates security in these regions, as foreign interventions and local grievances amplify existing conflicts. This instability is further exacerbated by transnational threats such as terrorism and cyber warfare, which challenge traditional notions of state security and demand more coordinated global responses. As these regions navigate a multipolar world order, they face both significant challenges and strategic opportunities. Addressing these will require resilient diplomacy, enhanced cooperation among regional actors, and an adaptable approach to conflict resolution that considers immediate security needs and long-term peace building. Ultimately, the unfolding geopolitical shifts in the Middle East and South Asia have profound implications for regional stability and the broader trajectory of global peace and security. ■

