CNSS Journal of Security Studies

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Centre for National Security Studies

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CNSS Journal of Security Studies

The CNSS Journal of Security Studies is a double-blind peer-reviewed journal. The journal shall serve as a credible compendium of knowledge on security and related subjects. The journal invites papers on traditional and non-traditional security themes, in the international, regional and Indian context. Here, we look forward to academic arguments that can shape and reshape the way we perceive Indian national security in a fast-changing world order.

Editorial Board

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*The views expressed by the authors are personal and do not attribute to the ethos of the Centre for National Security Studies.

Foreword

Major General JV Prasad (Retd.)

Patron, CNSS Journal of Security Studies

Director, Centre for National Security Studies

Centre for National Security Studies (CNSS) is a Bangalore-based think tank established by an MoU between MS Ramaiah University of Applied Sciences (MSRUAS) and Army Training Command (ARTRAC). CNSS focuses on the policy and academic research related to Comprehensive National Security Studies. The intent is to push the national security discourse beyond traditional security to a Comprehensive Security Policy framework. The CNSS Journal of Security Studies is a compilation of a wide range of themes across traditional and non-traditional security issues. The journal aims to highlight national security from an academician, practitioner, government, industry and investor perspective to arrive at a whole-of-nation integrated approach. The Journal attempts to bring out the best thoughts and practices in the realm of all verticals in the Centre, i.e., India Strategic Studies Programme, Emerging and Deep Technologies Programme. Non-Traditional Security Studies Programme and the Dual-use Technology Innovation Programme.

The theme of the Call for Papers for Volume 1, Issue 1 covered various themes under each of the four verticals. From India Strategic Studies, the theme is QUAD and its various perspectives from the member nations- India, USA, Japan and Australia. Emerging technologies are impacting the national security landscape significantly. AI and its impact on national security are the central themes in the emerging technologies vertical. Lastly, the Non-Traditional Security vertical looks at Climate security with a specific emphasis on UN Sustainable Development Goals and the blue economy; Terrorism, Insurgency and Ethnic conflicts and various human security aspects.

In this issue, we have selected six papers across the three verticals. The first paper is "Climate-Induced Migration and National Security in South Asia: A Regional Analysis", which looks into non-traditional security issues of migration and its widespread impact in the region of South Asia. The second paper, "India's Pursuit of Strategic Autonomy: An Ontological Security Perspective Rooted in Civilizational Legacy", delves into the historical narratives that shape Indian foreign policy non-alignment, multi-alignment and currently, the strategic autonomy that has been in discussion with the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine War. The paper titled "The Urgency of Separate Administration for the Kuki/Zo People in Manipur: Historical, Political, and Human Rights Perspectives" looks into the roots of the current ethnic conflict in Manipur. Fourth paper titled, "A Comprehensive Analysis of China's air-space counter-intervention activities over the South and East China Sea", looks into possible threats posed by the rise of China to its neighbours. The next paper in relation to the previous one is about "India's Role in the Quad: Implications on India-China Border Dispute", looking specifically at the India-China border disputes and the solutions India can use through the lens of QUAD. Lastly, a paper titled "Artificial Intelligence and Its Impact on National Security" describes prospective challenges

posed by the advancement of AI as a tool and the implications for national security as a whole.

We hope that this maiden issue of the CNSS Journal of Security Studies will pave the way for more academically rigorous and policy-oriented editions in future as well. The Centre for National Security Studies (CNSS) is committed to finding integrated approaches of academia, industry and the government to foster regional and international peace.

Climate-Induced Migration and National Security in South Asia: A Regional Analysis

Bulathgama TCB[1]

Abstract

The South Asian region is one of the world's most vulnerable to climate change, facing numerous impacts including sea-level rise, extreme weather events, increased cyclonic activity in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea, and shifting agricultural patterns. These changes complicate existing development and poverty reduction initiatives and threaten livelihoods across the region. Extreme weather conditions are likely to force many to leave their homelands temporarily or even permanently for another village, city, region or country. Climate-induced migration poses significant national security challenges, such as resource scarcity and competition, social tension and civil unrest, cross-border conflicts, governance and policy challenges as well as human trafficking and security threats. Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated regional approach. This paper explores the relationship between climate-induced migration and national security in South Asia, with regional analysis encompassing Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Maldives and Afghanistan. It also identifies the major climate change events driving migration in the region and examines the national security challenges faced by each country. Additionally, it highlights the importance of regional cooperation and policy adaptation to mitigate the risk associated with climate-driven displacement. The study employs a qualitative methodology, relying on secondary data from climate reports, journal articles, news articles and books. Through a multi-country comparative approach, this study underscores the urgent need for integrated policies that address climate resilience, sustainable development, and security cooperation in South Asia.

Keywords: Climate-Induced Migration, National Security, South Asia, Regional Cooperation.

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Introduction

Climate change is considered one of the most discussed topics across various fields worldwide. It poses significant threats to human livelihoods of human, well-being and security. According to the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO, 2023), global temperatures have risen since 1980, with the period from 2015 to 2023 being recorded as the warmest on record. Notably, due to a strong El Nino event, in 2016, the highest temperature was recorded that year (National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), 2020).

Beyond temperature rising, numerous climate change events are occurring globally, including sea-level rise, floods, hurricanes, heatwaves, and drought, which are becoming increasingly frequent (Clarke B et. al., 2022; Serdeczny, O. et al., 2017). The South Asian region encompassing eight countries, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, is particularly vulnerable. Projections indicate that South Asia's climate will be diverse and heterogeneous, with some areas experiencing droughts and reduced rainfall while others face more intense precipitation and heightened flood risks. The effects of these changes will vary among populations, regions and sectors (Sivakumar, M. V., & Stefanski, R., 2011).

As outlined above, the increasing frequency of climate change impacts not only disrupts livelihoods of people but also compels significant population movements both within and across borders. Climate-induced migration, while often regarded as an adaptation strategy, poses significant national security challenges for the countries involved. In South Asia, a considerable amount of the population is likely to be affected by climate hazards over the next decade, with most climate-induced migration impacting the poorest and most vulnerable groups (Asian Development Bank (ADB), 2009).

According to a World Bank assessment, climate change and environmental deterioration could force 216 million people to migrate within their own countries by 2050. Interestingly, over 50 million of these people reside in South Asia (World Bank (WB), 2018). South Asia's high vulnerability raises concerns about potential increases in both internal and international migrations across the subcontinent. Additional pressures from climate change and shifting migratory patterns could exacerbate security risks in regions already experiencing conflict (ADB, 2012).

This study explores the relationship between climate-induced migration and national security in South Asia through a regional analysis. It examines key climate events that have influenced migration and underscores the critical need for an integrated policy framework. Furthermore, the study highlights the significance of regional cooperation in mitigating risks, adapting to challenges, and fostering sustainable development across the region.

Literature Review

Climate Change Impacts in South Asia

South Asia with countries like India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, is one of the most affected regions of climate change because of its geographical location of these countries and the high population density as well as high reliance of their economy on agricultural activities (Islam, Sultan, & Afroz, 2009).
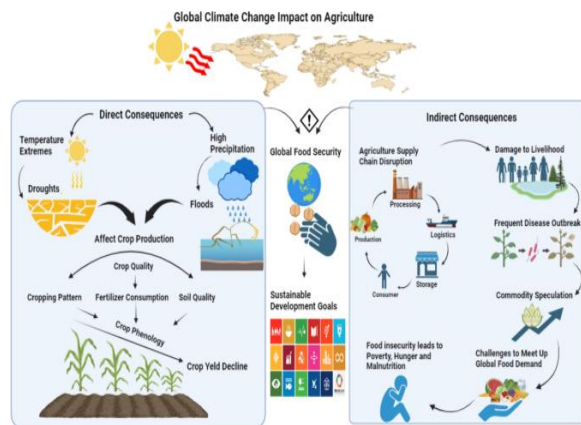
Figure 1: Direct and indirect influences of climatic change on agriculture and food security (Saleem et al., 2024).

Innovations in technology have also continued to pose various challenges in food and water security, particularly in the region due to increased temperatures, rain unpredictability and harsh weather conditions, including cyclones and floods and even drought (Saleem et al., 2024). South Asia has been predicted to suffer from an enhance in the occurrence of heat waves, and its impact on crops is likely to affect yield, especially on rice and wheat crops, which are a staple food in South Asia (Rahman et al., 2024). In addition, increased sea level poses a major risk to coastal regions particularly, the south Asian country of Bangladesh many people are at the risk of flooding, the effects of climate change also reinforce other socio-economic injustices, and for example they affect women, children and indigenous people more than they affect men, young people and non-indigenous people (Karim & Mimura, 2008). These problems can be solved only with the help of multiple approach that involves adaptation measures and international cooperation to minimise the negative impacts that climate change poses on the environment and the economy of the world.

Climate-Induced Migration: Global and Regional Perspectives

Climate change, which is displacing millions of people each year through different calamities, has in recent years become one of the major migration challenges. Downsizing due to increased vulnerability in certain areas due to natural disasters, gradual climate change effects like drought, and continued environmental degradation is unearthing communities globally (Soteras, 2024). In fact, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) predicts that by 2050, global displacement resulting from climate change adverse events will equal 200 million (UNHCR, 2021). The South Asian region where millions of people cross over from the shoal basins, river deltas, and dry zones due to the high possibilities of flash floods occasioned by floods, storm surges, and increased levels of floods due to increased sea levels, harsh weather, and other natural calamities (Shrestha, 2008). Successful displacement is a reality that is causing problems in regards to humanitarian aid, infrastructure, and politics, Also, climate-induced displacement is not a proactive process it creates pressure for forced migration and acts as a catalyst for social tension in political regions, particularly on the borderline (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2021).

Contemporary approaches to climate change migration emphasise further interaction between climate change and non-climatic factors. As the habitable areas of the Earth become non-liveable, countries such as Kiribati in the Pacific Islands are presently discussing means of migration (Nabong,

Hocking, Opdyke, & Walters, 2023). Migration policies on the regional level and international legislation are required to solve this problem, as migration increases and becomes multidimensional. The South Asia case also demonstrates that climate change policies should be inclusive of human migration policies and vice versa.

National Security Implications of Climate Migration

Climate change migration also has severe national security implications, especially in a global system, whereby large-scale climate change may lead to complete breakdown of societies' political structures and compound scarcity of resources (Pumphrey, 2008). Due to the emergence of climate change and weather changes, the world observes a shift in demographics where millions of people move from one country to another causing strain arising from political instabilities in governance structures (Nguyen, Grote, Neubacher, Rahut, & Do, 2023). In South Asia, India and Pakistan, for example, are experiencing more cross-border migrants because of climate change in their territories, and this is a social issue regarding the unity of the states (Ahmed, Givens, & Arredondo, 2024). The constant migration of people could put much more pressure on already scarce resources, which include water, land and energy, to mention but a few and this will lead to even more struggle between different communities (International Organisation for Migration (IOM), 2009).

Climate-induced displacement also has strategic security dimensions, as it is mentioned below. For instance, because of massive population displacement because of flooding and sea level rise India and Bangladesh can be drawn into a conflict owing to cross border insecurity, Moreover, the integration of climate

migrant population into urban areas can result into the formation of climate refugees who stand high chances of been discriminative, inadequate basic resources as well as social unrest thereby boosting chances of instability (Duque, 2024). In addition, resource competition in relation to climate change effects could lead to conflict, as many regions around the world already conflict over freshwater and arable land resources (Blondel, 2012/12).

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research method to explore the interconnection between climate-induced migration and national security in South Asia, using thematic analysis to identify patterns and drivers for migration. Secondary data were gathered from reports by reputed organisations such as ADB, WB, and Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), NASA and UNDP to ensure a comprehensive understanding. The analysis focused on regional vulnerabilities and security challenges, examining each country independently to identify issues and common themes, including resource scarcity, urbanisation and governance gaps. As the study was based entirely on existing literature, no direct contact with human participants was involved.

Findings and Discussion

Afghanistan

Afghanistan is one of the most vulnerable countries in the world to the adverse effects of climate change, ranked as the sixth most climate-vulnerable country globally (German Watch, 2021). Disastrous floods frequently occur, with severe flooding caused by heavy rainfall variability resulting in significant economic and non-economic damages (Zaki, 2023). Droughts and less rainfall are also major impacts of

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climate change. Afghanistan's average monthly rainfall has decreased by 0.5 mm or 2% every decade since the 1960s (Matthew et al., 2009). Additionally, the country has experienced rising temperatures over the years. A report jointly released by the National Environmental Protection, the United Nations Environmental Program and the World Food Program (WFP) notes that, "temperatures have been increasing all over the country over the past thirty years, especially in the Spring and Fall" (WFP, 2016).

In July 2019, droughts significantly impacted population migration within Afghanistan, displacing 287,000 people, mostly from western and northwestern provinces (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 2016). Additionally, climate-induced disasters forced more than 1.5 million people to leave their homes and seek protection in safer areas between 2008 and 2023 (Rafat, 2024). Environmental changes such as desertification, land degradation, and rising temperature also drive migration, as livelihoods-primarily dependent on rainfed farming and livestock rearing-become increasingly unviable. Consequently, many Afghans have been compelled to move in search of better living conditions (IOM, 2022).

Climate-induced migration impacts Afghanistan's national security as well. Extreme weather events pose a significant threat to internally displaced persons. When they move to places like Kabul, it can strain limited resources such as water and land, increasing the risk of disputes with the local population (Majidi, 2011). Conflicts between farmers and pastoralists are more likely in areas such as northern Kunduz, central Kabul and western Farah due to population growth and limited land availability. These issues are exacerbated by climate change, which causes displacement and

intensifies competition for scarce resources due to rising temperatures and less rainfall (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), 2022). Additionally, related to climate-induced migration, Afghan men and women face different scenarios; men often engage in labour migration, and women remain in their villages. This dynamic can create threats to human security (Spink, 2020).

Bangladesh

Bangladesh has the largest deltas in the world. Because of its geographical location, the country is highly vulnerable to natural disasters. Climate change events, such as flooding during rainy seasons, affect almost 80% of the total area of the country. High temperature impacts the northern and northwestern regions of the country. Sea level rise, cyclones and storm surges hit the south and southeastern parts of the country with tropical cyclones. Salinity intrusion affects almost the entire coastal belt along the Bay of Bengal. The impacts of these hazards affect every sector of the country, such as agriculture, fisheries, water sources, forestry and biodiversity.

The vulnerability of climate change impacts has led Bangladesh to experience climate-induced displacement of individuals and communities from their homes and lands. The main areas of displacement have been the river deltas and coastal areas of Bangladesh. By district on the mainland, 24 districts are already experiencing climate displacement (Displacement Solutions, 2012). It is estimated that at least 400,000 people move to Dhaka every year, according to the World Bank, and 70% of the city's slum dwellers are thought to have migrated due to environmental shock, according to the IOM (The Guardian, 2015). Moreover, by 2030, approximately

one in every seven million people in Bangladesh will be displaced by climate change (Environmental Justice Foundation, 2020).

This climate-induced migration poses an impact on the country's national security. In Bangladesh, cities like Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna, Rajshahi, Satkhira and Sirajganj, which have poor infrastructure, present a new challenge for urban migrants. Apart from the impact of climate change, these cities face resource scarcity, which can impede migrants from securing their basic needs. This can lead to conflict among the migrants. Internally displaced migrants due to climate change are at risk of violence, including sex trafficking and labor exploitation by criminal groups, due to lack of proper shelter and social safety nets. For people displaced by natural disasters, this is particularly true. For instance, trafficking increased after Cyclone Sidr in 2007 as criminals preyed on those who had lost their jobs or were the primary breadwinner in their families.

Bhutan

Bhutan is considered one of the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world. One of the pressing issues it faces is the retreat of glaciers. For example, in October 1994, the glacial lake outburst flood occurred in Bhutan. The flood from Lugge Tsho, located 90 km (kilometers) upstream of Punakha Dzong, caused severe flooding along the Pho Chhu River, resulting in damage to Dzongchu and fatalities (HimalDoc, n.d). The country is also prone to flash floods, particularly in the eastern and southern foothill regions (HimalDoc, n.d). In 2016, Thimphu experienced flooding along the Phuentshling-Thimphu highway at multiple locations. Flooding has significantly impacted Bhutan's economy, reducing its gross domestic product by 0.36% (Tshering, 2018). Droughts are another climate change impact affecting

Bhutan. Since the majority of the population relies on farming, which depends on timely precipitation, Bhutanese communities, particularly in rural areas, are highly vulnerable to weather patterns such as droughts and unpredictable rainfall (HimalDoc, n.d).

When considering climate-induced migration, Bhutan has a high rate of internal migration in the South Asian region, and it is expected to increase from 6% in 2009 to 70% by 2040, which is a notable highlighting factor. With such a situation, there might be a larger amount of labour shortage in the rural areas, since more people are trying to migrate to urban areas to find employment opportunities, and it will affect the country's social-economic development. Although it is uncertain if climate change is directly related, districts with substantial out-migration frequently depend more on agriculture and are more vulnerable to poverty and climate change (Katel et al, 2024).

Climate-induced migration in Bhutan is closely linked to environmental vulnerabilities and security risks. The country relies heavily on agriculture, and climate change severely affects rural communities, making them vulnerable to displacement. Additionally, climate change has contributed to a rise in health issues such as dengue and malaria, threatening health security A As agricultural pathways are damaged, farmers and rural residents migrate to cities, increasing competition for resources and social tensions, which can lead to conflicts that disrupt national security (ISra, 2019). However, Bhutan lack strong migration laws or conflict-aware adaptation plans. Unmanaged migration may exacerbate vulnerabilities and result in security issues for Bhutan and the broader South Asian region.

India

India is already known as a country severely affected by climate change. As mentioned in the World Bank report, changing weather patterns could pave the way for a significant crisis sparked by an abrupt shift in the monsoon, which would increase droughts and flooding in many areas of India (WB, 2013). Moreover, glacier melting is another crucial impact faced by India due to climate change. The stability and dependability of northern India's glacier-fed rivers, especially the Indus and the Brahmaputra, are anticipated to be threatened by melting glaciers and loss of snow cover over the Himalayas at a temperature increase of 2.5 degree C, according to calculations (WB, 2013). Sea level rise is another major threat occurring in India, and along with storm surges, it will lead to saltwater intrusion in the coastal areas, affecting agriculture, groundwater quality and causing contamination.

Climate-induced migration is happening in India as well. According to a study done by …, climate change acts as a stress multiplier to socioeconomic factors, pushing people towards migration. Over 70% of the respondents mentioned that drought and irregular rainfall as significant sources of stress. Additionally, 8.3% identified hailstorm as a major stressor, while 23% pointed to floods. In total, 69.74% of households across three states (Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh) reported relocating due to heatwaves, hailstorms, floods and droughts as their primary reasons. (Bharadwaj, 2021). Furthermore, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) estimated that 3.9 million people were displaced in 2020, with 2.3 million more anticipated annually due to sudden-onset disasters (IDMS, 2021).

India is facing a serious issue as a result of climate-induced migration, particularly illegal migration from Bangladesh due to climate change. This places a burden on its resources and alters the demographics of border areas. Tension arises between migrants and indigenous groups due to the porous border, which was created without considering geography or culture (Kumar and Khogen, 2022). Migrants from Bangladesh are an additional strain on India's broader security. As one of the countries most impacted by climate change (Eckstein, 2022). India faces a serious internal displacement threat that could have a major impact on national security (Kumar and Khogen, 2022). It is necessary to address the root cause of climate-induced migration to build a safer and more resilient India with sustainable resources, social stability, and strengthened security.

Maldives

Another South Asian nation significantly impacted by climate change is the Maldives, a country of small islands. Rising sea level, extreme temperatures, damaging winds, and intense rainfall events are the key indicators of the changing climate (Climate Risk Profile, 2016). The frequency and intensity of flash floods and tropical cyclones are expected to increase, even though the region may receive more rain in shorter periods (Christensen et al., 2007; Ministry of Environment, Maldives (MEE), 2016). Both maximum and minimum temperatures are rising, indicating a general warming trend over time (MEE, 2016). Sea level rise is a major concern, with projections of an 8.2 to 9.5 cm increase across various atolls by 2080.

As a low-lying island nation, the Maldives is highly vulnerable to climate change, particularly the threat of submersion due to sea level rise, which could lead to internal displacement or overseas migration (UNDP 2021). Changes in weather patterns and ecosystems disrupt traditional farming livelihoods, forcing people to seek better opportunities in urban areas or abroad (UNDP, 2021).

From a national security standpoint, past resettlements show that social tension within communities can lead to conflicts that last for generations. Failure to effectively manage migration and integrate migrants into host communities can undermine social cohesion and result in adverse socioeconomic outcomes, limiting migrants' contributions to society (Thoha, 2020). Migrant communities in such conditions are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, often targeted by opportunistic groups.

Nepal

Geographically situated in the heart of the Himalayas, Nepal is a mountainous and least developed country, particularly sensitive to climate change (IPCC, 2022). The rapid melting of snow and ice in the mountains, coupled with intense monsoon rainfall in the foothills, exposes Nepal to numerous climate risks and water-related hazards. Millions of Nepalese are vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, including reduced agricultural productivity, food insecurity, dependence on water resources, loss of biodiversity and harm to lives and property (NPS, 2022). Some of the climate change impacts Nepal faces include flooding, landslides, unpredictable rainfall, food shortages, and a rapidly changing ecosystem. Due to factors such as political instability, geographical location and social conditions, Nepal is ranked 128th out of 181 countries

in terms of vulnerability to climate change impacts (WB & ADB, 2021).

Due to the climate change disasters, people in Nepal are migrating, particularly from the Himalayan and hilly regions to the Terai for better living conditions. Over the past decade, 3.4 million people have moved to escape natural risks or as a result of natural catastrophes (Talchabhadel, 2023). By 2050, about 1.3 million people in Nepal may have to relocate due to climate-induced disasters, which is more than three times the number recorded from 2006 to 2020. The IDMC reports that natural disasters caused 121,000 new internal displacements in Nepal in 2019, with 29,000 of those people remaining internally displaced (Kapri, 2024).

The balance of social and cultural values and resources in society is impacted by migration. It can jeopardise a country's stability and security by disrupting the peaceful coexistence of groups divided by cultural, ethnic, religious and political differences (Onuoha and Ezirim, 2010). Furthermore, Nepal's infrastructure may be strained, and significant security risks could arise if it experiences an influx of climate refugees from other nations due to catastrophic events. These challenges highlight how migration, climate change and national issues are connected.

Pakistan

Geographically. Pakistan is situated in a region where the effects of climate change are felt most acutely (Malik et. al., 2012). Disasters like floods, droughts and other natural calamities are primary examples of climate change impacts in Pakistan (Banoori, 2012). The devastating effects of the 2010 floods included 20 million lives lost, injured or reported missing (Kurosaki et al., 2011). Another massive flood in 2012

further exacerbated the disasters in the country (German Watch, 2014). If the Himalayan glaciers continue to melt rapidly, Pakistan will face increased vulnerability to flooding, especially in areas near the Arabian Sea. Additionally, freshwater supplies are expected to decline due to climate change, endangering livelihoods and lives (LEAD n.d). Pakistan is also facing a new challenge of extreme cold, prompting the prime minister to direct authorities to provide temporary shelters for the homeless. For the first time in history, Pakistan has established shelter houses to address this issue (Shahid and Ahan, 2021).

By 2050, more than 140 million people are expected to relocate within their own nations, with millions of internal migrants anticipated in South Asia, according to the World Bank's "Grounds Well: Preparing for Internal Climate Migration" report (IPCC, 2018). Over half of Pakistan's population may move to metropolitan areas in the next 10 to 15 years due to climate-related pressures, according to a 2016 study. However, with poor living conditions and an imminent water crisis in major cities like Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad, Pakistan is ill-prepared for this scenario. Many cities lack the infrastructure necessary to manage a significant influx of migrants. This environment migration could destabilise the country, exacerbating existing problems such as resource scarcity and identity-based conflicts (Aslam et al., 2021). The increasing frequency of droughts and floods forces rural communities, particularly those reliant on agriculture, to relocate to urban areas in search of employment. Cities like Karachi and Lahore, already grappling with overpopulation, unemployment, and inadequate infrastructure, are experiencing accelerated urbanisation driven by climate change (Razia et al., 2023).

As outlined above, it is evident that climate-induced migration poses a significant threat to Pakistan. It also presents security risks, as it can fuel extremism and violence. Displaced people often experience social and economic isolation, increasing their vulnerability to recruitment by extremist organisations (Zubair et al., 2024). Furthermore, there are growing concerns that migration driven by climate change may lead to increased radicalisation and violence, further undermining Pakistan's security (Sumani, 2023).

Sri Lanka

As a small island developing state, Sri Lanka faces adverse effects of climate change, including flooding, sea level rise, rainfall variability and landslides, etc. Major floods occurred in 1907, 1913, 1940, 1947, 1957, 1967, 1968, 1978, 1989, 1992, 2003 and 2007 (Wickramarathna et al., 2012; MONPEA 2017). Among these, the 2017 flood had devastating impacts on the country. Severe rainfall frequently triggers landslides and flash floods, seriously affecting infrastructure, lives and livelihoods (Perera et al., 2018).

Extreme temperatures are another challenge, with Sri Lanka being more vulnerable to heatwaves due to its proximity to the equator (Alahakoon et al., 2022). Cyclones and other unpredictable extreme weather events also pose serious threats, occasionally resulting in fatalities and significant property damage (Kafle, 2017). Additionally, Sri Lanka is particularly vulnerable to the combined effects of sea level rise and storm surges (Dasgupta et al., 2011). Calculations indicate that sea level will rise by 10 centimetres (cm) by 2030 and 21cm by 2060 (World Bank Group, 2020).

Studies have identified that climate-induced disasters such as droughts, floods and landslides are primary drivers of migration in Sri Lanka. Agriculture plays a vital role in Sri Lankan livelihoods, but erratic rainfall, rising temperature and water scarcity disrupt agricultural activities, influencing farmers to seek alternative income sources. This has primarily caused internal migration within the country, with climate change being a significant factor. People are moving to urban areas in search of employment opportunities. In districts like Anuradhapura, Trincomalee, Nuwara Eliya and Kegalle, which rely heavily on agriculture, residents are migrating to urban areas for daily wages due to climate-induced disasters (Chandrarathna et al., 2021). Slow-onset events such as crop failure, water scarcity, saltwater intrusion and soil degradation also threaten Sri Lanka. Additionally, women constitute the majority of migrants, and while economic factors may be the primary motivation, it is clear that changing climate conditions increase pressure and make alternative career opportunities in the home region unfeasible (SLYCAN Trust, n.d).

As outlined above, it is evident that climate change poses a significant threat to the South Asian region in multiple ways. As a result, the region faces numerous challenges, including climate-induced migration, which is emphasised as a critical factor affecting national security.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, climate-induced migration has a devastating impact on South Asia. The findings illustrate that countries in the region face diverse vulnerabilities such as decreasing rainfall and rising temperature in Afghanistan, critical sea level rise in Bangladesh and the Maldives, and glacier melting in Bhutan, Nepal and India, which leads to flooding and droughts. Pakistan faces severe water scarcity, while Sri Lanka contends with sea-level rise and saltwater intrusion. These impacts significantly affect livelihoods, infrastructure and agriculture across the region. Despite these differences, the region shares common challenges, including resource scarcity, urban strain and social tension. Climate-induced migration exacerbates these issues, threatening national security by intensifying conflicts over resources and increasing risks to human security.

Addressing climate-induced migration as both a humanitarian and security concern is essential. Without determinative actions, displacement caused by climate-related disasters could destabilise the stability and sustainable development of the region.

Recommendations

Strengthen Climate Resilient Agriculture:

The study highlights that agriculture is a major economic pillar for countries in the region. However, the sector is under threat due to the adverse effects of climate change. Investing in climate-resilient farming practices, such as drought-tolerant crops, rainwater harvesting, sustainable soil management, and soil health restoration, can help reduce rural displacement. Governments should provide farmers with technical support, training and infrastructure facilities to ensure food security and economic stability.

Develop Community-Based Adaptation Strategies:

In South Asia, rural populations are among the most affected by climate-induced disasters. Empowering local communities to initiate climate adaptation measures can effectively address both climate change challenges and migration drivers. Initiatives like community-managed water systems, disaster prepare-

-dness training and localised renewable energy projects can enhance the knowledge and resilience of rural communities. These efforts can become valuable assets for their communities, with successful implementation benefiting the entire country. Since these initiatives involve local planning and decision-making, they hold the potential to create lasting and meaningful change.

Improve Border Management and Security:

An effective strategy to mitigate climate-induced migration in South Asia is improving border management and security. Climate change often leads to displacement, particularly in border regions like Bangladesh-India and Afghanistan-Pakistan, where unregulated migration can result in resource scarcity, strain infrastructure, and create social tension. Strengthening border management ensures legal migration pathways, enhances surveillance and fostering cross-border coordination, reducing risks such as human trafficking. Additionally, establishing shelters and essential services at the border supports displaced populations. These measures help manage migration effectively and promote regional stability.

Promote Regional Cooperation:

As highlighted in the study, every country in South Asia faces the devastating impacts of climate change. Addressing this shared challenge collectively through regional cooperation is essential. Issues such as resource scarcity, internal and cross-border conflicts, and extreme weather events are common to varying degrees across the region. Platforms like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation provide an opportunity for all nations to work together to develop policies, share resources and data, and

coordinate disaster response. These collaborative efforts can reduce climate-induced migration, promote stability and pave the way for sustainable development.

Increase Research and Development (R&D):

Increasing R&D focused on critical issues, including climate change, is essential to addressing climate-induced migration in South Asia. The region allocates significantly less to R&D than compared to Europe. India is leading among other Asian countries, but is still falling below global averages. Investing in R&D can help governments and policymakers gather reliable data, identify key drivers of migration and displacement patterns, and develop innovative solutions to tackle climate-related challenges efficiently and effectively.

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India's Pursuit of Strategic Autonomy: An Ontological Security Perspective Rooted in Civilizational Legacy

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Abstract

India's pursuit of strategic autonomy is an ongoing diplomatic and ideological endeavour rooted in its civilizational ethos and commitment to maintaining ontological security — a sense of continuity and identity in a complex international landscape. This study examines how India's historical experiences, cultural narratives, and civilizational legacy form a distinctive framework that influences its foreign policy decisions and its resistance to hegemonic alignments. Anchored in the concept of ontological security, this approach explores how India's self-conception, drawn from principles like Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (the world is one family) and strategic nonalignment, provides a foundation for its autonomous stance amidst global power shifts. Through analysis of India's engagements with multilateral organizations, alliances, and its selective partnerships, this paper reveals how India negotiates its identity against the backdrop of external pressures and global expectations. The study suggests that India's diplomatic strategies are not merely responses to immediate geopolitical threats but are deeply embedded in its historical narratives and normative beliefs. Thus, India's path to strategic autonomy underscores an intrinsic quest for ontological security, enabling it to navigate the evolving international system with a uniquely Indian approach.

Keywords: Strategic Autonomy, Ontological Security, Civilizational Legacy, India's Foreign Policy.

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Introduction

Foreign policy is a complex articulation of national priorities, balancing a state's practical goals with its ideational values[2], historical context, and position within the global order. While conventional approaches to foreign policy prioritize material interests, power calculations, and security concerns, the role of national identity and the concept of "self" are equally vital in shaping a state's diplomatic posture. Identity, a critical construct in sociology and International Relations (IR), defines a state's unique characteristics, values, and its historical trajectory, profoundly influencing its approach to both bilateral and multilateral relations (Adler & Barnett, 1998; Wendt, 1992). This understanding of self not only impacts the formulation of a nation's foreign policy goals but also sculpts the pathway through which it engages with the world, offering a stable ideological foundation even as the state's strategies adapt to shifting geopolitical landscapes. In IR, identity operates as a cognitive and affective lens[3], influencing how a nation perceives itself in relation to others.

According to Wendt (1992), identity is not merely a passive reflection of a nation's culture or history but a dynamic construct[4] shaped through continuous interactions and self-perceptions. This identity becomes "embedded" over time[5], forming the ideological basis for a nation's roles, responsibilities, and legitimate interests. Consequently, identity-driven policies provide states with a powerful source of legitimacy[6], as nations project their self-concept[7] through diplomatic engagements, alliances, and policies that align with their perceived values (Adler & Barnett, 1998).

The construction of a coherent "self-narrative"[8] is intrinsic to crafting foreign policy. A state that views itself as a "defender of democracy" is likely to embed democratic principles within its foreign policy, thereby aligning its goals with broader ideological imperatives. In contrast, a nation that sees itself as a regional power may focus on projecting its influence over neighbouring states, supporting foreign policy initiatives that underscore this self-image.

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[2] These are concepts and principles that reflect a nation's beliefs and ideals, which guide its behaviour and interactions on the global stage. Amitav Acharya (2001), in his book 'Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order' discusses how ideational values shape regional security dynamics.

[3] This is a framework that combines rational understanding (cognitive) and emotional responses (affective) to interpret experiences and formulate policies, affecting how states understand their identity and roles. See Identity and Foreign Policy: The Role of Identity in International Relations by David Campbell (1998).

[4] It is the idea that identity is not static but evolves over time through interactions and experiences with other states and actors in the international arena. For more insights see Social Theory of International Relations by Alexander Wendt (1999).

[5] The notion that a state's identity becomes ingrained in its political culture and historical narratives, influencing long-term policies and actions.

[6] General belief that a state's actions are appropriate, justified, and acceptable within the international community, often derived from its identity and values.

[7] I describe this as the perception a state has of itself, including its identity, values, and role in the world, which shapes its foreign policy decisions.

[8] A self-narrative refers to the story a nation tells about itself, which shapes its identity and influences its behaviour in the international arena. It encompasses historical experiences, cultural values, and collective memories that define how a state sees itself and its role in the world. Narratives of Nationhood: The Representation of History in the Political Discourse of Post-Soviet Russia by Mikhail Suslov (2017) discusses how nations construct narratives that shape their identities.

Identity thus operates as an underlying determinant in foreign policy formation, often as influential as a nation's material assets in the diplomatic arena (Wendt, 1999). In states that conceive of themselves as "beacons of democracy,"[9] "cultural leaders,"[10] or "resistance states,"[11] these ideological frameworks act as cognitive anchors [12] guiding and shaping their foreign policy choices.

Nye's (2004) concept of "soft power," [13] further illustrates how a nation's self-identity can actively shape global perceptions, deploying values, culture, and ideologies as tools for influence. The foreign policy of the United States and most European nations, which often invoke their democratic identity to justify alliances and interventions, exemplifies how state values permeate its external engagements. Conversely, Germany and Japan's post-World War II diplomacy has embraced pacifism and economic cooperation,

reflecting a redefined self-concept that prioritizes peaceful engagement over military prowess (Pyle, 2007). Such identity frameworks, once established, tend to be resistant to change, shaping a consistent foreign policy ethos that remains influential despite evolving administrations and global conditions.

In bilateral relations, identity plays a crucial role in shaping interactions between "self" and "other." [14] Campbell (1998) describes this as a process of "othering," where a state reinforces its own identity by distinguishing itself from others. Bilateral diplomacy thus transcends mere strategic calculations, as identity-based considerations influence national stances, making certain compromises unpalatable and reinforcing adversarial postures. In the multilateral sphere, identity similarly determines a nation's engagement with international organisations, treaties, and alliances. [15] Constructivist scholars argue that

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[9] This phrase describes states that view themselves as models of democratic governance and advocates for democratic principles globally. Such nations often believe it is their responsibility to promote democracy and human rights in other countries. See The Democratic Advantage: How Democracies Promote Prosperity and Peace by Steven Pinker (2018).

[10] Cultural leaders are states that see themselves as custodians or promoters of cultural values and norms, often aspiring to influence global culture through soft power, such as art, language, and education.

[11] Resistance states are countries that define themselves in opposition to perceived imperialism or hegemonic influences, often positioning themselves as champions of sovereignty and anti-colonialism in their foreign policy.

[12] Cognitive anchors are stable beliefs or frameworks that guide a state's decision-making processes in foreign policy. These anchors help states interpret international events and respond consistently according to their self-concept and identity.

[13] Soft power refers to the ability of a country to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or force. It encompasses cultural, ideological, and diplomatic means, allowing states to shape preferences and garner

support by promoting their values and policies. Joseph Nye introduced this concept to highlight the importance of non-military tools in international relations. See Nye, J. S. (2004). Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics. New York: Public Affairs.

[14] In the study of international relations, the concepts of "self" and "other" refer to how states perceive themselves (self) in relation to other states (other). The "self" embodies a nation's identity, values, and interests, while the "other" represents foreign states or entities that are seen as different or distinct. This binary framework is essential in understanding bilateral relations, as it influences how countries interact, negotiate, and form alliances, often leading to either cooperative or adversarial dynamics. The perception of identity can lead to the construction of narratives that justify actions and shape policies toward the "other."

[15] The multilateral sphere refers to the interactions and relationships that occur between multiple states or international actors, often facilitated through international organizations, treaties, and alliances. In this context, a nation's identity plays a crucial role in shaping its approach to multilateral engagement. A state's self-concept (its values, norms, and historical experiences) guides its participation in international organizations and influences its stance on global

multilateralism offers a stage upon which states can project and negotiate their identities, thereby reinforcing their roles within the international system (Wendt, 1999).

In the discipline of IR, identity is not merely an accumulation of cultural symbols or historical memories but is fundamental to a state's "ontological security" — a term that emphasizes the importance of a stable, consistent sense of self. As Giddens (1991) posits, ontological security is "a sense of continuity and order in events," allowing both individuals and collectives to construct stable self-narratives amidst an otherwise volatile international environment (Steele, 2008). For states, this quest for ontological security translates into a foreign policy that reinforces a consistent self-identity, shaping responses to threats and opportunities within a coherent framework (Steele, 2008). In this paper, I aim to unpack the concept of ontological security, exploring its significance within IR and illustrating how a nation's historical experiences shape its ontological security. I will demonstrate how ontological security is essential for a nation to navigate effectively within the anarchic landscape of IR, and how a nation's past is essential to shape its ontological security, using India as a key exemplar.

Ontological Security: Relevance in IR

Ontological security is fundamentally rooted in metaphysical inquiries[16] into the nature of existence and the self's relationship to the world. To begin, let's first consider the metaphysical structure of the world, as it underpins any concept of ontological security. The metaphysical structure of the world refers to the fundamental nature and organisation of reality (French, 2014). Philosophically, the world comprises entities that are both tangible (like physical objects) and intangible (such as beliefs, values, and identity constructs) (Rudolff, 2010). The world's structure, therefore, includes a vast web of interdependent realities: objective structures (natural laws, physical objects), intersubjective frameworks (shared beliefs, cultural norms), and subjective perceptions (individual consciousness and identity) (Rudolff, 2010). Ontological security, in this context, emerges as an agent's need to establish a stable understanding of these layers of reality, especially as they pertain to one's place within them (Mitzen, 2006). For the metaphysical structure to be fully coherent, the following conditions must be met:

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issues. This identity shapes how a nation aligns with others, how it advocates for specific policies, and how it navigates power dynamics within multilateral forums. Nations often seek to project their identities through their roles in international treaties and alliances, which can enhance their legitimacy and influence on the global stage.

[16] Metaphysical inquiries refer to philosophical investigations into the fundamental nature of reality, existence, and the relationships between entities. These inquiries often explore abstract concepts such as being, identity, time, space, and causality, seeking to understand the underlying principles that govern the universe and human experience. In the context of International Relations (IR), metaphysical inquiries may involve examining the ontological and epistemological assumptions that shape a nation's identity and foreign policy. Such inquiries challenge conventional understandings and encourage deeper reflection on how states construct their narratives and perceive their roles in the global order.

- Internal Consistency

The world must operate in a logically consistent manner, where principles like causality [17] and coherence[18] apply universally (Wendt, 1999).

- Representational Correspondence:[19]

The structure should faithfully represent observable phenomena, allowing individuals to construct reliable, repeatable experiences (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

To feel ontologically secure, individuals (or collectives like states) require a sense of continuity and stability within this metaphysical framework. Ontological security, then, is more than physical safety; it involves a deeply rooted assurance of being and identity (Giddens, 1991). This requires several conditions:

- Continuity of Self-Identity:

The individual/State must have a stable and continuous sense of self, grounded in biographical narratives[20] that affirm their identity (Giddens, 1991).

This includes a consistent understanding of their past, present, and future.

- Reliable Structure of Reality:

For ontological security to be possible, the world must appear logical and predictable. Events and actions should fit into a comprehensible framework, allowing individuals/states to trust that their environment will react in expected ways (Mitzen, 2006).

- Symbolic Frameworks:

Since identity is partially constructed through symbols (cultural, religious, national), an ontologically secure being needs a cohesive symbolic framework [21] that validates and reaffirms their identity (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

When these conditions are met, individuals or societies achieve ontological security, gaining a sense of stability and assurance in both their identity and their place within the world's metaphysical order (Steele,

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[17] Causality refers to the relationship between cause and effect, exploring how one event (the cause) leads to another event (the effect). In the context of IR, causality can help analyse the impact of historical events, policies, or decisions on state behaviour and international dynamics.

[18] Coherence refers to the quality of being logically connected and consistent, where elements of a system or argument support one another in a unified manner. In IR, coherence can apply to a nation's foreign policy, where consistent values, narratives, and strategies reinforce its identity and objectives on the global stage. A coherent approach helps to build trust and legitimacy among international actors.

[19] Representational correspondence refers to the relationship between a representation (such as a theory, model, or narrative) and the reality it aims to depict. For IR, representational correspondence can be crucial for understanding how nations portray their identities, interests, and policies to both domestic

and international audiences. A strong correspondence enhances credibility and legitimacy, while discrepancies can lead to misunderstandings or conflicts in international interactions.

[20] In IR, biographical narratives can be particularly significant for states, as they influence how nations construct their identities, justify their policies, and engage with other actors in the global arena. By framing their histories in specific ways, states can create compelling narratives that foster legitimacy and cohesion among their populations.

[21] Cohesive symbolic frameworks can significantly influence how states perceive themselves and others, shaping their foreign policies, diplomatic strategies, and national narratives. Such frameworks often draw on cultural, historical, and ideological elements that resonate with a community, facilitating social cohesion and collective identity.

2008). This sense of security is essential for agency[22], as it allows for a self-assured interaction with the world (Mitzen, 2006). Where IR is concerned, understanding ontological security and its role in IR requires dissecting it through various theoretical lenses within the discipline. Realism, for instance, traditionally asserts that states prioritize survival and power-maximization in an anarchic system (Waltz, 1979). This framework, however, often neglects how states construct and defend identities. Constructivism, by contrast, emphasizes ideational factors in shaping state behaviour, proposing that states operate within socially constructed identities and norms, which they seek to maintain even in the face of physical threats (Wendt, 1992).

It is important to note here that the concept of an ontologically secure nation revolves around the idea that a state, like an individual, seeks stability and continuity in its identity, narrative, and role within the international system (Mitzen, 2006). This pursuit is not just about physical security or territorial integrity but rather about maintaining a consistent self-conception amidst external pressures and existential threats (Steele, 2008).

Ontological Security and India's Foreign Policy Trajectory

India's trajectory in the realm of foreign policy has been emblematic of an enduring quest for autonomy, decisively shaped by a historical continuum and a civilizational ethos that predate modern statehood. Here, I explore how India's foreign policy post-independence manifested a unique and independent stance, notably through the non-aligned movement (NAM) and a pursuit of strategic autonomy [23], culminating today in "Atmanirbharta"[24]. I posit that the ontological security of India as a nation-state (a sense of self-assurance in its identity and global role) stems fundamentally from its civilizational legacy, which underpins its policies and renders its foreign engagements distinctively Indian. As has been discussed above, ontological security, at its core, refers to an entity's deep-seated need for a stable sense of self and identity within the broader metaphysical framework of existence (Giddens, 1991). For a state, ontological security entails the projection of a

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[22] "Agency" is crucial for understanding how states, non-state actors, and individuals navigate complex political environments, make decisions, and pursue their interests. Agency can be constrained by various factors, such as social structures, cultural norms, or institutional frameworks, but it remains a fundamental aspect of political behaviour and identity formation.

[23] This concept emphasizes the importance of self-determination and flexibility in navigating international relations, allowing states to pursue their national interests while maintaining a degree of freedom from hegemonic powers or global trends. In practice, strategic autonomy may involve cultivating diverse partnerships, enhancing domestic capabilities, and asserting a distinctive identity on the global stage. The concept is particularly relevant in a multipolar world,

where states seek to balance their interests amidst competing influences.

[24] In India, Atmanirbharta has gained prominence as a national policy aimed at reducing dependency on foreign imports and enhancing domestic production capabilities across various sectors, including defence, manufacturing, and agriculture. This approach emphasizes the importance of indigenous innovation, resource utilization, and sustainable development, aligning with the broader goal of building a resilient economy. The concept is also linked to India's aspirations for strategic autonomy in the global arena, where it seeks to assert its identity and priorities while navigating international relations.

consistent narrative, one rooted in both historical authenticity and contemporary relevance, which secures its identity amidst global flux (Mitzen, 2006).

India's Civilizational Legacy as the Bedrock of its Ontological Security

So is India ontologically secure? I posit that it is. It can be corroborated by the fact that its ontological security finds its foundation in its millennia-old civilisation, where continuity in cultural, philosophical, and social structures has cultivated a national psyche resilient to pre-colonial invasions, colonial disruptions[25] and post-colonial pressures [26] . Post-independence, this collective memory and historical identity endowed India with a confidence in navigating global politics autonomously, resistant to hegemonic affiliations[27],

that is reflective of its intrinsic values (Wendt, 1999). India's civilisational legacy extends beyond mere antiquity; it embodies a pluralistic, philosophical corpus that valorises autonomy and balance. Vedic philosophy, emphasising "Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah"[28], "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam"[29], and non-interference, crystallised a worldview oriented towards inclusivity and balance rather than dominance or subservience (Nehru, 1946). India's present-day ontological security is also reinforced by profound contributions to the ancient world in diverse fields such as medicine, literature, astronomy, religion, mathematics, economics, statecraft, and more. These ancient contributions resonate globally and provide India with a distinct sense of historical identity, allowing it to navigate modern challenges with a

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[25] They primarily stem from British colonialism, which led to profound transformations in Indian society, economy, and governance. These disruptions included the dismantling of traditional industries, the imposition of foreign economic policies that favoured British interests, the restructuring of social hierarchies, and the introduction of new legal and educational systems. The colonial period also saw resistance movements that sought to reclaim autonomy and assert Indian identity, ultimately culminating in the struggle for independence. The legacies of these disruptions continue to influence contemporary Indian society, shaping its political discourse, economic policies, and cultural identities.

[26] In the context of India, postcolonial pressures manifest in several ways, such as the struggle to forge a national identity amidst diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, the need to address historical injustices and inequalities, and the ongoing impact of global economic forces that may perpetuate neo-colonial dynamics. Additionally, postcolonial pressures can include the expectations from the international community regarding governance, human rights, and development, which can complicate domestic policy-making. Navigating these pressures requires a balance between embracing global integration and asserting national sovereignty.

[27] Hegemonic affiliations often align with the influence of a dominant power or set of values that shape the behaviour and

policies of other states, particularly in a hierarchical world order. These affiliations can manifest in various forms, such as military alliances, economic partnerships, or cultural influences, and are often characterized by asymmetrical power dynamics. In the context of India, hegemonic affiliations can be seen in its interactions with global powers, such as the United States or China, and how these relationships influence India's strategic autonomy, foreign policy choices, and identity formation. Understanding hegemonic affiliations helps to elucidate the complexities of power relations in the international system and the ways in which smaller states navigate these dynamics.

[28] "Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah" is a Sanskrit phrase that translates to "May all be happy" or "May all beings be happy." It is often used in Indian philosophical and spiritual contexts to express a universal aspiration for the well-being and happiness of all living beings.

[29] "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" is a Sanskrit phrase that translates to "The world is one family." This concept reflects the idea of universal brotherhood and interconnectedness, emphasizing that all human beings belong to a single global community. Rooted in ancient Indian philosophy, this notion promotes values of empathy, compassion, and mutual respect among diverse cultures and peoples.

consciousness deeply rooted in its past. The same is explained as follows:

- Medicine:

India's advancements in medicine trace back to the Ayurvedic[30] and Siddha[31] systems, which are among the oldest healing practices known to humanity. The foundational texts, such as Charaka Samhita[32] and Sushruta Samhita,[33] outlined methods for diagnosis, surgical procedures, and herbal treatments (Mukhopadhyaya, 2019). Charaka's [34] theories on physiology and Sushruta's [35] pioneering work in surgery (especially rhinoplasty and cataract surgery) contributed to the foundations of modern medicine ((Dave et al., 2024). Ayurveda's holistic approach to wellness has seen a global resurgence, emphasising preventive healthcare, which remains highly relevant in contemporary times.

- Literature:

India's rich literary tradition, notably the Vedas, Upanishads, Mahabharata, and Ramayana, provided philosophical and ethical frameworks that continue to influence Indian society. The Bhagavad Gita,[36] a part of the Mahabharata, is an enduring spiritual text, inspiring scholars and thinkers worldwide on topics of ethics, duty, and existential purpose (Choudhary & Prabha, 2023). The Sanskrit language, with its precision and complexity, influenced linguistics and continues to inspire research on artificial languages and computational linguistics.

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[30] The term "Ayurvedic" refers to Ayurveda, an ancient system of medicine that originated in India over 3,000 years ago. The word "Ayurveda" is derived from Sanskrit, where "Ayur" means "life" and "Veda" means "knowledge" or "science." Ayurveda emphasizes a holistic approach to health, focusing on balancing the body, mind, and spirit through natural remedies, dietary practices, and lifestyle modifications.

[31] "Siddha" refers to an ancient system of medicine that originated in South India, closely related to Ayurveda but distinct in its methodologies and practices. Siddha medicine is based on the belief that human beings can attain physical and spiritual perfection through the cultivation of certain skills and knowledge, referred to as "Siddhi." The system emphasizes the balance of bodily humors (known as "thodams"), the importance of herbal and mineral remedies, and holistic approaches to health and wellness.

[32] "Charaka Samhita" is one of the foundational texts of Ayurveda, attributed to the ancient sage Charaka. Composed around the 2nd century BCE to the 2nd century CE, it is a comprehensive treatise on medicine, encompassing various aspects of healthcare, including diagnosis, treatment, and the principles of health maintenance.

[33] "Sushruta Samhita" is one of the oldest and most important texts in the field of surgery and medicine within Ayurveda, attributed to the ancient physician Sushruta. Composed around the 6th century BCE, it is renowned for its systematic approach to surgical techniques and the treatment of various ailments.

[34] Charaka is a revered ancient Indian physician and philosopher, best known for his contributions to Ayurveda, the traditional system of medicine in India.

[35] Sushruta is an ancient Indian physician and surgeon, often regarded as the "Father of Surgery" in the context of Ayurveda. He is traditionally credited with authoring the "Sushruta Samhita," a seminal text that serves as a comprehensive guide to surgical techniques, anatomy, and patient care.

[36] Gita emphasizes the importance of duty (dharma), righteousness, and the pursuit of self-realization, making it a foundational text in Hindu philosophy. Its teachings have resonated across cultures and continue to be studied for their insights into ethics, spirituality, and the human condition.

- Astronomy:

Ancient Indian astronomers like Aryabhata[37] and Varahamihira[38] developed significant astronomical models. Aryabhata's work on the heliocentric system and his approximation of π (pi) contributed substantially to the field (Pingree, 1970). His texts on planetary motion and eclipses predate similar discoveries by Western astronomers, highlighting India's early understanding of astronomical phenomena. Varahamihira's compendium, Brihat Samhita,[39] offered insights into astrology, meteorology, and hydrology, concepts that find applications in modern sciences even today.

- Religion and Philosophy:

India's contributions to world religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism) have shaped global spiritual discourse. Hinduism introduced concepts of dharma (duty), karma (action), and moksha (liberation) which resonate universally, while Buddhism's focus on mindfulness and the Four Noble

Truths[40] has gained immense popularity as a philosophical and meditative practice worldwide (King, 1999). The Vedanta[41] and Yoga philosophies continue to influence contemporary metaphysical and wellness practices, fortifying India's identity as a spiritual and philosophical guide.

- Chess:

The game of Chaturanga,[42] which originated in ancient India, is the precursor to modern chess. Symbolic of strategic thought, this game influenced global strategy and board games. The rules of Chaturanga emphasised foresight, patience, and strategic maneuvering, qualities that are crucial in modern-day decision-making and strategic planning (Murray, 1913).

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[37] Influential ancient Indian mathematician and astronomer, recognized for his pioneering contributions to the fields of mathematics and astronomy. He is best known for his work, the 'Aryabhatiya', which covers various mathematical concepts, including the place value system, arithmetic, algebra, and trigonometry, as well as astronomical calculations.

[38] Prominent Indian astronomer, mathematician, and astrologer, known for his extensive contributions to the fields of astronomy and astrology. He is best recognized for his seminal work, the Brihat Samhita, which is an encyclopaedic text encompassing various subjects, including astronomy, astrology, meteorology, and architecture.

[39] The 'Brihat Samhita' is a comprehensive ancient Indian text written by the astronomer and astrologer Varahamihira in the 6th century CE. It serves as an encyclopaedic guide encompassing various disciplines, including astronomy, astrology, meteorology, architecture, and agriculture.

[40] The Four Noble Truths are fundamental principles in Buddhism that outline the nature of suffering and the path to liberation. They are Dukkha (Suffering), Samudaya (Origin of Suffering), Nirodha (Cessation of Suffering), Magga (Path to the Cessation of Suffering).

[41] "Vedanta" literally means "the end of the Vedas," signifying its roots in the Vedic texts. It addresses fundamental questions regarding the nature of reality, the self (atman), and the ultimate truth (Brahman).

[42] Ancient Indian strategy game that is considered a precursor to modern chess. The name "Chaturanga" translates to "four divisions of the military," referring to the four types of units in the game: infantry, cavalry, elephants, and chariots. This game is believed to have originated in India around the 6th century CE and was played on an 8x8 board, similar to contemporary chess.

- Mathematics:

Indian mathematicians like Brahmagupta[43], Bhaskara II,[44] and Aryabhata[45] laid foundational principles in arithmetic, algebra, and trigonometry. The concept of zero as a numeral, an idea developed in India, revolutionized mathematics and computational sciences, with Brahmagupta formalizing operations on zero and negative numbers (Joseph, 2010).

Pingala's binary system[46] and Sanskrit algorithms anticipated developments that later became essential to digital computing and coding. These contributions underscore India's foundational role in mathematical theory and its applications.

- Economics and Statecraft:

Ancient Indian treatises on economics and governance, notably Kautilya's Arthashastra,[47] are seminal texts that delve into politics, economics, and military strategy. Kautilya's principles on diplomacy, espionage, and resource management provided a sophisticated framework for governance and economic stability (Boesche, 2002). These ideas on realpolitik[48] and statecraft resonate today, as they align with India's contemporary approach to strategic autonomy and economic self-reliance.

- Metallurgy and Engineering.

Ancient Indian metallurgy showcased remarkable advancements, exemplified by the Iron Pillar of Delhi, which resists corrosion even after centuries. This metallurgical expertise extended to crafting high-quality steel, today known in its anglicised form as Wootz steel,[49] which was highly valued and exported worldwide, especially for weapons (Ranganathan, 1985). Such engineering feats, coupled with architectural marvels like the Ellora and Ajanta caves,[50] highlight India's innovative spirit and technical prowess.

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[43] Influential ancient Indian mathematician and astronomer who made significant contributions to mathematics, particularly in the fields of algebra and number theory.

[44] Also known as Bhaskara Acharya (1114–1185 CE), was a prominent Indian mathematician and astronomer renowned for his contributions to mathematics, particularly in algebra, calculus, and number theory.

[45] Renowned Indian mathematician and astronomer whose works significantly influenced the fields of mathematics and astronomy in ancient India and beyond.

[46] Pingala's system employs a binary scheme, using combinations of short (labelled as "1") and long (labelled as "0") syllables to form various metrical patterns. This can be seen as a precursor to modern binary arithmetic, where the presence or absence of a value is indicated by a binary digit. His use of binary in the context of poetry showcases a sophisticated understanding of mathematical patterns and their applications.

[47] The Arthashastra is an ancient Indian treatise on statecraft, economics, and military strategy attributed to Kautilya, also known as Chanakya, who lived during the 4th century BCE. The text is considered one of the earliest and most comprehensive works on political science and realpolitik, outlining the principles of governance and the practical aspects of running a state.

[48] A political philosophy and approach that emphasizes pragmatic and practical considerations over ideological or ethical ones in politics and statecraft.

[49] Wootz steel is a legendary type of high-quality steel that originated in ancient India, particularly known for its unique properties and superior strength. The term "Wootz" is derived from the Tamil word "ukku," meaning steel.

[50] The Ellora and Ajanta Caves are renowned ancient caves that are UNESCO World Heritage Sites located in Maharashtra, India, celebrated for their remarkable rock-cut architecture, intricate sculptures, and exquisite paintings.

These profound civilizational contributions foster India's ontological security by providing a stable and cohesive narrative that celebrates resilience, innovation, philosophical and cultural richness that resonates even to this day. This rich heritage informs India's contemporary identity and fortifies its stance in the global arena, reinforcing an intrinsic sense of purpose and continuity. India's civilizational achievements allow it to present a unique narrative that transcends colonial histories, promoting a self-assured global presence rooted in ancient wisdom and modern adaptability. In essence, India's civilizational legacy not only underscores its identity but also reinforces its autonomy and capacity to navigate the international order independently. This ontological security (born from an enduring historical consciousness) empowers India to chart its path confidently, grounded in an unbroken continuum of intellectual and spiritual contributions.

This legacy rendered India's post-independence leaders, such as Jawaharlal Nehru, acutely aware of their role not merely as statesmen but as custodians of a civilizational ethos. Consequently, India embraced non-alignment[51] as a strategic stance, steering clear of Cold War binaries that could compromise its autonomy (Ganguly, 2019). Non-alignment thus enabled India to engage with both blocs pragmatically while safeguarding its ontological security by aligning its foreign policy with intrinsic values rather than external pressures.

From Non-Alignment to Strategic Autonomy: A Work in Progress

India's foreign policy, especially during the Cold War, demonstrates the relevance of ontological security in constructivist terms. Its commitment to non-alignment served as a framework to preserve its post-colonial identity and resist the ideological polarisation between the US and the Soviet Union. India's insistence on non-alignment was not a mere political expedient but a philosophical assertion of self-identity and civilizational maturity. In refusing to ally exclusively with either the United States or the Soviet Union, India exercised what would later be conceptualised as strategic autonomy, an articulation of its civilizational ethos transformed into realpolitik (Raghavan, 2017). Constructivists argue that this approach enabled India to project itself as a morally autonomous state, resisting superpower pressures while promoting principles of sovereignty and self-determination (Mohan, 2003).

As India transitioned from the Cold War era to the post-liberalization period of the 1990s, its ontological security imperatives evolved, influenced by economic liberalization and a redefined strategic posture. The concept of strategic autonomy evolved from non-alignment, maturing as India encountered new global dynamics and regional imperatives. It denoted a state's ability to make decisions independently, guided by self-interest and unhampered by external hegemonies.

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[51] Non-Alignment refers to a foreign policy strategy that advocates for maintaining independence from major power blocs and avoiding alignment with either of the dominant military alliances, particularly during the Cold War era. The concept emerged in the context of decolonization and the desire of newly independent nations to assert their sovereignty and avoid being drawn into the ideological and military conflicts between the United States and the Soviet Union.

For India, the continuity in strategic autonomy from non-alignment reflected a seamless adaptation of its civilizational tenets into the post-colonial era, allowing it to act as a sovereign entity on the global stage.

This shift toward strategic autonomy responded to internal pressures for economic reform and external demands for a stronger defence posture, illustrating India's aspiration to engage globally without compromising its unique identity as a sovereign actor (Cohen & Dasgupta, 2010). India's nuclear policy exemplifies this balance between physical and ontological security. Following nuclear tests in 1998, India asserted itself as a nuclear power while pledging "no first use" of nuclear weapons, signifying a desire for both strength and responsibility (Tellis, 2001). India's contemporary doctrine of strategic autonomy enables it to engage with both the United States and Russia while asserting its independence in defence policies, reinforcing its self-image as a flexible yet self-determined actor (Pant, 2017).

India's recent stance on key issues, such as its non-aligned posture in the Russia-Ukraine war, Israel-Hamas-Palestine imbroglio, US-Iran relations, strategic neutrality on US-China tensions, and calibrated responses to regional threats, is emblematic

of this autonomy (Taneja, 2024). By asserting its sovereignty in these instances, India has preserved its ontological security, refusing to capitulate to polarising pressures that could disrupt its narrative of self-reliance and neutrality. Strategic autonomy, therefore, is not merely a policy stance but an ontological choice, a means to safeguard India's narrative of independence against the homogenising tendencies of global powers (Chacko, 2012).

Strategic Balance through Ontological Security: A Pragmatic Approach

India's diplomatic engagements in QUAD, [52] BRICS,[53] ASEAN,[54] and SCO[55] are underpinned by a pragmatic balancing strategy that seeks to navigate the complexities of IR while reinforcing its ontological security. This balancing act is characterised by a judicious assessment of national interests, wherein India prioritises economic development, regional stability, and cultural diplomacy. The Latin phrase Cui Bono? (Who benefits?) aptly encapsulates India's approach, as it meticulously evaluates the implications of its multilateral engagements in the context of its national identity and security. In pursuing its strategic interests, India remains cognizant of the need for flexibility and adaptability in its foreign policy. The integration of ontological security into this balancing

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[52] Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or QUAD, is a strategic alliance involving the United States, India, Japan, and Australia, established to promote security and economic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region.

[53] An association of five major emerging economies: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. Established in 2009 it aims to promote peace, security, and development and to challenge Western dominance in global financial and political institutions.

[54] A regional organization founded in 1967 to promote economic, political, and security cooperation among its ten Southeast Asian member states, including Indonesia, Malaysia,

the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. ASEAN aims to foster regional stability, accelerate economic growth, and create a platform for addressing shared issues such as trade, security, and cultural exchange.

[55] A Eurasian political, economic, and security alliance founded in 2001 by China, Russia, and four Central Asian countries—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. India and Pakistan joined as full members in 2017. The SCO focuses on combating terrorism, separatism, and extremism, as well as enhancing economic cooperation and cultural exchanges across the Eurasian region.

strategy emphasizes the importance of a stable national identity in an ever-evolving geopolitical landscape. India seeks to assert its identity as a regional and global actor through active participation in these multilateral forums, thereby reinforcing its narrative of being a stabilizing force in a multipolar world. The synthesis of these memberships reflects a broader vision where power dynamics are fluid, and alliances are contingent upon shared interests. India's diplomatic maturity lies in its ability to engage constructively with disparate blocs while retaining its strategic autonomy, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of over-reliance on any single partnership. By prioritizing strategic balance (brought about by being ontologically secure), India not only addresses immediate geopolitical challenges but also crafts a coherent identity that resonates across its diverse engagements, reinforcing its commitment to a stable and prosperous regional order.

Atmanirbharta: The Culmination of Civilizational Self-Reliance

The doctrine of "Atmanirbharta," or self-reliance, has recently crystallised into a core strategic vision under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, encapsulating India's ambition to minimise foreign dependence while nurturing indigenous capabilities across critical sectors such as defence, technology, and infrastructure (Roy, 2021). This drive towards self-sufficiency is far from a modern construct; it resonates deeply with

India's civilizational ethos, which has long emphasised self-sustenance and communal resilience. Modi's government has championed Atmanirbharta, presenting it as not merely an economic policy but a return to India's philosophical roots. His initiatives, such as "Make in India" and "Digital India," have invigorated domestic industries, aiming to establish India as a global manufacturing hub and a leader in digital technology, consistent with the nation's enduring values of self-reliance and innovation (DIPP, 2014).

In the defence sector, for instance, Modi's push for Atmanirbharta has yielded the indigenously developed Tejas fighter jet [56] and the INS Vikrant aircraft carrier,[57] which symbolise India's growing military autonomy and strategic capability (MoD Press, 2022).

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[56] The Tejas is an indigenously developed multi-role light combat aircraft (LCA). The Tejas program aims to enhance India's defence self-sufficiency and reduce reliance on foreign fighter jets, aligning with the nation's Atmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India) goals.

[57] India's first indigenous aircraft carrier, developed by Cochin Shipyard Limited and commissioned into the Indian Navy in 2022. The development of INS Vikrant marks a significant achievement in India's Atmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India) initiative by bolstering the nation's maritime security through domestic production

Similarly, the launch of the Indian Space Research Organisation's (ISRO) Chandrayaan [58] and Mangalyaan [59] missions underscore the role of Atmanirbharta in India's pursuit of technological independence, showcasing indigenous prowess in space exploration (ISRO, 2019). Modi's vision has also targeted economic resilience through initiatives like "Vocal for Local," [60] (PMO, 2020) which encourages citizens to support domestic products, reinforcing the idea that self-reliance extends beyond mere production to cultural pride and collective self-definition.

Atmanirbharta, under Modi's leadership, marks a transformative moment where India's ontological security is further bolstered by acting as a bulwark against external dependencies, making it actively assertive in key policy issues where foreign policy is concerned, helping it in building a future where self-reliance aligns with economic, technological, and cultural integrity. In this endeavour, India reaffirms a legacy of resilience, adaptability and continuity (key for being ontologically secure), where ancient principles of autonomy and plurality find new expression in modern aspirations.

Conclusion:

In the foregoing discussion, I have attempted to show that India's ontological security, underpinned by its ancient civilizational moorings, has been indispensable in enabling it to navigate the turbulent waters of the international order with a foreign policy that is uniquely autonomous and un-swayed by hegemonic pressures. This secure identity, intricately woven from a tapestry of profound philosophical, scientific, and cultural achievements, has empowered India to exercise strategic autonomy from independence through to the present era. Such a deeply embedded ontological foundation confers upon India a sovereign trajectory, enabling it to assert an independent stance, even within a global arena often besieged by shifting allegiances and demands for conformity. I further argue that the ontological stability that India derives from its ancient civilizational corpus is an enduring wellspring of epistemic and spiritual continuity.

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[58] Chandrayaan is India's lunar exploration program launched by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). The latest mission, Chandrayaan-3, launched in 2023, successfully achieved a soft landing on the Moon's south pole, making India the first country to reach this region. The Chandrayaan program underscores India's advancements in space exploration and its capability for complex interplanetary missions.

[59] Also known as the Mars Orbiter Mission (MOM), is India's first interplanetary mission to Mars, developed by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). Launched in 2013, it successfully entered Mars' orbit in 2014, making India the first Asian nation to reach Mars and the first country in the world to

do so on its first attempt. The mission was designed to study the Martian atmosphere, surface, and mineral composition. Remarkably cost-effective, Mangalyaan demonstrated India's growing prowess in space technology and mission planning, earning global recognition for ISRO's achievements.

[60] The initiative aims to bolster domestic industries, enhance employment opportunities, and reduce dependency on foreign products by fostering a culture of self-reliance and supporting local artisans, manufacturers, and small businesses. It represents a push towards economic resilience by celebrating and strengthening India's local production capacity.

The holistic principles embedded in the Ayurvedic and Siddha medical systems, alongside the spiritual and philosophical profundities enshrined in the Vedas, Upanishads, and epics like the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, underscore a self-sustaining ethos that has permeated Indian society for millennia and continues to have an impact in the policies that are conceived even to this day, for, these textual and metaphysical frameworks, far from being relics of a bygone era, continue to function as active repositories of ethical and moral frameworks that shape India's national consciousness. Such a rooted consciousness has provided a locus for India to assert its identity on the world stage, with the authority of a civilisation that is both ancient and dynamic, which has shaped the world through its contributions, which still holds credence even today. For e.g. contributions in mathematics and astronomy, as seen in Aryabhata's heliocentric postulations and Brahmagupta's conceptualisation of zero, not only revolutionised the field of mathematics but also illustrated an indigenous epistemological orientation that transcended imported paradigms. This intrinsic intellectual autonomy has reverberated through centuries, informing India's contemporary approach to technological self-reliance and scientific inquiry.

The ontological confidence derived from such profound contributions has allowed India to pursue Atmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India), thus reflecting a long-standing impulse toward strategic and intellectual sovereignty. Religion and philosophy have further fortified India's ontological edifice. The emergence of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, its own brand of Christianity (as followed in Kerala), and later Sikhism and Sufism introduced to the world an esoteric repository of thought centred on concepts of

dharma, karma, and moksha, imbuing Indian society with a unique spiritual self-awareness. These ontological foundations in the spiritual realm provided a metaphysical orientation that resisted colonial homogenization and has subsequently allowed India to project a stable and self-assured identity in the international arena. Through these religious and philosophical traditions, India has maintained an unwavering posture of non-alignment and self-definition, asserting a foreign policy that is neither beholden to Western nor Eastern ideological imperatives but rather arises from an intrinsic ethos.

The ancient Indian strategic lexicon - represented in the game of Chaturanga (chess) and in Kautilya's Arthashastra - contributes to a long-standing tradition of foresight and statecraft, providing a nuanced understanding of diplomacy and governance that remains relevant in India's approach to foreign policy. Such strategic acumen informs contemporary Indian diplomacy, reinforcing its non-aligned stance and commitment to sovereign decision-making amidst fluctuating global alignments.

I conclude by emphasising that India's ontological security, emanating from its rich civilizational heritage, functions as a stabilising axis in its foreign policy, fostering a continuity of purpose and identity that transcends temporal geopolitical constraints. This enduring legacy confers upon India an ontological resilience that empowers it to assert an autonomous foreign policy, rooted not in transient allegiances but in the immutable profundities of an ancient civilisation.

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The Case of Separate Administration for the Kuki/Zo People in Manipur: Historical, Political, and Human Rights Perspective

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Abstract

The survival and dignity of the Kuki/Zo people in Manipur hinge on the urgent demand for separate administration. This paper outlines the historical marginalisation, systemic political exclusion, and ongoing human rights violations faced by the Kuki/Zo people, arguing that these conditions have rendered them a vulnerable minority on the brink of cultural and physical extinction. In light of international legal frameworks, such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), and various case studies, the Kuki/Zo people's call for separate administration is not merely justified but necessary for their survival. The world must listen and act upon, for the future of an entire people depends on it.

Keywords: Kuki/Zo, Manipur, Separate Administration, Historical and Political Perspectives, Human Rights, Indigenous People's Rights.

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Introduction

The political and ethnic landscape of Manipur in Northeast India has been defined by deep-seated conflicts rooted in both historical legacies and contemporary issues of governance, identity, and resource control. The state of Manipur, in India's ethnically diverse Northeast, is home to multiple ethnic groups, primarily the Meitei, Naga, and the Kuki/Zo people. The region as a whole and the state in particular has witnessed long-standing ethnic conflicts rooted in historical grievances, political exclusion, and territorial disputes; and central to these sufferings are the Kuki/Zo people of Manipur, whose calls for self-administration have largely been ignored, even as their lands and lives remain under constant threat.

The Kuki/Zo people, a transnational ethnic group with historical ties across India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh, have long sought recognition of their unique identity and the right to govern their ancestral lands. However, the Indian state's post-colonial policies toward the region, particularly in Manipur, have been inadequate, to say the least and failed to address the aspirations of the group. Instead, they have resulted in a political and administrative setup that consolidates power in the hands of the majority Meitei population, leaving the hill tribes, including both the Naga and Kuki/Zo peoples, with marginal political representation and economic development.

Between the plight of the prominent ethnic groups in the state, the Kuki/Zo people have been central to the ongoing discussions on autonomy, self-governance, and the reconfiguration of administrative units, as they have always been victim to political foul play since way back from the time of the imperialist British, who exact their will through political agents and any lord/Chief who dared defy their tenets were met with the fierce wrath of the Iron fist of the British Military might. For the Kuki/Zo people of Manipur, the dream of autonomy has been more than a political aspiration; it is a must for survival, looming pertinently ever more, given the recent violent ethnic cleansing they face that is systematically being orchestrated by the majority Meiteis with their Government in Imphal.

Nestled within the larger ethnic mosaic of Northeast India, the Kuki/Zo people have faced generations of marginalisation, ethnic violence, and systemic political exclusion. Each day without a separate/self-administration in its sincerest form for the Kuki/Zo people brings them closer to the complete erosion of their identity, land, and culture. Their demand for a separate administration has gained momentum in recent years due to continued marginalisation, systemic inequalities, and ethnic violence that has led to their sudden and violent exodus en masse from the Imphal valley, severely impacting their socio-economic and political standing in present-day Manipur.

This paper seeks to explore the urgency behind the Kuki/Zo people's demand for a separate administrative region, presenting an urgent case grounded in their history of resistance to the British, political disenfranchisement, and ongoing human rights abuses. It will do so by analysing the historical context of ethnic relations in Manipur, the impact of colonial and post-colonial policies on the Kuki/Zo people, and the contemporary political and economic challenges they face. The future of the Kuki/Zo people is not an abstract concern but a dire reality shaped by decades of suffering and systemic exclusion. Drawing upon international legal frameworks and examples from other indigenous communities, this paper offers a

pathway for the preservation of the Kuki/Zo people's rights, land, and cultural heritage. Examining these important factors, this paper will argue that the creation of a separate administrative unit for the Kuki/Zo people is not only justified but necessary to address their long-standing grievances and ensure their socio-political survival in the largest Democracy in the world.

Historical Context and Ethnic Composition of Manipur

The Ethnic Landscape of Manipur

Manipur is a state characterised by its extraordinary multi-ethnic diversity, with a population composed of three dominant ethnic groups: the Meitei, the Nagas, and the Kuki/Zo people. These groups are distinguished not only by their unique cultural practices, religion, languages, and traditions but also by their geographical distributions within the state. The Meitei, who constitute the largest ethnic group in Manipur, predominantly reside in the fertile plains of the Imphal Valley, which is the political and economic heart and powerhouse of the state. The valley's resources, fertile land, and strategic position have historically afforded the Meitei population significant political power and influence over the whole state.

In contrast, the Nagas and the Kuki/Zo people inhabit the surrounding hilly regions, which are geographically isolated and less economically developed than the valley. These hill tribes have historically maintained a degree of autonomy due to the geographical isolation of their territories and their distinct cultural practices. However, this apolitical autonomy has been steadily eroded by the post-colonial state's policies, which have sought to integrate the hill tribes into a calculated centralised administrative framework crafted to be dominated solely by the dominant valley's Meitei population.

The Kuki/Zo people, in particular, occupy the southern and western hilly regions of Manipur. These areas are less developed in terms of infrastructure and economic opportunities, which has further exacerbated the socio-political divide between the hill tribes and the Meiteis. The Kuki/Zo people are part of a larger transnational ethnic group, with historical ties to communities in Myanmar and Bangladesh. This transnational identity has made it more difficult for the Kuki/Zo people to achieve political unity within the Indian state, as their communities are divided by international borders and have often been sidelined in the broader political arrangement of the region.

The Impact of Colonial and Post-Colonial Policies

The roots of the Kuki/Zo people's political marginalisation can be traced back to the British colonial administration of Northeast India. During the colonial period, the British recognised the distinct identity of the hill tribes and implemented a policy of indirect rule in these areas. The Kuki/Zo people, along with other hill tribes, were administered separately from the valley-dwelling Meiteis, and their internal governance systems were largely left intact. This policy allowed the hill tribes to maintain a degree of quasi-autonomy and control over their own affairs, even as the British exerted control over the region's resources and strategic interests.

The British policy of separate administration for the hill tribes was largely driven by pragmatic considerations. The hilly regions were difficult to govern directly due to their rugged terrain and strong resistance from the local tribes to any external interference in their affairs. As a result, the British

adopted a hands-off approach, allowing the tribal chiefs to retain control over local governance in exchange for their co-operation in maintaining the established order and facilitating British economic exploitation and political interests in the region.

However, this system of separate administration began to unravel in the post-independence period. Following India's independence in 1947, the Indian state sought to integrate the diverse ethnic groups of Northeast India into a unified national framework. In the case of Manipur, this meant incorporating all hill tribes into the state's centralised political and administrative structure, which was dominated by the Meitei majority. The abolition of the colonial-era system of indirect rule and the imposition of a more centralised governance model led to the gradual erosion of the hill tribes' quasi-political autonomy and authority over their land.

For the Kuki/Zo people, this transition represented a significant loss of political power and control over their ancestral lands. The Indian state's policy of integration often failed to consider the unique socio-political structures of the hill tribes, leading to a sense of alienation and marginalisation among these communities. Over due course of time, the Kuki/Zo people became increasingly disillusioned with the Indian state's approach to governance in Manipur, as their political representation remained limited and their economic development lagged behind that of the Meitei-dominated valley.

The Kuki Rebellion and Ethnic Struggles

The discontentment among the Kuki/Zo people is not a recent phenomenon but has deep historical roots. One of the most significant events in the history of the Kuki/Zo people's struggle for autonomy was the Kuki/Zo Rebellion of 1917–1919. This uprising was a response to British attempts to recruit Kuki/Zo men into the labour corps for World War I, which the Kuki/Zo leaders saw as an unacceptable infringement on their autonomy (Haokip, 2017). The rebellion, though ultimately unsuccessful, was a defining moment in the Kuki/Zo people's historical consciousness and their ongoing struggle against external domination.

After India's independence in 1947, the political landscape of the Northeast was restructured without proper consultation of all stakeholders, including the Kuki/Zo people, leading to their further disenfranchisement. The Manipur Merger Agreement of 1949, which integrated Manipur into the Indian Union, ignored the Kuki/Zo people's autonomy claims, leading to their subsequent political exclusion (Kipgen, 2013). The carving out of administrative regions, particularly with the creation of the state of Nagaland in 1963 and the later reorganisation of Manipur, led to further fragmentation of the Kuki/Zo population across international borders, diminishing their political voice.

Left behind during the political reorganisation of the North East region, the Kuki/Zo people felt left out, underrepresented and unprotected in the new political set-up, leading to friction between the Kuki/Zo and Naga communities who otherwise had always been close neighbours. The raising and subsequent formation of the NSCN IM, also known as the mother of all insurgent groups in North East India, during the latter part of the 1980s has brought imbalance in the power structure between the two ethnic tribes in the hill areas of Manipur. This ultimately led to a simmering friction between the two ethnic groups,

where villages of both ethnic groups existed adjacent to each other and where there were overlapping claims over ancestral lands.

The lack of timely intervention and unchecked growth in the strength of the NSCN-IM has led to the over-exaggeration and exercise of power over the Kuki/Zo people and led to an open Naga-Kuki conflict, which escalated in the 1990s. As digressed earlier, this conflict was rooted in overlapping territorial claims over the hill districts of Manipur, resulting in significant violence, displacement, and the entrenchment of ethnic divisions in the area with the Kukis suffering tremendous loss as they were unprepared and unorganized to meet the full force of an Insurgent backed by a country no less than China. The Kukis were slaughtered in thousands, till today observe 13 September every year as "Black Day" as the well-armed Naga Insurgents, particularly the NSCN-IM, unleashed an unabated violence over the unarmed and unorganised Kuki population.

The Naga-Kuki conflict also had a profound impact on the Kuki/Zo people's political aspirations and ushered in a political reawakening to the need for a separate administration. The Indian government's attempts to negotiate a settlement with the Naga insurgent groups, including the demand for a separate Naga administrative unit (Greater Nagalim), further alienated the Kuki/Zo people, who felt that their own necessity for survival in the form of a legitimate political demand for autonomy were being sidelined in favor of the Naga agenda. This sense of political marginalisation has continued to fuel the Kuki/Zo people's demand for a separate administrative region that would allow them to govern their own affairs and protect their lands and rights from encroachment and infringement, respectively.

Political Marginalisation of the Kuki/Zo People

Limited Political Representation and Power Disparities

The political marginalisation of the Kuki/Zo people in Manipur is a reflection of the broader structural inequalities that exist within the state's governance framework. Despite constituting a significant portion of the population in the hill districts, the Kuki/Zo people have historically been underrepresented in the state assembly and other political institutions. This underrepresentation is a direct result of the intentionally structured Manipur state's electoral system, disproportionately favouring the valley-dwelling Meitei population. There is also the impractical and imbalance distribution of the state budget/funds where the larger area of the tribals which require more development of geographically isolated/remote areas as compared to the conveniently reachable valley districts being accorded disproportionately larger sums of funds while tribals have to make do with the meagre leftovers of the developmental funds of the Meitei dominated few valley districts.

Manipur's legislative assembly is composed of 60 seats, 40 of which are allocated to the valley constituencies, where the Meiteis form the majority. The remaining 20 seats are reserved for the hill districts, which are home to the Naga and Kuki/Zo tribes. This unequal distribution of seats means that the hill tribes, despite their significant population, have little influence over the state's political decisions. The Meitei-dominated assembly has consistently sidelined the demands of the hill tribes, particularly those related to land rights, development, and political autonomy. Besides, the constant effort to pry into the land

holdings of the tribals by the dominant Meiteis is an ongoing concerted effort of the 40 Meitei MLAs, headed by the Chief Minister himself, in that campaign.

This political imbalance is further exacerbated by the fact that the Meiteis hold a dominant position in the state's politics, bureaucracy and security apparatus. The concentration of political and economic power in the hands of the Meiteis has led to a situation where the hill tribes, including the Kuki/Zo people, are often excluded from key decision-making processes. Even constitutional bodies such as the Hill Areas Committee (HAC) under the guardianship of the Governor himself is rendered powerless like a toothless tiger, having bestowed tremendous authority only on paper and practically lacking any exercisable power due to lack of crucial financial autonomy, the state cabinet inversely resides over tribal matters than the empowered HAC itself. As a result, the Kuki/Zo people have little control over the allocation of resources and the implementation of development projects in their own territories.

The lack of political representation for the Kuki/Zo people has also manifested in the state's approach to land governance. The hill districts of Manipur are governed by a system of customary land tenure, which is distinct from the land laws that apply to the valley. However, the state government has repeatedly attempted to extend its control over the hill districts by imposing valley-based land laws, which are seen as a direct threat and infringement of tribal land and rights in the hill districts.

Land and Resource Conflicts

The issue of land and resource conflicts lies at the core of the tensions between the Kuki/Zo people and the state government of Manipur. The Kuki/Zo people, unlike other hill tribes in the region, have traditionally followed the system of land ownership that is unique to them, in which the land/village belongs to the Chief who reigns supreme on matters relating to governance and administration of the village. In essence, the Chief is the lord of the land, and the community rents land with a meagre payment of a few bushels of their yearly produce. Every field to be cultivated by each household is chosen through a lottery system to ensure fairness in allocation, and the whole process is presided over by the Village authority, a committee formed by Village elders to look after every affair of the village with the Chief at its head. This system of land tenure is deeply intertwined with their cultural and social identity, as it not only determines fair and equal access to resources but also preserves the hierarchical and social structures within the tribe.

The hill districts, where the Kuki/Zo people are concentrated, are rich in natural resources, including forests, minerals, and arable land. Historically, these areas were largely left untouched by the valley-based Meitei population, due to the rugged terrain and the traditional authority of tribal chiefs over the land. However, in recent decades, the state's efforts to extend centralized governance to the hill areas have been accompanied by multiple attempts to alter land ownership patterns through various Bills passed by the state cabinet, which in itself is an abuse and over empowerment of the cabinet that enjoyed excessive power over the state assembly and eventually the people. The state government, dominated by the Meiteis, has repeatedly sought to bring the hill districts

under the same land laws that govern the valley, which would undermine the customary system of land ownership. These moves have been seen as an attempt to facilitate greater exploitation of the hill districts' resources for the benefit of the valley, without adequate consultation or consent from the hill tribes. For the Kuki/Zo people, such policies represent not just an economic threat but also an existential one, as they jeopardise their ability to maintain control over their ancestral lands and, by extension, their cultural and social autonomy, however insignificant it may be.

The Government's land acquisition efforts are often framed in the language of "development" and "modernisation," with the stated goal of integrating the hill areas into the broader economy of the state. However, the Kuki/Zo people view these initiatives with suspicion, as they have historically been excluded from the economic benefits of such development projects. For instance, infrastructure projects like industrial estates, medical colleges, all important offices headquarters, sports facilities, transportation hubs etc. are concentrated in the congested valley districts, even the roads connecting all districts of the state are designed to be intercepted and transit in Imphal valley while the hill districts remain underdeveloped and underserved in terms of basic amenities like healthcare, education, and transportation.

This unequal distribution of development resources has only deepened the sense of marginalisation among the Kuki/Zo people. The imposition of valley-based land laws would further exacerbate this inequality by allowing outside investors and state actors to encroach on the hill tribes' lands, potentially leading to displacement and loss of livelihoods. The fear of land alienation is not unfounded, as similar processes have

occurred in other parts of India, where tribal communities have been dispossessed of their lands in the name of development, often without adequate compensation or rehabilitation.

In response to these threats, the Kuki/Zo people have mobilised to protect their land rights. Local resistance movements, often led by tribal chiefs and community leaders, have emerged to challenge the state's land policies. These movements argue that the extension of valley-based land laws to the hill districts would violate the Kuki/Zo people's rights under the Indian Constitution, as well as international agreements like the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which recognizes the right of indigenous communities to maintain control over their lands and resources.

In addition to legal and political mobilisation, there has been a resurgence of traditional practices of land management and resource conservation among the Kuki/Zo people. By reaffirming their connection to the land and their customary systems of governance, the Kuki/Zo people are seeking to assert their sovereignty in the face of external pressures. This has led to a renewed emphasis on collective land management, sustainable agricultural practices, and the preservation of forests and rivers that are central to their way of life.

The land conflict is not just an economic or legal issue, but a deeply political one. It touches on questions of identity, belonging, and self-determination as a tribal lives off his land and the land flourishes under its care; there has always been a symbiotic relationship between a tribe and the land, and neither can seem to exist in harmony without the other. For the Kuki/Zo people, the struggle to retain control over their land is inseparable from their broader demand for political autonomy and separate administration. Without the

power to govern their own territories, they fear that they will continue to be marginalised in the state's development agenda, with their lands and resources exploited for the benefit of others.

The Naga-Kuki Conflict and its Aftermath

The ethnic conflict between the Naga and Kuki communities is another major factor that has shaped the contemporary political landscape in Manipur and influenced the Kuki/Zo people's demand for separate administration. The conflict, which reached its peak in the early 1990s, has its roots in long-standing territorial disputes and overlapping claims and dissidence between the two groups, as well as broader political aspirations for autonomy.

Historically, both the Nagas and the Kukis have claimed portions of the hill districts as part of their ancestral homeland. These overlapping claims have led to frequent tensions, particularly in areas where the two communities live in close proximity. The conflict has been further aggravated by the rise of ethnic-based insurgent groups first initiated by the Nagas during and after independence, which have sought to carve out separate political entities for their respective communities ranging from outright sovereignty to a little more autonomy than existing state cabinet controlled autonomous district councils that lack any form of financial power.

The Naga insurgent movement, which picked up steam during the 1950s, initially sought independence from India but later shifted its demand to greater autonomy within the Indian state. The demand for a "Greater Nagalim"—a contiguous territory that would include all Naga-inhabited areas across several Northeastern states, including parts of Manipur—has been a central

goal of the Naga movement. However, this demand has been met with resistance not only from the Kuki/Zo people but also from all the people residing all over the North Eastern states, whose proven fear that their own territories could be subsumed under renewed and constitutionally recognised Naga control.

The tension between the two groups escalated into open conflict in the 1990s, when violence broke out between the Naga outfit NSCN IM and the Kuki people. The conflict led to the displacement of thousands of Kukis, destruction of a number of villages, and a deepening ethnic division in the region, with the Kukis falling victim on a much larger scale as compared to the Nagas fighting under the banner of the well-organised NSCN IM. The Indian government's handling of the conflict, which many Kukis perceive as biased toward the Nagas, further alienated the Kuki/Zo community.

One of the key flashpoints in the conflict was the Indian government's peace negotiations with the Naga insurgent groups, particularly the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN IM). The Kuki/Zo people have long suspected that the Indian government is more willing to accommodate the Naga demand for autonomy, while ignoring the Kuki/Zo people's own aspirations for self-governance. This perception has only heightened the Kuki/Zo people's sense of political marginalisation and fueled their demand for separate administration.

The legacy of the Naga-Kuki conflict continues to shape the politics of the region today, while the violence has largely subsided, the underlying tensions remain unresolved. The territorial claims of the two groups continue to overlap, and there is little trust between the two communities. In this context, the

Kuki/Zo people see the creation of a separate administrative unit as a way to protect their interests and prevent further encroachment on their lands. Moreover, the conflict has had a profound impact on the Kuki/Zo people's political mobilisation. In the wake of the violence, several Kuki insurgent groups emerged, demanding either separate statehood or greater autonomy for the Kuki-inhabited areas of Manipur. While most of these groups have since entered into ceasefire and tripartite agreements under the aegis of the Suspension of Operations (SoO) with the state of Manipur and the Indian government, the political question of Kuki/Zo autonomy and to what extent remains to be seen.

The Kuki/Zo people's demand for separate administration is, in part, a response to the perceived failure of the Indian state to address the root causes of the Naga-Kuki conflict. They argue that only by having control over their own political and administrative institutions can they ensure that their lands, resources, and cultural identity are protected. For the Kuki/Zo people, the conflict with the Nagas is not just about territory but also about their right to self-determination and their place within the Union of India

The Case for Separate Administration

Legal and Constitutional Frameworks for Autonomy

The demand for a separate administration for the Kuki/Zo people is grounded in both legal and constitutional precedents within the Indian system. India's Constitution recognises the distinct status of tribal communities, particularly in the Northeastern region, where multiple autonomous administrative arrangements have been established to accommodate the unique cultural, social, and political needs of indigenous groups.

One of the key constitutional provisions relevant to the Kuki/Zo people's demand for autonomy is the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The Sixth Schedule, which applies to certain tribal areas in the Northeastern states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram, allows for the creation of Autonomous District Councils (ADCs). These councils have significant legislative, executive, and judicial powers over matters such as land ownership, resource management, and cultural practices.

While Manipur's hill districts are governed by Autonomous District Councils, the powers and resources allocated to these councils are far more limited than those provided under the Sixth Schedule. The Kuki/Zo people argue that the existing ADCs in Manipur do not provide them with sufficient autonomy to manage their own affairs. They contend that the ADCs lack the financial and administrative capacity to implement development projects or address local grievances effectively.

The Kuki/Zo people's demand for separate administration, therefore, goes beyond the mere extension of the ADCs' powers. They seek a more robust form of political autonomy that would allow them to govern their own territories, control their resources, and protect their cultural identity. This could take the form of a separate state within the Indian Union, or an autonomous region with greater powers than those currently granted under the Sixth Schedule or in the form of a Union Territory (UT) with legislative powers which slightly differs from the Union territory of Delhi where power resides mostly to the Lieutenant Governor and not the Civil Government. .

International Human Rights Perspectives

The demand for self-determination by the Kuki/Zo people is also supported by international human rights frameworks that recognise the rights of indigenous communities to autonomy and control over their lands and resources. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2007, is one of the most comprehensive international instruments that affirm the rights of indigenous peoples, including the right to self-determination. Article 3 of the UNDRIP explicitly states that indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination, by virtue of which they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social, and cultural development.

For the Kuki/Zo people, the demand for separate administration aligns with this international standard, as they seek to determine their own political and administrative structure within the framework of the Indian Union. The Indian government, as a signatory to UNDRIP, is obliged to respect the principles enshrined in the declaration, particularly the rights of indigenous peoples to control their lands, territories, and resources.

Article 26 of the UNDRIP further emphasises that indigenous peoples have the right to their lands, territories, and resources, which they have traditionally owned, occupied, or otherwise used or acquired. It also mandates that the states it should give legal recognition and protection to these lands, territories, and resources. The failure of the Indian government to fully recognise and protect the land rights of the Kuki/Zo people has been a significant driver of their demand for autonomy.

Moreover, Article 19 of the UNDRIP stipulates that states must consult and co-operate in good faith with indigenous peoples before adopting and implementing legislative or administrative measures that may affect them. The Kuki/Zo people argue that the Indian government and the state of Manipur have often failed to meaningfully consult with them on issues that affect their land, resources, and political rights. For instance, the imposition of valley-based land laws on the hill districts has been done without adequate consultation or the consent of the Kuki/Zo people, in violation of this international norm.

In addition to UNDRIP, other international human rights instruments also support the Kuki/Zo people's case for autonomy. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which India is a party, recognises the right of peoples to self-determination in its Article 1. The covenant also guarantees the protection of minority rights, including the right to enjoy their own culture, profess and practice their own religion, and use their own language. The Kuki/Zo people's demand for separate administration can be seen as a way to safeguard these rights in a context where they feel politically and culturally marginalised.

Human rights organisations and advocacy groups have increasingly highlighted the plight of the Kuki/Zo people, urging the Indian government to recognise their legitimate aspirations for self-governance. Reports by international organisations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have documented the discrimination, human rights abuses, and neglect faced by the Kuki/Zo and other tribal communities in Manipur. These reports call for greater protection of indigenous land rights, meaningful political representation, and the creation of

mechanisms for self-governance in line with international human rights standards.

The Kuki/Zo people's demand for separate administration is thus framed not only as a local political issue but also as a matter of international human rights. By asserting their right to self-determination, the Kuki/Zo people are seeking to align their struggle with global movements for Indigenous Rights and Autonomy. The recognition of these rights by the Indian Government would not only address the Kuki/Zo people's immediate grievances but also enhance India's standing as a country that respects International Human Rights norms.

Socio-Economic Justifications for Separate Administration

Beyond the legal and political dimensions, the demand for separate administration for the Kuki/Zo people is also driven by socio-economic factors. The Kuki/Zo-inhabited areas in the hill districts of Manipur remain some of the most underdeveloped and neglected regions in the state. Despite being rich in natural resources, these areas suffer from a lack of infrastructure, basic services and amenities, and economic opportunities, leading to widespread poverty, neglect and underdevelopment.

The disparity between the valley and hill regions of Manipur is stark. While the Imphal Valley, where the Meitei population is concentrated, enjoys better access to roads, healthcare, education, and other essential services, the hill districts remain largely underdeveloped. This inequality has been aggravated by the state's political and economic structure, which disproportionately favours the valley regions in terms of resource allocation, political power in the form of

disproportionate representation and many fewer development projects.

The Kuki/Zo people argue that the state's neglect of their territories is a direct consequence of their political marginalisation. Without adequate representation in the state assembly and other decision-making bodies, the Kuki/Zo people have little influence over how development resources are distributed. As a result, their communities continue to face poor living conditions, with limited access to clean water, electricity, healthcare, and education.

The demand for separate administration is thus seen as a way to address these socio-economic disparities by allowing the Kuki/Zo people to take control of their own development agenda. With greater political autonomy, the Kuki/Zo people would be able to prioritise on their own the needs of their communities, allocate resources more equitably, and implement development projects tailored to their specific cultural, traditional and geographical context.

For example, the creation of a separate administrative region would allow the Kuki/Zo people to design and implement policies aimed at improving infrastructure in the hill districts, which could include building roads and bridges to connect remote villages, improving access to healthcare by establishing clinics and hospitals, and expanding educational opportunities by constructing schools and colleges. These initiatives would not only improve the quality of life for the Kuki/Zo people but also reduce the economic dependence of the hill districts on the valley.

In addition to infrastructure development, separate administration would enable the Kuki/Zo people to develop their own economic strategies based on the sustainable use of their natural resources. The hill

districts, being rich in forests, minerals, and agricultural land, have not witnessed to date these resources being utilised or exploited in ways that would benefit the local population. With greater control over their own resources, the Kuki/Zo people could pursue economic activities that are environmentally sustainable and culturally appropriate, such as community-based forest management, agroforestry, and eco-tourism.

Moreover, separate administration would allow the Kuki/Zo people to address the issue of unemployment, which is a major problem in the hill districts. Many young people in Kuki/Zo communities are forced to migrate to other parts of India in search of work due to the lack of economic opportunities in their home regions. By creating an autonomous region with its own economic policies and development programs, the Kuki/Zo people could generate jobs in sectors such as agriculture, small-scale industry, and tourism, reducing the need for out-migration and contributing to the overall development of the region.

Pathways to Achieving Separate Administration

Legal and Political Pathways

The demand for separate administration for the Kuki/Zo people can be pursued through various legal and political mechanisms within the framework of the Indian Constitution. One potential pathway is the creation of a new state within the Indian Union, similar to the creation of other Northeastern states such as Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya. The Indian Constitution allows for the reorganisation of states under Article 3, which grants Parliament the power to form new states, alter the boundaries of existing states, or create union territories.

The creation of a separate state for the Kuki/Zo people would require political consensus at both the state and national levels. It would also necessitate negotiations with other ethnic groups in Manipur, particularly the Nagas and Meiteis, to ensure that their interests are taken into consideration. While the process of statehood would be complex and politically sensitive, it is not without precedent. The formation of new states in India has historically been driven by demands for greater autonomy, cultural recognition, and the equitable distribution of resources, all of which are central to the Kuki/Zo people's case for separate administration.

Another potential pathway is the granting of enhanced autonomy to the hill districts under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. As mentioned earlier, the Sixth Schedule in its sincerest form provides for the creation of Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) with adequate legislative, executive, and judicial powers. While Manipur's hill districts are already governed by ADCs, these councils currently lack the genuine power that lies in the form of financial and administrative capacity to effectively govern the region.

The extension of Sixth Schedule provisions to Manipur's hill districts without any local adjustments and amendments would give the Kuki/Zo people greater control over their land, resources, and cultural practices. It would also provide a framework for local governance that is more responsive to the needs and aspirations of the hill tribes. However, this would require amendments to the Indian Constitution and political will at both the State and National levels, which would be difficult but not totally impossible given the ongoing ethnic cleansing against the Kuki/Zo people by the dominant Meiteis.

In addition to these constitutional mechanisms, the Kuki/Zo people could pursue political negotiations with the Indian government and other stakeholders in Manipur. The ongoing peace process with Naga insurgent groups provides a potential model for such negotiations. By engaging in dialogue with the Indian state, the Kuki/Zo people could seek to address their grievances and negotiate a political settlement that guarantees greater autonomy while maintaining the territorial integrity of Manipur if they so choose to.

Role of Civil Society and International Advocacy

The role of civil society in supporting the Kuki/Zo people's demand for separate administration cannot be understated. Local advocacy groups, tribal organisations, and human rights activists have been at the forefront of raising awareness about the Kuki/Zo people's plight and mobilising support for their cause. These groups have played a critical role in documenting human rights violations, organising protests, and lobbying the government for political and legal reforms.

International advocacy is also an important component of the Kuki/Zo people's struggle for autonomy. By building alliances with global Indigenous Rights Organisations, the Kuki/Zo people can highlight their case to the attention of the international community. This can help to exert pressure on the Indian government to comply with international human rights standards and engage in meaningful dialogue with the Kuki/Zo people.

Organizations such as the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Amnesty International and local advocacy efforts, through mentioned forums can provide a platform for the Kuki/Zo people to share their concerns globally, making it an International

issue rather than a mere inconvenience in local governance as portrayed time and again by the State Government. These bodies are adequately equipped to bring indigenous struggles to the attention of International Human Rights Institutions, applying pressure on the right spots in the Indian Government, insisting that it honour its commitments under International Law(s), such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). At the same time, civil society organisations within India, particularly those based in the Northeastern region, can amplify the Kuki/Zo cause at the national level. They can organise fact-finding missions, publish reports on land disputes, resource exploitation, and the cultural marginalisation of the Kuki/Zo people, and mobilise support from other marginalised communities in India. More importantly, these efforts can challenge the dominant narratives in Manipur and the rest of India, which often portray the demand for separate administration as secessionist, anti-national or a mere inconvenience in local Governance.

An essential role of civil society is to nurture the critical practice of dialogue between the Kuki/Zo people and other ethnic groups, especially the Nagas and Meiteis, to avoid ethnic divisions escalating into violence. Grassroots initiatives that promote inter-community dialogue, peacebuilding, and reconciliation are essential in addressing the long-standing tensions and in preventing further ethnic conflict in Manipur. By facilitating constructive dialogue, civil society organisations can work towards a political settlement that addresses the aspirations of the Kuki/Zo people while ensuring that the others are not miffed in the process, while ensuring peace and stability in the region. Moreover, these advocacy efforts are crucial in influencing policy at both the

State and National levels. Activism and lobbying can bring attention to the region's socio-economic disparities and highlight the necessity for Self-Governance structures that are better suited to the unique needs of the Kuki/Zo people. International advocacy, in particular, can also open up avenues for foreign diplomatic engagement, where pressure from Human Rights Organisations may compel the Indian Government to consider necessary reforms to usher in development and devolve power to the grassroots.

At the regional level, positive dialogues, interactions and co-operations among tribal groups across the Northeast region—through mechanisms like the North East Students' Organization (NESO) or other frontal tribal councils/organizations such as the United Naga Council (UNC), Kuki Innpi, Zomi Council (ZC), Hmar Innpui (HI) etc.—can strengthen the political demands for autonomy. Such regional cooperation adds weight to the Kuki/Zo people's claims, acts as a measure from gas lighting any potential hostile situation between two neighboring communities with similar claim over stretches of lands and enabling them to unite with other Indigenous tribal communities with similar aspirations in a common cause for greater recognition of their rights and autonomy.

Obstacles and Challenges to Achieving Separate Administration

Despite the compelling case for separate administration, several significant challenges lie in the path of realising this goal. One of the primary obstacles is the complex, volatile and highly charged ethnic landscape of Manipur, which involves multiple competing claims for territory and political authority. The demand for a separate administration for the Kuki/Zo people inevitably raises concerns among the

Meitei and Naga communities, both of which have their own aspirations for autonomy and control over land and resources. Achieving a political solution that satisfies all of these groups will require delicate negotiation and a willingness on all sides to open to compromise for the greater good.

For the Meitei population in the Imphal Valley, the creation of a separate administration for the Kuki/Zo people is viewed as a threat to the territorial integrity of Manipur. Many Meitei political leaders have expressed opposition to any division of the state, fearing that it could lead to further fragmentation and weaken the political power of the valley-based population, while it also serves as a convenient political agenda for election and re-election for an ace and aspiring Meitei politician. The Meiteis, as the dominant group in Manipur's political system with the highest number of electorates, also use their influence to sway political parties, thereby blocking any potential proposal for separate administration in the state assembly or in political negotiations with the Central Government.

Similarly, the Naga community in Manipur also views the Kuki/Zo demand for separate administration with suspicion due to the existence of overlapping territorial claims, as well as the potential to undermine their own demand for autonomy. The Nagas have long sought the creation of a "Greater Nagalim," a proposed Naga homeland that would encompass Naga-inhabited areas of Manipur, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, and Assam. Any move to create a separate administration for the Kuki/Zo people is being viewed as a threat to this goal, particularly in the mentioned areas where Kuki and Naga territorial claims overlap. This could lead to a serious implication of renewed tensions between the two communities and complicate efforts

in the search for an inclusive and lasting political solution. Another significant challenge is the Indian Government's reluctance to grant further autonomy to ethnic groups in the Northeast. While the Indian Constitution provides mechanisms for the creation of new states and autonomous regions, the central government has historically been cautious about encouraging separatist movements or granting political concessions that could be perceived as weakening the unity and authority of the Indian state. The Indian government's experience with insurgent movements in the Northeast, as well as in other parts of the country like Kashmir and Punjab, has made it wary of demands for autonomy that could potentially lead to further fragmentation or secession.

Moreover, the Indian Government may be hesitant to grant autonomy to the Kuki/Zo people due to concerns about setting a precedence and commencing a domino effect for other ethnic groups in the region, in particular and the whole country in general. The Northeast is home to a wide array of tribal communities, many of whom have their own grievances and aspirations for greater autonomy. Granting separate administration to the Kuki/Zo people could embolden other groups to make similar demands, potentially leading to a proliferation of autonomous regions or new states in the country. The central government may therefore prefer to maintain the status quo rather than risk further complicating an already complex and volatile political landscape.

The lack of political unity among the Kuki/Zo people themselves may also pose a challenge to achieving separate administration. While there is broad consensus within the community on the need for greater autonomy, there are differences of opinion on what form this autonomy should take. Some factions within the Kuki/Zo community advocate for full statehood, while others prefer the creation of an autonomous district councils under the Sixth Schedule or the BTC model of state within state, whereas some quarters voice a demand to be included in the list of the Union Territory to be bestowed with special legislative powers. There are also divisions among different Kuki/Zo tribes and clans, which could hinder efforts to present a united front in negotiations with the Indian government.

In addition to political challenges, there are practical obstacles to the creation of a separate administrative region for the Kuki/Zo people. The hill districts of Manipur, where the Kuki/Zo people are concentrated, are geographically remote and underdeveloped. Establishing a viable autonomous region would require significant investment in infrastructure, governance institutions, and economic development. Without adequate resources and support from the central government, the Kuki/Zo people may struggle to build a functioning autonomous region that can provide for the needs of its population.

Case Studies

1. The Anglo-Kuki War (1917-1919) and Marginalisation of the Kuki/Zo thereafter

The Anglo-Kuki War is a critical moment in Kuki/Zo history, reflecting their resistance to British domination and attempts to preserve their territorial integrity. It is an often-overlooked yet significant episode that underscores the long-standing fight for autonomy. The war, which resulted in the death of thousands of Kuki/Zo fighters and civilians, reveals a deep-seated desire for self-administration (Haokip, 2017).

The war ended in British victory, and the subsequent punitive actions by the colonial government included the confiscation of lands and forced labour, further entrenching the Kuki/Zo people's marginalisation.

Historical Context: Marginalisation of the Kuki/Zo People

The Kuki/Zo people have faced systematic marginalisation since the British colonial era. Their struggle for self-determination can be traced back to the Anglo-Kuki War (1917-1919), during which the Kuki/Zo people resisted British efforts to enlist them in World War I and fought for the protection of their lands (Haokip, 2017). Unlike other anti-colonial movements, the Kuki/Zo people's resistance was primarily about protecting their autonomy, cultural identity, and land. Despite their defeat, the Anglo-Kuki War became a symbol of resilience and pride for the Kuki/Zo community, shaping their continued demands for self-determination.

Post-Independence Marginalisation

After India's independence in 1947, the political landscape of the Northeast was restructured without proper consultation of the Kuki/Zo people, leading to their further disenfranchisement. The Manipur Merger Agreement of 1949, which integrated Manipur into the Indian Union, ignored the Kuki/Zo people's autonomy claims, leading to their subsequent political exclusion (Kipgen, 2013). The carving out of administrative regions, particularly with the creation of the Nagaland state in 1963 and the later reorganisation of Manipur, led to further fragmentation of the Kuki/Zo population across international borders, diminishing their political voice.

Political Dimension: Disenfranchisement and Exclusion

The political landscape in post-independence Manipur has continued to be unfavourable to the Kuki/Zo people. Despite being a significant ethnic group, the Kuki/Zo people have consistently been sidelined in state politics, both in the Manipur Legislative Assembly and in local governance structures. Political power has remained concentrated in the hands of the dominant Meitei and Naga groups, leaving little room for Kuki/Zo representation (Rajkumar, 2015). This political disenfranchisement has exacerbated ethnic tensions, as seen in multiple violent clashes over land and political rights.

The political dynamics in Manipur are further complicated by the inter-ethnic competition for resources and land. The Scheduled Tribes (ST) status granted to the Kuki/Zo people has not translated into meaningful political gains. Instead, ST status has often served as a tokenistic gesture, doing little to alleviate the deeper structural issues, such as unequal access to resources and political power (Kipgen, 2015). The Kuki/Zo people's attempts to gain greater political autonomy through initiatives like the Kuki National Organisation (KNO) and United People's Front (UPF) have largely been stifled by both the state and central governments.

Resistance to Autonomy

Efforts to negotiate political solutions through dialogue have consistently been met with resistance. For instance, in 2009, the Kuki State Demand Committee (KSDC) called for the creation of a separate state for the Kuki/Zo people within the Indian Union. However, this demand was rejected by both the

state government and central authorities, reflecting the unwillingness to address the legitimate concerns of the Kuki/Zo people (Haokip, 2017). This ongoing refusal to grant the Kuki/Zo people political autonomy leaves them vulnerable to violence and displacement.

2. The Churachandpur Uprising (2015)

The 2015 Churachandpur uprising provides a stark example of the political disenfranchisement faced by the Kuki/Zo people. In response to the passage of three controversial land reform bills in the Manipur Legislative Assembly, which were perceived as threats to Kuki/Zo land rights, protests erupted across the Kuki/Zo-dominated districts. The bills were seen as attempts by the Meitei-dominated legislature to seize tribal lands, fueling unrest that left nine Kuki/Zo people dead (Kipgen, 2015). The protests were not just about land; they were a manifestation of the deeper frustration felt by the Kuki/Zo people regarding their lack of political voice in the state.

3. Human Rights Violations: The Case for Separate Administration

The Kuki/Zo people have experienced a pattern of human rights abuses, ranging from systemic discrimination to outright violence and displacement. These abuses have been enabled by the political marginalisation of the Kuki/Zo people and the failure of the Manipur state government to protect their rights. Despite the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which guarantees the rights of indigenous peoples to self-determination, the Kuki/Zo people continue to face violations of their basic rights (United Nations, 2007).

Forced Displacement and Land Grabs

One of the most egregious human rights violations faced by the Kuki/Zo people is the forced displacement from their ancestral lands. Encroachment by both the Meitei and Naga communities has significantly reduced the land available to the Kuki/Zo people. The Manipur Land Reform Act (1960), which was supposed to regulate land ownership and protect tribal land rights, has instead been used as a tool for land grabs by dominant ethnic groups (Rajkumar, 2015).

4. The Kuki-Naga Conflict (1992-1997)

The Kuki-Naga conflict of the 1990s was a bloody episode that resulted in the displacement of thousands of Kuki/Zo people. Tensions between the two communities over land claims and political power erupted into violent clashes, leading to the destruction of hundreds of Kuki/Zo villages and the displacement of over 100,000 people (Kipgen, 2013). The conflict was marked by massacres, forced evictions, and targeted ethnic violence. To date, many displaced Kuki/Zo people remain in makeshift camps, unable to return to their ancestral lands.

Ethnic Violence and Security Concerns

Ethnic violence against the Kuki/Zo people has persisted, despite claims of peace-building initiatives by the state. In the absence of a separate administration, the Kuki/Zo people are forced to rely on state security forces that have often been complicit in or indifferent to the violence. For example, during the 2015 Churachandpur riots, reports emerged of police inaction, with some witnesses accusing state security forces of siding with Meitei groups in the violence (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

5. Human Rights Watch Report (2021)

In its 2021 report, Human Rights Watch documented the ongoing ethnic violence in Manipur and the failure of the state to protect minority groups, including the Kuki/Zo people. The report highlighted multiple instances where the Kuki/Zo community was targeted for attacks, and the state's response was either inadequate or outright negligent. This failure to ensure the safety of the Kuki/Zo people underscores the need for separate administration (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

6. The International Legal Framework: UNDRIP and Indigenous Rights

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) provides a robust legal framework for understanding the Kuki/Zo people's claims to separate administration. Articles 3 and 4 of UNDRIP explicitly recognise the right of indigenous peoples to self-determination and autonomy in matters concerning their internal affairs (United Nations, 2007). These rights include control over their land, resources, and governance structures, which the Kuki/Zo people have long been denied in the context of Manipur. UNDRIP's provisions apply directly to the situation of the Kuki/Zo people, as they align with their demands for separate administration and self-governance.

a. Right to Self-Determination

Article 3 of UNDRIP states that "Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right, they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development" (United Nations, 2007). For the Kuki/Zo people, this principle underlines their right to

establish a separate administrative region within India, where they can govern themselves and protect their cultural identity and resources. This call for autonomy is not a demand for secession but rather for a recognition of their distinctiveness within the Indian Union, similar to arrangements made for other indigenous communities globally, such as the Inuit in Nunavut, Canada (Smith, 2010).

b. Rights to Land, Territory, and Resources

Article 26 of UNDRIP further affirms that "Indigenous peoples have the right to the lands, territories and resources which they have traditionally owned, occupied or otherwise used or acquired" (United Nations, 2007). In the context of Manipur, the Kuki/Zo people's ancestral lands have been gradually encroached upon, not just by state policies but also by competing ethnic groups. The political exclusion of the Kuki/Zo people has made them vulnerable to losing their traditional lands, a violation of their internationally recognised rights. A separate administration could provide the legal and political framework necessary to protect these lands from further encroachment.

7. Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR)

The Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) in Assam provides a strong precedent for the kind of arrangement the Kuki/Zo people are seeking. The BTR was created after years of violent struggle by the Bodo people, who demanded recognition of their cultural and political rights within Assam. The Bodo Accord of 2003 granted the Bodo people limited autonomy over specific districts, allowing them to manage their own affairs while remaining part of the Indian Union (Sharma, 2013). Although the Bodo Accord has not

resolved all tensions, it has provided a framework for self-governance that has reduced ethnic violence and empowered the Bodo people politically. A similar arrangement for the Kuki/Zo people could lead to stability and long-term peace in Manipur.

Economic and Social Development

Separate administration would not only enhance political rights but also promote economic and social development. The Kuki/Zo people have long suffered from underdevelopment, in part due to their marginalisation in state politics. By having their own administrative region, they would be able to tailor development policies to their specific needs, including the preservation of their traditional agricultural practices, the promotion of education, and the development of infrastructure. This would allow the Kuki/Zo people to participate more fully in the Indian Separate administration would not only enhance political rights but also promote economic and social development. The Kuki/Zo people have long suffered from underdevelopment, in part due to their marginalisation in state politics. By having their own administrative region, they would be able to tailor development policies to their specific needs, including the preservation of their traditional agricultural practices, the promotion of education, and the development of infrastructure. This would allow the Kuki/Zo people to participate more fully in the Indian economy, while also ensuring that development projects are aligned with their cultural values and needs (Kipgen, 2015).

8. The Bodo Accord (Assam)

The Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) in Assam provides a strong precedent for the kind of arrangement the Kuki/Zo people are seeking, the two groups of communities shares several parallels in terms of their demand for political autonomy and cultural preservation. The Bodos, a large tribal group, have long sought autonomy to protect their identity and resources, which led to violent insurgencies in the late 20th century, demanding recognition of their cultural and political rights within Assam. The Indian government responded by signing the Bodo Accord in 2003, which led to the creation of the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR). The Bodo Accord of 2003 granted the Bodo people limited autonomy over specific districts, allowing them to manage their own affairs while remaining part of the Indian Union (Sharma, 2013). Although the Bodo Accord has not resolved all tensions, it has provided a framework for self-governance that has reduced ethnic violence and empowered the Bodo people politically.

Relevance: The Bodo Accord provides a successful example of a negotiated settlement between the Indian government and a tribal community, resulting in a degree of political autonomy within the Indian Union. The BTR has its own autonomous council, which controls important aspects of governance, such as education, agriculture, and cultural affairs. This model could serve as a blueprint for similar arrangements for the Kuki/Zo people, demonstrating that political autonomy within India is achievable through negotiation and legal frameworks.

9. The Nagaland Peace Process

The Naga insurgency, one of the longest-running conflicts in India's Northeast, has led to decades of negotiations between the Naga leaders and the Indian government. In 2015, the Indian government signed a Framework Agreement with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM), aimed at reaching a final settlement to the Naga issue. This agreement

recognises the Nagas' unique history and political rights, though a final solution is still in negotiation.

Relevance: The Naga peace process illustrates the complexities of addressing ethnic grievances in the Northeast. The Indian government's willingness to engage with the Nagas, including discussions on greater autonomy and territorial adjustments, is a positive precedent for the Kuki/Zo people. It shows that the Indian state can be flexible and open to negotiated settlements that respect the distinct identity and political aspirations of indigenous communities.

10. Indigenous Autonomy in Mexico's Chiapas Region

In 1994, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in the state of Chiapas, Mexico, launched an armed rebellion demanding greater autonomy for indigenous communities. Although the Mexican government did not fully accede to all their demands, negotiations led to the establishment of autonomous indigenous municipalities, where indigenous groups exercise control over local governance, land management, and cultural affairs.

Relevance: The situation in Chiapas highlights the global struggle of indigenous peoples for political autonomy and cultural preservation. The Zapatistas' fight for land rights and self-governance resonates with the Kuki/Zo people's demands for separate administration. This case study shows that, even in complex political environments, indigenous peoples can achieve degrees of autonomy through both negotiation and advocacy, without full secession from the state.

11. The Creation of Nunavut (1999)

A comparison can be made with the creation of Nunavut, a self-governing territory in Canada established to protect the Inuit people's land rights and autonomy. Nunavut was the result of decades of negotiation between the Inuit and the Canadian government, with the final agreement ensuring Inuit control over land use and governance (Smith, 2010). This case serves as a model for the Kuki/Zo people, demonstrating how a carefully negotiated arrangement can lead to peace and prosperity for indigenous groups without compromising the sovereignty of the state.

Proposed Solutions: The Case for Separate Administration

Based on the historical, political, and human rights arguments outlined above, the need for a separate administrative region for the Kuki/Zo people becomes undeniable. The proposal for a separate administration is rooted in the understanding that the current governance structure in Manipur is inadequate to protect the rights, lands, and safety of the Kuki/Zo people.

Autonomy and Local Governance

A separate administrative region would allow the Kuki/Zo people to exercise control over their own political and legal systems. As seen in other regions where indigenous autonomy has been granted, local governance allows for better protection of cultural rights and resources. The Kuki/Zo people would be able to govern themselves according to their traditional customs and practices, while still being part of the larger Indian Union. This model of governance has been implemented in several regions worldwide, including the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) in Assam, India (Sharma, 2013), and the autonomous

regions in Adivasi areas of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh.

Representation and Political Rights

One of the most immediate benefits of a separate administrative region would be increased political representation for the Kuki/Zo people. In the current political setup, Kuki/Zo representatives in the Manipur Legislative Assembly and local bodies are often outnumbered and outvoted by Meitei and Naga representatives. By creating a separate administrative entity, the Kuki/Zo people would be able to elect their own leaders who would have the power to address their specific concerns, including land rights, cultural preservation, and economic development (Kipgen, 2013).

Relevance: This case serves as a model for the Kuki/Zo people, demonstrating how a carefully negotiated arrangement can lead to peace and prosperity for indigenous groups without compromising the sovereignty of the state.

12. Greenland's Autonomy under Denmark

Greenland, an autonomous territory of Denmark, presents a highly successful example of indigenous autonomy within a sovereign state. Greenland's Home Rule Act of 1979 and subsequent Self-Government Act of 2009 granted the island significant control over its domestic affairs, while Denmark retained control over foreign policy and defence. Greenlanders, mostly Inuit, govern their resources, education, and health systems, and have the right to full independence should they choose to pursue it.

Relevance: While Greenland's context is different, its path to autonomy under a larger nation-state offers valuable lessons for the Kuki/Zo people. The Greenland model shows that a high degree of political autonomy and cultural preservation can coexist within a broader national framework. This could inspire a similar framework for the Kuki/Zo people, where their distinct identity and political aspirations are respected within the Indian Union.

Conclusion:

The Kuki/Zo people's demand for separate administration is not just a political aspiration but a necessity born out of decades of marginalisation, conflict, and the threat to their identity, culture, and existence. The Kuki/Zo people have been systematically excluded from the political and economic power structures of Manipur, and their land and resources have been exploited without adequate compensation or consultation. Their demand for self-governance is a legitimate response to these challenges and is supported by both Indian Constitutional principles and International Human Rights standards.

The creation of a separate administration for the Kuki/Zo people is urgent for several reasons. First, it would address the long-standing socio-economic disparities between the hill districts and the Imphal Valley, in essence bridging the hill valley divide, allowing the Kuki/Zo people to take control of their own development and ensure that resources are distributed more equitably. Second, it would protect the Kuki/Zo people's cultural and political identity, which is under threat from land encroachment, resource exploitation, and political marginalisation. Third, it would provide a mechanism for resolving the conflicts and tensions that have plagued the region, including the Naga-Kuki conflict and the ongoing Kuki/Zo – Meitei conflict and disputes over land and political control.

The pathway to achieving separate administration will not be easy. It will require persistent advocacy, legal reforms, and political negotiation, but the precedent exists, and the urgency is clear. The Indian government, along with international bodies and civil society organisations, must engage in a meaningful dialogue to ensure the survival of the Kuki/Zo people

However, the benefits of separate administration for the Kuki/Zo people far outweigh the challenges. By granting the Kuki/Zo people the autonomy they seek, India would not only fulfil its Constitutional obligations to protect the rights of indigenous peoples but also promote peace, stability, and development in a region that has long been neglected.

The demand for separate administration by the Kuki/Zo people is grounded in historical, political, and socio-economic realities that underscore the necessity of self-determination, which can in no way ever be overstated. The historical marginalisation, political disenfranchisement, and human rights violations they have endured over the decades make a compelling case for the creation of a new administrative structure that guarantees their autonomy and much-needed security. As demonstrated through the appendices and case studies; International legal frameworks such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) guided by successful case studies from regions like Nunavut and the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) set adequate precedents, positively exhibiting that Indigenous groups around the world have successfully negotiated political autonomy within larger nation-states; and such cases can be developed as models that can be adapted to the Kuki/Zo situation in present day Manipur.

Granting the Kuki/Zo people a separate administration would not only address their legitimate grievances but would also contribute to the long-term stability and peace in Manipur in particular and the North East as a whole. Without such an arrangement, the systemic exclusion and violent targeting of the Kuki/Zo people are likely to continue, exacerbating ethnic tensions and further destabilising the region. Therefore, it is in the best interest of the Indian Government, as well as the international community, to support the establishment of a separate administrative region for the Kuki/Zo people.

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A Comprehensive Analysis of China's Air-Space Counter-Intervention Activities over South and East China Seas

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Abstract

China has been claiming vast areas of the South China Sea for a very long time. But their territorial claims have become more aggressive after President Xi Jinping assumed power in 2012. Consequently, under the leadership of President Xi, the Chinese People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) has opted for an aggressive posture in this regard and has started executing dangerous manoeuvers over the South China Sea to deny airspace navigation to foreign aircrafts and regularly having intercepts with the air-force of the QUAD member states like the USA, Australia, etc. in recent years. These kind of manoeuvres can lead to accidents and wider conflicts in the region. Therefore, this research paper will try to understand and analyse the PLAAF's evolving capabilities over the South China Sea and how it affects the overall security situation in the Western Pacific region. Critical issues like how the regional groupings, alliances and the international community stop such irresponsible Chinese PLAAF behaviour over the seas and what lessons such air-power tactics have for Indian national security in the long run are discussed. This research paper tries to decode the various aspects from these PLAAF activities in terms of the evolving PLAAF air-power tactics and its increasing confidence via such disruptions, impact on regional geopolitics, diminishing deterrence of the US and the regional actors in the South China Sea and how can the QUAD tackle this disruption in the long run.

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Background

The great-power rivalry between the US and China has consequences for regional security in the Indo-Pacific. One major point of conflict between these two powers is the 'Freedom of Navigation Operations' (FONOPs) and overflight operations run by the US Department of Defence (DoD). As per the DoD notification from 2017, 'the DoD challenges excessive maritime claims asserted by a wide variety of coastal states, including allies, partners, and other nations on a worldwide basis to maintain global mobility of US forces. The program employs US forces from each branch of the military services.'[2] This FONOPs program has often faced China's resistance in the Indo-pacific, more often near the South China Sea (SCS) and East China Sea (ECS) as China claims a vast majority of this maritime zone through its 'nine-dash line' definition and opposes the navigation of any foreign vessel passing through these waters without China's permission.

The above situation has also aggravated in the airspace over the SCS and ECS in the last decade with People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) assets performing dangerous and risky manoeuvers and intercepts against foreign air forces, which can lead to miscalculated accidents and conflicts. In September 2024, US Secretary of the Air Force Frank Kendall acknowledged China's growing capabilities to counter and degrade US air power projection abilities in the Western Pacific.[3] This paper critically tracks and analyses these air-space denial tactics, assesses PLAAF's increasing confidence in conducting risky air-space tactics, examines limitations of current deterrence strategies/proposals, predicts possible future contestations, impact on Quad countries and addresses critical loopholes.

Origin of PLAAF Air-Intercepts

The PLAAF risky air-intercepts over SCS can be generally studied in three phases viz. 2014-2020 intercepts, 2021-2024 intercepts and individual intercepts against the US air-force (USAF) since 2021 which were maximum. The first known violent intercept between US and Chinese military occurred on 1st April 2001 when a US Navy (USN) EP-3 signals-intelligence aircraft collided mid-air with a Chinese Navy (PLAN) J-8 interceptor fighter over SCS. The EP-3 was challenged by two J-8 interceptors and one of them collided with EP-3 while performing a series of aggressive close passes, resulting in death of J-8 pilot and subsequent emergency landing of EP-3 at Lingshui airfield in Hainan.[4] This incident occurred during George W. Bush and Jiang Zemin presidency when the US and China were not much enemical to each other and China's claims over SCS were mild. In last 23 years, things have changed drastically and the PLAAF under the leadership of president Xi-Jinping has resorted to more aggression over the SCS.

[2] US Department of Defence. (2017, February 28). *US Department of Defense Freedom of Navigation (FON) Program*. https://policy.defense.gov/Portals/11/DoD%20FON%20Program%20Summary%2016.pdf?ver=2017-03-03-141350-380

[3] Olay, M. (2024, September 16). Threat From China Increasing, Air Force Official Says. *US Department of Defense*. https://www.defense.gov/News/News-

Stories/Article/Article/3907669/threat-from-china-increasing-air-force-official-says/

[4] EP-3 Collision, Crew Detainment and Homecoming. (2001). *US Naval History and Heritage Command*, *AR/695*. https://www.history.navy.mil/research/archives/Collections/ncdu-det-206/2001/ep-3-collision--crew-detainment-and-homecoming.html?cq_ck=1619548656299#top

2014-2020 PLAAF Intercepts

Since Xi Jinping's rise in 2013, PLAAF intercepts and airspace blockage activities gradually increased over the SCS from 2014 onwards. Those intercepts are recorded below:

- 19th August 2014: A USN P-8 Poseidon maritime-patrol aircraft was buzzed by a J-11 fighter 135 miles east of Hainan Island. The J-11 made several passes near the P-8, coming within 20 feet distance which was termed as unsafe and unprofessional by the Pentagon. The J-11 also displayed its weapons load-out while passing at an angle of 90 degrees, pointing its belly toward the nose of the P-8.[5]

- September 2015: A USAF RC-135 Rivet Joint-surveillance aircraft was intercepted by two Xian JH-7 fighters 80 miles east of the Shandong peninsula. One of the JH-7s crossed about 500 feet in front of the nose of the RC-134. The DoD reported no indication of a 'near collision.'[6]

- 17th May 2016: USN EP-3 Aries maritime-reconnaissance aircraft got intercepted by two J-11s in international airspace east of the island of Hainan. As per sources, one J-11

came within 50 feet of the side of the EP-3 aircraft at a high rate of speed. This was termed as unsafe via initial reports.[7]

- 7th June 2016: USAF RC-135 was intercepted by two Chengdu J-10 fighters close to Chinese coast. The J-10s had an unsafe, excessive rate of closure on RC-135. The US Pacific command deemed this intercept as poor airmanship rather than intentional aggressive flying.[8]

- 17th May 2017: USAF WC-135 Constant-Phoenix aircraft, having radiation-sniffing surveillance capabilities, was intercepted by two Su-30 jets over ECS. The USAF termed the intercept as unprofessional due to the manoeuvre displayed by the Su-30 pilot and the speed and proximity between the two aircraft.[9]

2021-2024 PLAAF Intercepts

There was no major record of any risky PLAAF behaviour over SCS & ECS airspace between 2018 and 2020. After President Biden assumed power in 2020, China started to intercept aircraft belonging to countries other than the US and tried to breach the

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[5] Majumdar, D. (2014, August 22). Chinese Fighter Buzzes U.S. Navy Surveillance Plane, Pentagon Upset. *US Naval Institute*. https://news.usni.org/2014/08/22/chinese-fighter-buzzes-u-s-navy-surveillance-plane-pentagon-upset

[6] LaGrone, S. (2015, September 22). Chinese Aircraft May Have Conducted an Unsafe Intercept of U.S. Surveillance Plane Last Week. *US Naval Institute*. https://news.usni.org/2015/09/22/pentagon-chinese-aircraft-conducted-an-unsafe-intercept-of-u-s-surveillance-plane-last-week

[7] Ali, I., & Rajagopalan, M. (2016, May 20). China demands end to U.S. surveillance after aircraft intercept. *Reuters*.

https://www.reuters.com/article/world/china-demands-end-to-us-surveillance-after-aircraft-intercept-idUSKCN0YA2BQ/

[8] LaGrone, S. (2016, June 8). *"Improper Airmanship" by Chinese Pilot Led to Unsafe Intercept*. US Naval Institute. https://news.usni.org/2016/06/08/pentagon-poor-chinese-flying-likely-cause-unsafe-intercept-air-force-recon-plane

[9] Stewart, P., Blanchard, B., & Ruwitch, J. (2017, May 20). Chinese jets intercept U.S. radiation-sniffing plane, U.S. says. *Reuters*. https://www.reuters.com/article/world/chinese-jets-intercept-us-radiation-sniffing-plane-us-says-idUSKCN18F03X/

airspace of neighbouring ASEAN member state Malaysia. Those activities are tabulated below:

Date	Reporting Country	PLAAF actions	Country remarks	China's remarks
31st May 2021	Malaysia	Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) reported that 16 PLAAF Xian Y-20 and Ilyushin Il-76 airlifters approached in a tactical formation within 60 nautical miles (69 miles) of Malaysia's eastern coast. They were flying at speeds of 290 knots and at altitudes between 23,000-27,000 feet and were likely conducting a long-range airlift surge exercise.[10]	RMAF sent Hawk light combat jets from Labuan air base and termed the incident as serious matter that threatens national security.[11]	PLAAF conducted routine training over waters to south of Nansha Islands in accordance with international law, and they didn't enter Malaysia's airspace.[12]
26th May 2022	Australia	A Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) P-8A aircraft, while performing surveillance activity under '*Operation Gateway*' over SCS was intercepted by a J-16.[13] The J-16 released flares before passing in front of the P-8A and releasing chaff before the P-8A's flight path. Aluminium fragments of	The Australian government said that they won't be intimidated by the dangerous actions of the PLAAF and will continue its legal operations in the SCS.[15]	P-8A engaged in close-in reconnaissance and threatened China's sovereignty & security near Xisha islands. Countermeasures of PLAAF were professional, safe, reasonable and legitimate.[16]

[10] Mahadzir, D. (2021, June 1). *Chinese Air Force Fly 16 Aircraft Through Malaysian Airspace in Large-Scale Exercise*. US Naval Institute. https://news.usni.org/2021/06/01/chinese-air-force-fly-16-aircraft-through-malaysian-airspace-in-large-scale-exercise

[11] Mahadzir (2021).

[12] *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on June 2, 2021*. (2021, June 2). Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347055.html

[13] Chinese interception of P-8A Poseidon on 26 May 2022. (2022, June 5). *Department of Defence, Australia*. https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/releases/2022-06-05/chinese-interception-p-8a-poseidon-26-may-2022

[15] Morse (2022).

[16] Congyi, L. (2022, June 7). *Chinese defense spokesperson responds to Australia's hype of China-Australia military aircraft encounter.* Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China. http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/4912457.html

		chaff were sucked by the engine of the P-8A.[14]	
June 2022	USA	US special operations C-130 was intercepted by a PLAAF Su-30 in an unsafe and unprofessional manner.[17]	DoD spokesperson Lt. Col. Martin Meiners declined to react on this incident while emphasizing that US will continue to fly and operate in accordance with international laws & expects others to do the same.[18]	No Comments.[19]

[14] Morse, D. (2022, June 5). Federal government says it will not be deterred by Chinese "intimidation" tactics in South China Sea. *ABC News*. https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-06-05/australian-government-wont-be-intimidated-in-south-china-sea/101127204

[17] Seligman, L. (2022, July 14). *Chinese fighter jet had "unsafe" interaction with U.S. military plane in June*. Politico. https://www.politico.com/news/2022/07/14/chinese-jet-us-military-interaction-00045832

[18] Seligman (2022).

[19] *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on July 15, 2022*. (2022, July 15). Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng./xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347325.html

26th April to 26th May2 022	Canada	A Royal Canadian air-force (RCAF) CP-140 Aurora long-range patrol-aircraft performing duties under '*Operation NEON*' was intercepted multiple times by PLAAF aircraft which was unprofessional & put the safety of crew at risk. The crew had to quickly change their flight-path to avoid a potential collision.[20]	The RCAF aircraft was harassed, and the PLAAF aircraft didn't adhere to international air safety norms.[21]	Under the pretext of enforcing UNSC resolutions, RCAF have intensified close-up reconnaissance of China & acted provocatively, endangering national security. PLAAF took reasonable, effective, safe and professional measures.[22]
21st Dec. 2022	USA	As per the US Indo-Pacific command (INDOPACOM), a J-11 performed an unsafe manoeuvre by flying in front of and within 20 feet of the nose of a USAF RC-135, forcing RC-135 to take evasive manoeuvers to avoid collision.[23]	The US Indo-Pacific Joint Force will continue to fly, sail and operate at sea and in international airspace.[24]	US frequently endangers China's national security via aerial and naval reconnaissance & China would take "necessary measures."[25]

[20] Smith, J. (2022, June 2). Canada says Chinese warplanes harassed its patrol aircraft on N. Korea sanctions mission. *Reuters*. https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/canada-says-chinese-warplanes-harassed-its-patrol-aircraft-nkorea-sanctions-2022-06-02/

[21] Statement from the Canadian Armed Forces. (2022, June 1). *Department of National Defence, Canada*. https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/news/2022/06/statement-from-the-canadian-armed-forces.html

[22] Zhuo, C. (2022, June 6). *Defense spokesperson answers press question on Canadian military's hype of aircraft encounters.* Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China. http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/4912402.html

[23] Shelbourne, M. (2022, December 30). *Chinese Navy Fighter Flew Within 20 Feet of U.S. Air Force Plane Over South China Sea*. US Naval Institute. https://news.usni.org/2022/12/30/chinese-navy-fighter-flew-within-20-feet-of-u-s-air-force-plane-over-south-china-sea

[24] Shelbourne (2022).

[25] *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on December 30, 2022*. (2022, December 30). Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347438.html

26th May 2023	USA	USAF RC-135 was aggressively intercepted by a J-16, forcing RC-135 to fly through J-16's wake turbulence.[26]	The USAF expects all countries to use international airspace safely and in accordance with international laws.[27]	Frequent deployment of US aircraft to conduct close surveillance seriously harms China's sovereignty and security.[28]
16th Oct. 2023	Canada	RCAF CP-140 Aurora surveillance aircraft was intercepted by two PLAAF jets, which came within five metres. The jets were armed with air-to-air missiles and were aggressively flying in close proximity to put CP-140 into its blind spot. They also released multiple firework-like flares close to CP-140 wings and near the front of the plane, which was concerning.[29]	Canadian Defence Minister Bill Blair described the PLAAF fighters' actions as dangerous and reckless.[30]	CP-140 intruded into China's airspace in Chiwei Yu near ECS. PLAAF took reasonable, legal, and professional standard actions while maintaining Diaoyu Dao & its affiliated islands as China's territory.[31]
24th Oct. 2023	USA	A J-11 made an unsafe intercept of a USAF B-52 Stratofortress bomber at night with limited visibility over SCS by closing in with an uncontrolled excessive	The DoD stated that the incident won't change their approach to the FON operations and they will continue to fly, sail and	B-52 flew halfway around the world near China's doorstep (SCS) for military muscle flexing.[34]

[26] USINDOPACOM Statement on Unprofessional Intercept of U.S. Aircraft over South China Sea. (2023, May 30). *U.S. Indo-Pacific Command*. https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3410337/usindopacom-statement-on-unprofessional-intercept-of-us-aircraft-over-south-chi/

[27] U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (2023).

[28] *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning's Regular Press Conference on May 31, 2023*. (2023, May 31). Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng./xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347534.html

[29] Garcha, N. (2023, October 16). Chinese military jet intercepts Canadian Forces plane in "aggressive manner." *Global News*. https://globalnews.ca/news/10027324/chinese-military-aircraft-intercept-canadian-forces/

[30] Brewster, M. (2023, October 16). Chinese fighters engaged in "unsafe" intercept of Canadian surveillance plane, commander says. *CBC News*. https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/china-air-force-intercept-aurora-surveillance-1.6997852

[31] Xinjuan, W. (2023, October 18). *Chinese defense spokesperson refutes Canada's hype of military aircraft encounter.* Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China. http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16259850.html

[34] *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Mao Ning's Regular Press Conference on October 27, 2023*. (2023, October 27). Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng./xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347623.html

		speed, flying below, in front of, and within 10 feet of the B-52. The PLAAF pilot was assumed to be unaware of how close he was to causing a mid-air collision.[32]	operate safely and responsibly.[33]	
29th Oct. 2023	Canada	A Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) CH-148 Cyclone helicopter was buzzed by two J-11s in an unsafe manner as the helicopter experienced turbulence. The same helicopter during a second sortie on the same day was intercepted again by another J-11, which dropped flares directly in front of the helicopter, due to which the pilot had to manoeuvre to avoid flares getting ingested into the helicopter's rotor and engine intakes.[35]	The Canadian Department of National Defence (DND) deemed the incident as unsafe.[36]	China lodged their firm position on Canadian warplanes conducting reconnaissance activities near China's airspace & hoped Canada would refrain from repeating their inappropriate behaviour.[37]

[32] *Unprofessional Intercept of U.S. B-52 over South China Sea*. (2023, October 26). U.S. Indo-Pacific Command. https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3569987/unprofessional-intercept-of-us-b-52-over-south-china-sea/

[33] Press, A. (2023, October 27). US Military: Chinese Fighter Jet Came Within 10 Feet of B-52 Bomber Over South China Sea. *Voice of America*. https://www.voanews.com/a/us-military-chinese-fighter-jet-came-within-10-feet-of-b-52-bomber-over-south-china-sea/7329306.html

[35] *Statement from the Canadian Armed Forces Regarding Unsafe Intercept of Royal Canadian Air Force Helicopter*. (2023, November 3). National Defence, Government of Canada. https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/news/2023/11/statement-from-the-canadian-armed-forces-regarding-unsafe-intercept-of-royal-canadian-air-force-helicopter.html

[36] Brewster, M. (2023, November 4). Canadian military chopper buzzed by Chinese fighter jets, DND says. *CBC News*. https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/cyclone-helicopter-jets-south-china-sea-1.7017843

[37] *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on November 3, 2023*. (2023, November 3). Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347628.html

8th Aug. 2024	Philippines	Philippines air force (PAF) NC-212i light-transport turboprop plane got intercepted by two PLAAF jets which executed dangerous manoeuvers at very close distance and dropped atleast eight flares in front of PAF plane.[38]	Philippine military chief Gen. Romeo Brawner stated that incident posed a threat to PAF aircraft, interfered with lawful flight operations in airspace within Philippine's sovereignty and jurisdiction and contravened international law.[39]	Despite repeated warnings, PAF aircraft illegally intruded into the airspace of Huangyan Island. The PLAAF carried out identification, tracking, warning & expulsion in accordance with the law.[40]

PLAAF versus USAF Intercepts since fall 2021

In October 2023, Ely Ratner, then assistant secretary of defence for Indo-Pacific security affairs in DoD, declassified several footage of risky intercepts of PLAAF's coercive and risky operational behaviour against USAF since 2021, which they believed was a centralised and concerted campaign to force a change in US operational capabilities.[41] Visual analysis of those images and videos footages are tabulated below[42]:

Date of Intercept	PLAAF action	DoD footage & images analysis	Remarks
11th January, 2022	A PLAAF jet crossed in front of a USAF aircraft at a	As per the image of the USAF cockpit display, the intercept happened at an altitude of 15,883 feet, and a twin-seater & twin-engine PLAAF	USAF asset is identified as a fixed-wing turbo-fan aircraft, either a surveillance

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[38] Gomez, J. (2024, August 10). Philippine military says Chinese air force jets endangered its patrol plane with flares, risky moves. *AP News*. https://apnews.com/article/philippines-china-scarborough-shoal-aircraft-patrol-cb66939c0f0698cf8eafeb9974f575ef

[39] Gomez (2024).

[40] Zhuo, C. (2024, August 10). *PLA Southern Theater Command drives away Philippine aircraft illegally intruding into China's Huangyan Dao*. China Military Online. http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/16330462.html

[41] Garamone, J. (2023, October 17). U.S. Accuses China of Conducting "Centralized, Concerted" Campaign of Harassment of Aircraft. *U.S. Department of Defense*. https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3560463/us-accuses-china-of-conducting-centralized-concerted-campaign-of-harassment-of/

[42] Department of Defense Releases Declassified Images, Videos of Coercive and Risky PLA Opera. (2023, October 17). *U.S. Department of Defense*. https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3559903/department-of-defense-releases-declassified-images-videos-of-coercive-and-risky/

	distance of 100 yards (300 feet), forcing the USAF aircraft to fly through the PLAAF jet's wake turbulence.	aircraft was flying at a distance of 22 feet sideways before crossing in front. The GPS coordinates as per the image Degree, Minutes, Seconds (DMS) indicator are roughly calculated as having a latitude and longitude position of 18.76ºN & 115.12º E respectively.[43] This location is calculated to be approximately 520 km away from Hainan Island.[44]	or a transport asset. It is approximately 520 km away from the Chinese mainland and outside China's Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ).
29th April, 2022	Four PLAAF jets conducted a risky intercept of a USAF asset continuously for a duration of five hours, reaching a minimum distance of 75 feet.	Footage 1 shows a twin-seater & twin-engine PLAAF asset armed with air-to-air missiles flying sideways to a USAF asset. Footage 2 is a heads-up display (HUDS) feed showing the interaction happening over an altitude of 25,488 feet. The latitude and longitude coordinates can be calculated roughly using DMS displayed to be around 32.71ºN & 122.62ºE. This location is calculated to be approximately 198 kms away from Shanghai. Image 1 & 2 shows the involvement of a PLAAF Chengdu J-10. Image 3 shows the release of a flare from a twin-seater PLAAF jet.	USAF asset is a turbo-propeller aircraft. The intercept happens north of SCS 198 km away from Shanghai which is well outside China's ADIZ.
24th May, 2022	A PLAAF jet intercepted a USAF asset at a distance of just 15 feet laterally and 10 feet below.	PLAAF jet is identified as a twin-seater & twin-engine Xian JH-7. It is armed with both air-to-air and air-to-ground payloads.	The USAF asset is a four-engine turbo-propeller aircraft.

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[43] *GPS coordinates, Coordinates of an address*. (n.d.). Gps-Coordinates.net. https://www.gps-coordinates.net/

[44] *Distance between Coordinates*. (n.d.). Gps-Coordinates.org. https://gps-coordinates.org/distance-between-coordinates.php

| 8th June, 2022	Four PLAAF jets conducted a five-hour intercept of a USAF asset by coming as close as 40 feet and taking photographs.	PLAAF jet involved is a single-engine JH-7 fighter. The involvement of twin-pilot assets helps PLAAF to conduct close reconnaissance.	USAF and PLAAF assets were assumed to have flown without any drastic manoeuvers as both aircraft crews are seen to be taking photos of each other suggesting stable flight behaviour.
23rd June, 2022	A PLAAF jet approached a USAF asset at a distance of 40 feet before repeatedly flying above and below USAF aircraft and flashing its weapons. When the USAF aircraft pilot radioed the PLAAF pilot, he received an explicit language, including an expletive from the PLAAF pilot.	Footage released shows a twin-seater & twin-engine PLAAF jet armed with payloads closely following the USAF asset. The HUDS images show interception occurring at an altitude of 15,816-15,821 feet. The latitude and longitude coordinates can be assessed roughly using the displayed DMS as 18.31ºN & 112.80ºE which is approximately 321 kms away from the Hainan Island.	The USAF asset is a turbo-fan aircraft and is outside the Chinese ADIZ.

21st December, 2022	A PLAAF jet flew in front of and within 20 feet of the nose of a USAF aircraft. USAF aircraft dives downwards to avoid collision.	Footage released by the US INDOPACOM identifies the PLAAF asset as a twin-seater & twin-engine jet armed with four missiles.	The USAF asset is not recognised.
11th January, 2023	A PLAAF jet intercepted a USAF asset within a distance of 30 feet.	Footage released identifies the armed PLAAF asset as a twin-seater & twin-engine jet. There is no risky manoeuvre observed	The USAF asset is a four-engine turbo-fan aircraft.
7th February, 2023	A PLAAF jet intercepted a USAF asset by approaching at a distance of 20 feet.	Footage released identifies armed PLAAF asset as a twin-seater & twin-engine jet. There is no risky manoeuvre observed.	The USAF asset is a fixed-wing turbo-fan aircraft.
15th February, 2023	A PLAAF jet intercepted a USAF asset within a distance of 70 feet.	Footage released identifies PLAAF asset as a single-seater & twin-engine jet. There is no risky manoeuvre observed.	The USAF asset is a turbo-propeller aircraft.
2nd March, 2023	A PLAAF jet intercepted a USAF asset by approaching at a distance of 50 feet.	Footage released identifies PLAAF asset as a twin-seater & single-engine armed JH-7. There is no risky manoeuvre observed.	The USAF asset is not recognised.

25th May, 2023	A PLAAF jet flew in front of the nose of a USAF asset, forcing USAF aircraft to fly through the PLAAF jet's wake turbulence.	USINDOPACOM released footage shows twin-engine PLAAF jet flying from right direction and crossing USAF aircraft and releasing wake turbulence. USAF cockpit crew is shaken with the impact of turbulence. This can be classified as a very risky manoeuver by PLAAF. The thrust from the two engines of PLAAF jet is very strong, enough to cause turbulence which shakes USAF asset which is presumed to be larger in size and heavier in mass.	The USAF asset is a four-engine turbo-fan aircraft.
11th June, 2023	A PLAAF jet intercepted a USAF asset within a distance of 25 feet.	Footage released identifies PLAAF asset as a twin-seater & twin-engine jet. There is no risky manoeuvre observed.	The USAF asset is not recognised.
12th July, 2023	A PLAAF jet intercepted a USAF asset within a distance of 900 feet and released eight flares. This is basically a signalling manoeuvring towards the USAF asset.	Footage released identifies PLAAF asset as a twin-seater & twin-engine jet. Since the distance between the USAF and PLAAF aircraft is large, there is no impact of released flares.	The USAF asset is not recognised.

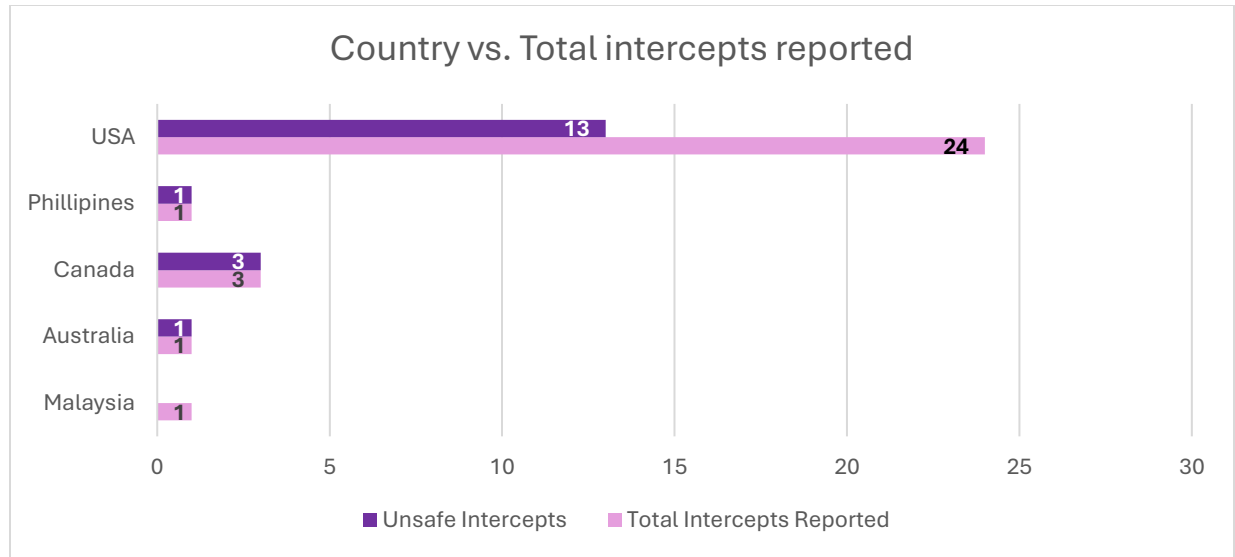| 10th August, 2023	A PLAAF asset closed in with a high speed up to a distance of 50 feet beneath the wing of a USAF aircraft and then conducted a barrel roll around and below the USAF aircraft, causing the pilot to perform defensive manoeuvres to avoid a potential collision.	Image released identifies PLAAF asset as an armed twin-seater & twin-engine jet. The observed intercept is risky.	The USAF asset is a fixed-wing turbo-fan aircraft.
21st September, 2023	A PLAAF jet intercepted a USAF asset within a distance of 50 feet.	Footage released identifies armed PLAAF asset as a twin-seater & twin-engine jet. There is no risky manoeuvre observed.	The USAF asset is a fixed-wing turbo-fan aircraft.

PLAAF Intercepts Pattern Analysis

The reported information from the previous sections of PLAAF risky behaviour recorded for the period between 2014 and 2024 is visualised and analysed via below graphical representations:
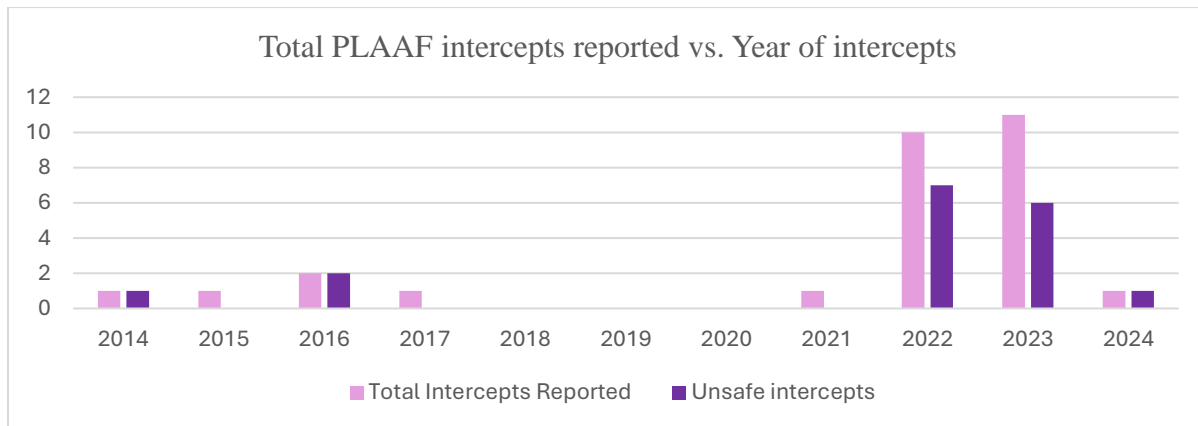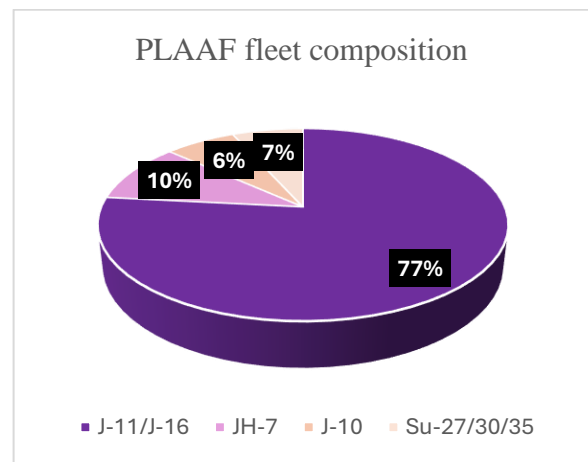

Chart 1. Source: Author

From Chart 1, it is observed that PLAAF intercepts with other air forces began slightly from 2014 and increased till 2016, but dipped from 2017-2020. President Xi Jinping assumed power in 2013, coinciding with President Barack Obama continuing his term in the US. The start of intercepts from 2014 could be considered a direct executive order by the Central political leadership to deny airspace navigation to US and allied forces. From 2013 to 2017, US President Obama's administration, in its second term, was directly challenging Chinese claims over the SCS, which wasn't the norm during President Obama's first term from 2009-2013. From 2017 to

2021, under the Trump administration, US foreign policy was more inward-looking, and the SCS was a lesser priority area, which explains the absence of any risky intercepts between 2018 and 2020, which also implies that the US reduced its FONOPs activities over the SCS. From 2021 to 2025, under the President Biden administration, FONOPs again gained priority as President Biden showed his commitment to the ASEAN allies and partners getting bullied in the SCS, which explains the spike in intercepts between 2022 and 2023. Therefore, the number of PLAAF unsafe intercepts is dependent on a specific US President's policy towards the Indo-Pacific.
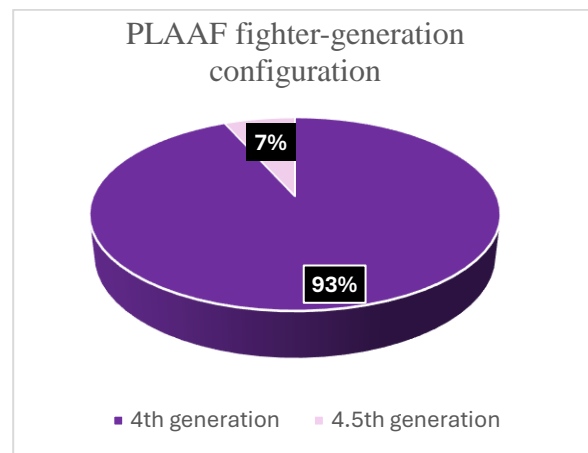
Country vs. Total intercepts reported

Country	Unsafe Intercepts	Total Intercepts Reported
USA	13	24
Phillipines	1	1
Canada	3	3
Australia	1	1
Malaysia		1

Chart 2. Source: Author

Chart 2 shows total intercepts reported by different countries in the SCS region. The US, having a strong air force, has reported maximum total and unsafe intercepts since it is the strongest competitor to China in the Indo-Pacific and has an unsafe intercept to total intercepts ratio of around 0.54. Canada, a NATO ally, reported the second-highest intercepts. Philippines and Malaysia, which have direct contestations with China over the SCS, have a weaker air force and thus face fewer air intercepts. For Canada, Philippines and Australia, important Quad members and part of five-eyes intelligence, the ratio of unsafe intercepts to total intercepts is 1.0, which indicates that PLAAF is confident in bullying those countries whose air force is weaker and which are not operating under the FONOPs program.
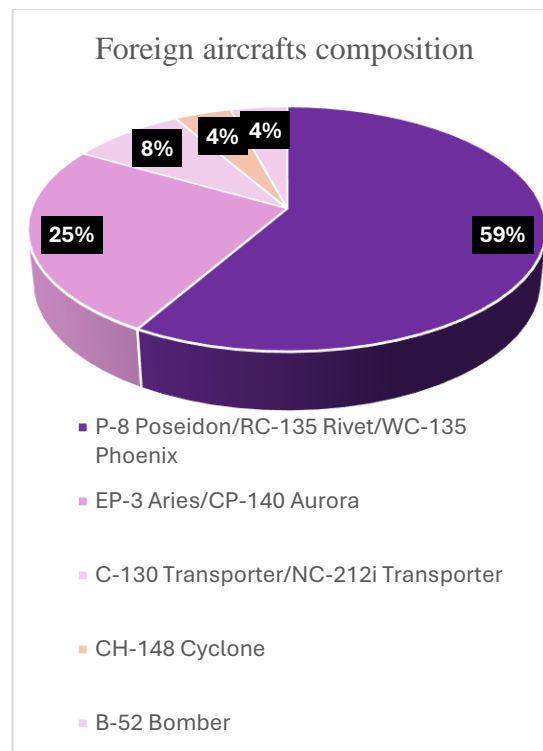
PLAAF fleet composition

- J-11/J-16 — 77%
- JH-7 — 10%
- J-10 — 6%
- Su-27/30/35 — 7%

Chart 3. Source: Author

PLAAF fighter-generation configuration

- 4th generation — 93%
- 4.5th generation — 7%

72

Chart 4. Source: Author

Charts 3 and 4 depict the composition and generation type of PLAAF assets deployed for conducting the air intercepts. PLAAF mostly used 4th - 4.5th generation fighter jets to intercept foreign aircraft. The deployment of J-11, J-16, JH-7, J-10, Su-30, etc. shows PLAAF's complete utilisation of inventory for challenging the intrusions, which means PLAAF attaches great importance to securing SCS airspace, barring the 5th generation assets. The 77% usage of J-11/J-16 fighters, which are manufactured by Shenyang Aircraft Corporation (SAC), implies PLAAF has a greater confidence in utilising its domestically developed fighters to challenge adversaries in within visual-range (WVR) interactions. The 93% usage of 4th generation fighters like J-11, J-10, etc., which are mostly twin-engine jets, indicates that PLAAF first wants to utilise 4th generation jets to completely gain air-superiority before deploying 4.5th or higher generation jets. This allows PLAAF to study WVR air-space denial tactics and pilot-manoeuvring abilities for further fine-tuning.

Foreign aircrafts composition

- P-8 Poseidon/RC-135 Rivet/WC-135 Phoenix
- EP-3 Aries/CP-140 Aurora
- C-130 Transporter/NC-212i Transporter
- CH-148 Cyclone
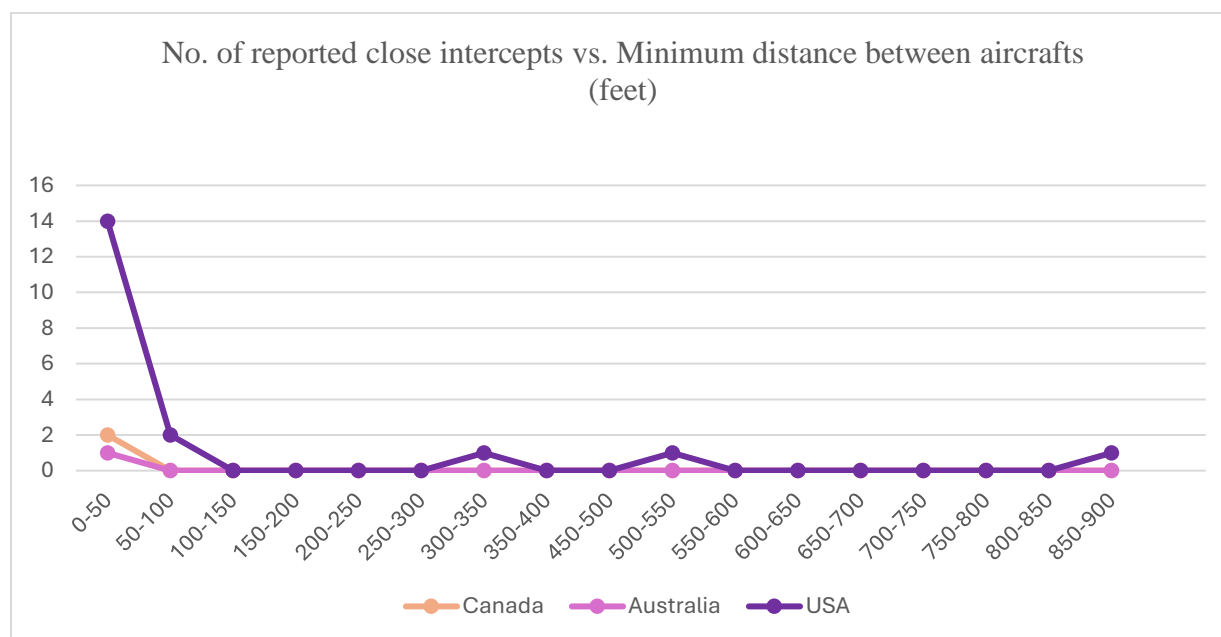- B-52 Bomber

Chart 5. Source: Author

Charts 5 and 6 show composition and mission parameters of all foreign country aircrafts which flew over SCS & ECS in last decade. Nearly 59% of the aircrafts have been flown by US and Australia for advanced surveillance and reconnaissance activities which include the likes of P-8 Poseidon, RC-135 Rivet etc. Nearly 69% of missions were pertaining to surveillance purposes for which China has shown protests.

missions were for transport purposes, which is a cause of concern for China because China won't like the use of heavy strategic transporters of the US to transport heavy military equipment to its regional adversaries like Japan, Philippines, Taiwan, etc. Maritime patrol missions are around 26% which is bound to face air-space blockage attempts as China claims entire SCS. The October 2023 night-time intercept of a USAF B-52 Stratofortress bomber was again China's attempt to nullify the strategic posturing of the US. China's air-space blockage activities are thus executed to slow down/block any chances of surveillance or maritime patrol. China now considers any kind of airspace navigation over the SCS & ECS, which falls outside its official ADIZ, as a threat to its national security, which is a new concerning paradigm shift in Chinese policy.

Chart 6. Source: Author

The majority of these missions were under FONOPs but China was concerned that most of these could be for spying and detection activities on Chinese militarised islands in the SCS. Around 9% of the

Chart 7. Source: Author

Chart 7 represents the number of unsafe intercepts against minimum distance (in feet) between PLAAF and aircraft operated from Canada, Australia and the US. Both Australia and Canada faced 3 close intercepts together, which were within 50 feet. For Australia, the minimum distance was considered unsafe and highly risky because the PLAAF asset was flying in front at a closer distance and released flares, which got ingested into the turbo-fan engine of a P-8. This could have short-circuited the engines of P-8, leading to engine failure and altitude loss. For Canada, intercepts happened within 50 feet and were unsafe, but since RCAF assets were turbo-propeller variants having a lesser speed compared to turbo-fan aircraft, there was enough time for the crew to manoeuvre and change flight path. Also, the impact of flares on a turbo-prop engine is negligible because those engines are covered, and there is less risk of any ingestion of flares damaging engines.

The US has faced the greatest number of intercepts within 50 feet of the PLAAF aircraft, as observed in the chart. This is because the US has conducted regular reconnaissance and surveillance missions in the SCS and ECS than any other nation. For any distance beyond 200 feet, the intercept can't be categorised as unsafe/risky because there is a minimum chance of any collision unless the adversary comes directly in front within a short time. At least on 3 occasions, USAF aircrafts had to change their flight-paths in order to avoid a potential collision, which provides the probability of a collision occurring within 50 feet as

merely 23%. Similarly, on 3 counts, USAF aircrafts were trapped in wake-turbulence flowing from PLAAF assets, which disturbed their flight paths and cockpit crew. The low probability of collision within 50 feet is considered by PLAAF as a favourable condition to perform risky manoeuvres. This, along with the PLAAF pilot's superior aircraft control displayed in video footage, will be a challenge to FONOPs

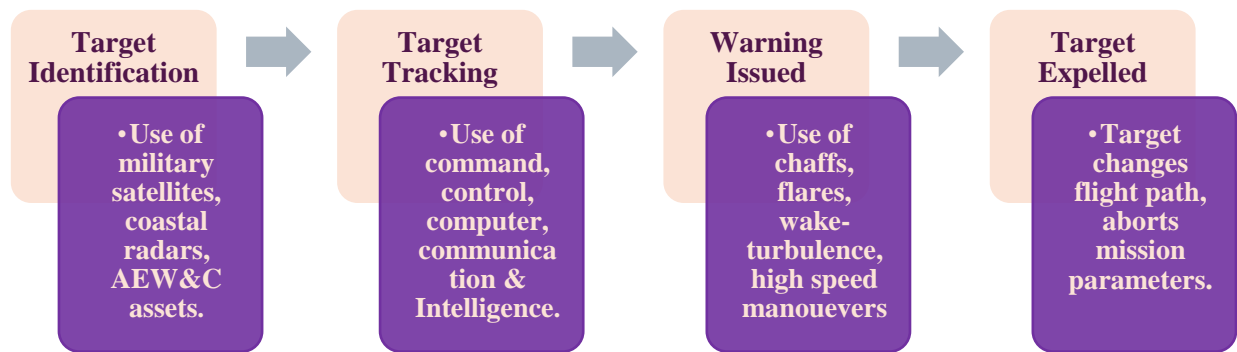**PLAAF Tactics (ITWE) for Counter-Intervention**

The annual China Military Power Report 2023 (CMPR-2023) released by DoD indicates that PLAAF is the largest aviation force in the Indo-Pacific region and its role has drastically transformed from territorial air-defence to "offensive and defensive operations", which is gradually eroding a significant and longstanding US military advantage in the air domain.[45] China's area-access and area-denial (A2/AD) strategy, also called counter-intervention, aims to deny the US from having a presence in China's immediate periphery and limit US access in the Indo-Pacific.[46] As observed in earlier sections, PLAAF follows a well-planned strategy of 'Identification, Tracking, Warning and Expulsion' (ITWE) of any aircraft that passes through SCS & ECS airspace to maintain effective counter-intervention. PLAAF's ITWE process is depicted below:

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[45] Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2023. (2023). (p. 62). US Department of defence. https://media.defense.gov/2023/Oct/19/2003323409/-1/-1/1/2023-

MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA.PDF

[46] CMPR-2023, US Department of defence, p. 88

Target Identification		Target Tracking		Warning Issued		Target Expelled
• Use of military satellites, coastal radars, AEW&C assets.	→	• Use of command, control, computer, communication & Intelligence.	→	• Use of chaffs, flares, wake-turbulence, high speed manouevers	→	• Target changes flight path, aborts mission parameters.

- **Identification:** China uses its constellation of military reconnaissance satellites, which provide identification of US and allied forces assets like aircraft carriers, which carry fighter fleets in the SCS/ECS conflict region. China has invested in reconnaissance, surveillance, command, control, and communications (C3) systems at strategic, operational, and tactical levels to provide high-fidelity over-the-head targeting information. China has a robust Integrated Air-Defence System (IADS) architecture extending up to 556 km from its coastal zone that relies on an extensive early-warning radar network, fighter aircrafts, and a variety of Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM) systems. China has placed radars on militarised island outposts in the SCS, further extending the range of its IADS. China has long-range air surveillance radars, including models claiming to support Ballistic-Missile Defence (BMD) and other models asserting the ability to detect stealth aircraft (not verified). PLAAF's Airborne Early-Warning and Control (AEW&C) aircrafts, such as the KJ-2000 and KJ-500, further extend China's radar coverage past the range of its ground-based radars.[47]

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[47] CMPR-2023¸US Department of defence, p. 89

- **Tracking:** Successful initial identification of any flying asset as a friend/foe leads PLAAF to conduct extensive tracking. Tracking involves monitoring the entry-exit coordinates in the area of interest, complete flight-path, mission parameters, asset specifications and close-air behaviour. As per the CMPR-2023 report, the improvements of PLAAF are enabling it to operate and project power at greater distances from the Chinese mainland for longer periods.[48] These improvements could be mid-air refuelling capabilities, network-centric information systems, Command, Control, Communications, Computers, and Intelligence (C4I) structures. Chinese outposts in the SCS further extend the operating reach of PLAAF, thereby enabling them to begin instant tracking after identification.[49] The C4I modernisation helps PLAAF to collect, process and share information rapidly for improving PLAAF commanders' situational awareness for accelerated decision making.[50]

- **Warning:** PLAAF A2/AD strategy focuses on aggressive warning far away from its ADIZ. The method of warning depends on the type of target and its mission. As per the declassified footage of the DoD, if the target is a fast-moving fixed-wing turbo-fan aircraft performing maritime patrol or ISR mission, then PLAAF jets perform high rates of closure/rapid approaches to overtake the target

at high speed and come directly in front of the target nose. Thus, PLAAF jets escape the wake-turbulence of the target aircraft from behind and signal their intentions to block the flight path to rival pilots. When the target is a slow-moving fixed-wing turbo-prop aircraft performing transport/patrol, then PLAAF performs maritime bow crossings, barrel rolls and acrobatics to intimidate because they are aware that for a slow-moving target, the corresponding PLAAF manoeuvers are easy to execute without any risk of collision.[51]

- **Expulsion:** PLAAF executes the expulsion of target aircrafts through a series of dangerous manoeuvers and discharging objects like chaffs and flares. The chaff and flares are especially dangerous for any turbo-fan asset, as their ingestion can lead to engine failure, which is similar to any bird-hit event of any commercial airline. The application of wake turbulence to disturb the flight path is also undertaken. The rate of successful expulsion recorded is 37% overall.

Current Proposals, Ineffective FONOPs & Limitations

Experts have termed PLAAF behaviour as grey-zone warfare and proposed policy and military tactics.

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[48] CMPR-2023, US Department of defence, p. 91

[49] CMPR-2023, US Department of defence, p. 93

[50] CMPR-2023, US Department of defence, p. 94

[51] CMPR-2023, US Department of defence, p. 138

Capability to respond quickly to PLAAF actions is a vital factor, and its absence may lead to reversing it difficult as PLAAF may consider it as an 'accepted new norm'. The responses can involve using wargames of varying fidelity to measure reactions, as that allows high-quality analysis of the potential political and military risks associated with such interactions.[52] High-quality intelligence is essential, which requires intelligence resources, collection systems and skilled analysts. It's being proposed to amend international laws as PLAAF behaviour may not meet the legal standards of retaliation under the UN Article 51's right of self-defence.[53] Diplomatic involvement of regional actors to create the political manoeuvring space for timely action is an option. Selective institution-building mechanisms like military-to-military deconfliction hotlines and sharing information among allied armed forces and militaries can be utilised.[54]

The military proposals involve air-policing coordination among regional actors to prevent China from imposing an ADIZ over the SCS using quick-reaction scramble jets like the F-15 or F/A-18F paired with a KC-30A air refuelling aircraft to extend the endurance. This will provide air training opportunities to the air-policing units, and the PLAAF can decrease their operations. Crisis hot line initiatives like risk-management discussions with multilateral organisations like the Five-Power Defence Arrangement (FPDA) are thought to carry more weight than any single nation dealing with China. The idea of 'Deterrence by detection' by using surveillance drones like MQ-9B Sky Guardian and MQ-4C Triton emerged in 2020, which proposes that China could be deterred in the SCS if they knew they were under real-time constant surveillance. The drones will engage China to watch them and distract them from their usual SCS behaviour.[55] In 2020, US experts proposed a strategy of 'Targeted Denial' which would involve USN, backed by USAF, selectively countering China's aggressive maritime manoeuvers by shadowing Chinese assets. Targeted denial operations would require training, joint exercises, improved ISR, communications, and interoperability.[56]

Presently, FONOPs & above proposals/strategies have inherent limitations. FONOPs and overflight operations haven't deterred China from pursuing expansionist activities. It's due to the hesitancy of regional US allies like Japan and Australia. Japan has constitutional barriers that prevent it from taking any action in the SCS. Australia has politico-economic constraints.

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[52] Layton, P. (2021). *China's Enduring Grey-Zone Challenge* (p. 64). Air and Space Power Centre. https://airpower.airforce.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-07/Chinas%20Enduring%20Greyzone%20Challenge_0.pdf

[53] Layton (2021). p. 65

[54] Layton (2021). p. 66

[55] Layton (2021). pp. 78-84

[56] Burgess, S. (2020). Confronting China's Maritime Expansion in the South China Sea: A Collective Action Problem. *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs, Air University Press.* https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/2331176/confronting-chinas-maritime-expansion-in-the-south-china-sea-a-collective-actio/

Both these nations can't participate in FONOPs, thus reducing it only as a symbolic protest against expansionism in the SCS.[57] Only a few US allies have conducted activities close to the Paracels islands, and no country apart from the US has flown aircraft within 12 nautical miles of China's claimed islands in the SCS.[58] China hasn't been deterred by the deployment of even US strategic assets like B-52 bombers in the past.[59] USN assets flying low in the SCS zone sometimes get detected by PLAN destroyers, exposing their vulnerability.[60] The concept of targeted denial involving joint exercises and interoperability could face similar counteractions, as China and Russia have also started to conduct similar exercises to counter-balance Western influence and to disrupt the US and its allies.[61]

The capability to respond quickly to PLAAF actions depends on various external factors like political will, geopolitical interests, force capability, etc. A surveillance/ISR gathering asset is simply not designed to respond in real time. The use of wargames to measure reactions is constrained by the amount of resources and planning. Wargames are only effective if participating forces use simulations that depict real-world scenarios. High-quality intelligence again depends on primary assets, which face disturbances. The use of hotlines to manage crises has been ineffective as US messaging towards PLAAF actions has remained the same, while from the Chinese perspective, they are normal.[62] Diplomatic involvement of regional actors for a timely response can face issues, as the perception gap between China and regional countries in defining 'risky behaviour' is blurry.[63] The amendment of international laws is a vague idea, as the UN and other international organisations themselves face credibility issues due to a fractured mandate. The air-policing coordination is a good idea, but it has only remained on paper since 2021, as PLAAF operations increased. In reality, it cannot be implemented due to overlapping claims of regional actors over the SCS. The 'Deterrence by detection' using drones to distract the PLAAF for a long time is not effective, as China's ally, Russia, has

[57] Burgess (2020).

[58] Keary, J. (2024, October 22). *Military challenges to Beijing's South China Sea claims are increasing.* The Strategist; Australian Strategic Policy Institute. https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/military-challenges-to-beijings-south-china-sea-claims-are-increasing/

[59] Pickrell, R. (2018, October 20). B-52s impose their will over South China Sea ahead of sit-down between US, Chinese defense chiefs. *Air Force Times.* https://www.airforcetimes.com/news/your-air-force/2018/10/20/b-52s-fly-over-south-china-sea-ahead-of-sit-down-between-us-chinese-defense-chiefs/

[60] Ashish Dangwal. (2023, February 25). Hot Pursuit! Armed With 4 Air-To-Air Missiles, Chinese J-11 Fighter Intercepts US P-8 Poseidon Over South China Sea. *Eurasian Times.* https://www.eurasiantimes.com/hot-pursuit-armed-with-4-air-to-air-missiles-chinese-j-11-fighter/

[61] Williams, H., Bingen, K. A., & MacKenzie, L. (2024, July 30). Why Did China and Russia Stage a Joint Bomber Exercise near Alaska? [Interview]. In *Center for Strategic and International Studies.* https://www.csis.org/analysis/why-did-china-and-russia-stage-joint-bomber-exercise-near-alaska

[62] Eric Chan. (2023, June 14). Talking While "Gray Zone" Fighting: China Expands Its Military Coercion Tactics to an International Audience. *Global Taiwan Institute*, *8*(12). Global Taiwan Brief. https://globaltaiwan.org/2023/06/talking-while-gray-zone-fighting-china-expands-its-military-coercion-tactics-to-an-international-audience/

[63] Nouwens, M. (2024). *Middling and Muddling Through? Managing Asia- Pacific Crises* (pp. 59–66). International Institute of Strategic Studies. https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/publications---free-files/aprsa-2024/aprsa24-chapter-2.pdf

shown successful tactics to down USAF MQ-9 drones near its vicinity in the Black Sea.[64]

Impact on Quad & Future Contestations

The growing PLAAF counter-intervention activities diminish the credibility of the Quad, which seeks to oppose any destabilising or unilateral actions that seek to change the status quo by force or coercion in the Indo-Pacific.[65] This can advance China's Global Security Initiative (GSI), which is a Chinese design to divert attention away from territorial and jurisdictional disputes in the SCS towards non-traditional security threats. China already has plans to turn Southeast Asia into a testing zone for China's GSI. Already, Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand are looking to explore mutual cooperation under GSI.[66] Hence, if these nations feel that the Quad is unable to secure their maritime sovereignty, they can instead switch to China to secure their internal non-traditional security concerns. India can also be impacted if China attempts to replicate SCS counter-interventions someday near the LAC, Doklam tri-junction, Bhutan's border or near

facilities in Hambantota, Ream base or Coco-islands, which have a sizeable Chinese military presence.

The chances of future contestations are also higher due to changes in PLAAF policies to train fighter pilots for a shorter time, which ensures adequate active personnel to deploy over vast areas.[67] The PLAAF's capabilities to dominate the electromagnetic spectrum and challenge USAF superiority are rising with the induction of Y-9LG EW platform for long-range jamming and electronic intelligence (ELINT) capabilities. The Y-9LG can disrupt enemy communications, radar, and navigation systems, and can gather intelligence from various threat emitters.[68] The CMPR-2024 report states that China could harness emerging technologies such as automation, big data, internet of things (IOT), AI, & cloud computing to improve process efficiencies, providing improved automation to create a comprehensive, real-time picture for war-fighters, which implies PLAAF could become more lethal.[69] As experts view PLAAF intercepts as deliberately designed and not accidental, the confidence of PLAAF to act aggressively, even to

[64] Vergun, D. (2023, March 14). Russian Fighter Strikes U.S. Unmanned Aircraft. *US Department of Defense*. https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3329229/russian-fighter-strikes-us-unmanned-aircraft/

[65] The Wilmington Declaration Joint Statement from the Leaders of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States. (2024, September 22). *PIB Delhi*. https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2057454

[66] Freeman, C., Gill, B., & Mcfarland, A. (2024). *China's Global Security Initiative Takes Shape in Southeast and Central Asia* (pp. 10–14). United States Institute of Peace. https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2024-12/sr534_chinas-global-security-initiative-takes-shape-southeast-central-asia.pdf

[67] Redaccion, P. (2024, November 29). The Chinese Air Force modernizes its capabilities to shorten the preparation time for new fighter pilots. *Zona Militar*. https://www.zona-militar.com/en/2024/11/29/the-chinese-air-force-modernizes-its-capabilities-to-shorten-the-preparation-time-for-new-fighter-pilots/

[68] Honrada, G. (2024, September 2). China's electronic war plane made to dominate South China Sea. *Asia Times*. https://asiatimes.com/2024/09/chinas-electronic-war-plane-made-to-dominate-south-china-sea/

[69] *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2024* (p. 94). (2024). US Department of defence. https://media.defense.gov/2024/Dec/18/2003615520/-1/-1/0/MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA-2024.PDF

the brink of causing an accident, will increase.[70] The PLAAF could also probe regional actors' air defences and their political responses.[71] In the future declaration of ADIZ across the nine-dash line is also a possibility.[72]

Lessons Learnt, Road Ahead and Conclusion

The CMPR-2024 report mentions that the PLAAF has reduced the number of coercive and risky air intercepts compared to the last 2 years.[73] But this also implies that either the US has reduced its overall overflight operations or operations are not occurring over the 'nine-dash line' boundary, which the US won't acknowledge in reality. From discussions in the preceding sections, it's now well established that overflight tactics are a drastic failure. Future alternative tactical and strategic measures should be pondered, like:

- As noted in the PLAAF ITWE strategy for A2/AD, at the tactical level, deployment of large body aircraft like P-8, RC-135, etc. should be minimised/discontinued for a simple reason that these have a large radar cross-sectional area and are easier for radar detection and identification. Turbo-prop/fan assets are also vulnerable against adversary fighter jets' wake-turbulence, flares, chaffs,

WVR challenges due to their slower velocity, and they should be accompanied by 4th- 4.5th generation jets for air-support, which the US has surprisingly not done for several years.

- The use of C-130 Transport and Stratofortress B-52 Bombers is a flawed idea as it's largely symbolic. If at all, such assets are deployed, they should fly at a higher altitude with partner jets, as these aren't usually used for ISR operations. Helicopters are a bad choice for maritime patrol and reconnaissance in the SCS due to their low flight ceilings, exposure to flares and chaffs.

- All reported air-intercepts involved slow-moving Turbo-prop/fan aircraft operating solo; therefore, nations should ponder to deploy their fast-moving assets, fighter jets at super-cruise velocity to challenge the air-superiority aspect of PLAAF jets. It would be more effective if these assets were flown in large formations to surprise PLAAF, as it has only shown risky intercepts against non-combat air assets, and they are yet to be tested in WVR interactions with combat air assets. For example, a maximum of 4 PLAAF jets harassing a USAF asset should be challenged in a reciprocal manner by deploying 5 USAF fighter jets to showcase strength. If PLAAF responds, the

[70] Wilkins, T. (2022, July 1). *By accident or design—or designed accident? China's unsafe air intercepts*. The Strategist; Australian Strategic Policy Institute. https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/by-accident-or-design-or-designed-accident-chinas-unsafe-air-intercepts/

[71] Kok Wey Adam, L. (2021, July 15). *Airborne Assault to Occupy South China Sea Features?* The Royal United Services Institute. https://rusi.org/explore-our-

research/publications/commentary/airborne-assault-occupy-south-china-sea-features

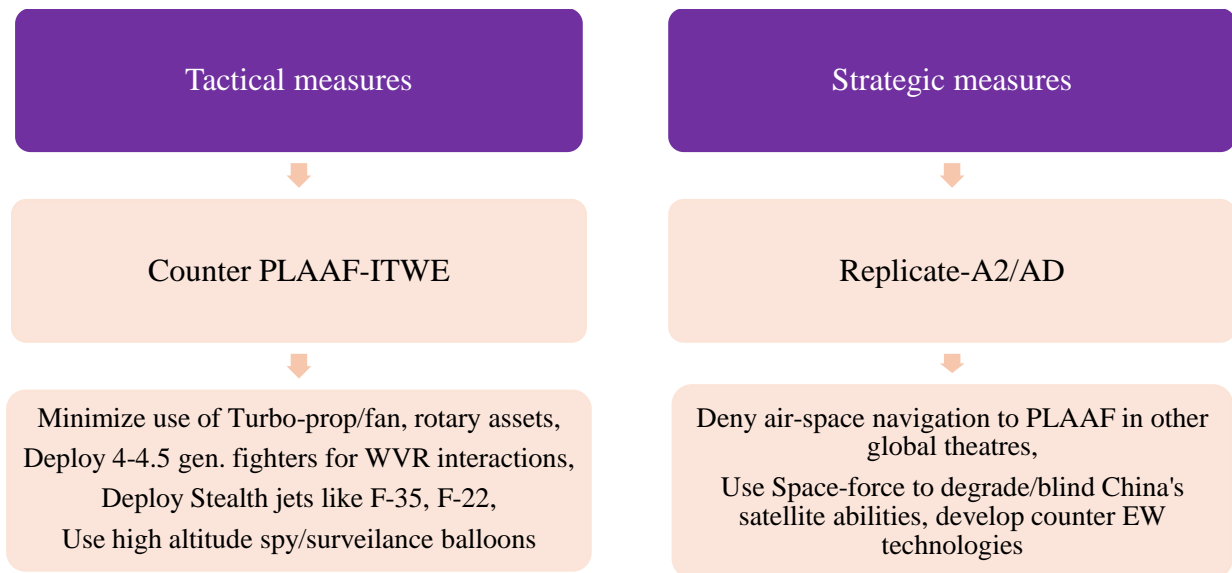[72] Layton, P. (2022, June 6). A flare up in China's deliberate pattern of aggression. *The Interpreter, Lowy Institute*. https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/flare-china-s-deliberate-pattern-aggression

[73] CMPR-2024, US Department of defence, p. 135

▪ counter assets should be increased for every alternate interaction. It should also be experimented with and analysed whether PLAAF can cope with air stress from assets that fly at higher altitudes above 62,000 feet.

Tactical measures	Strategic measures
Counter PLAAF-ITWE	Replicate-A2/AD
Minimize use of Turbo-prop/fan, rotary assets, Deploy 4-4.5 gen. fighters for WVR interactions, Deploy Stealth jets like F-35, F-22, Use high altitude spy/surveilance balloons	Deny air-space navigation to PLAAF in other global theatres, Use Space-force to degrade/blind China's satellite abilities, develop counter EW technologies

- The target identification and tracking abilities are a great advantage for the PLAAF. To diminish this ability, the use of 5th generation stealth aircraft (F-22/F-35) and bombers (B-2 Spirit & B-21 Raider) can be a major strategic move that can depress PLAAF's abilities to identify/track targets over the SCS. The US Administration's FY-2025 budget includes major investments in air power, including fifth-generation aircraft, joint all-domain C2, and therefore the US should increase the deployment of such assets, which have never been done in the past.[74]

- At a strategic level, harsh options like denying PLAAF air-space access (replicate-A2/AD) at alternate theatres like West Asia, Europe, near the Arctic, Latin America or South Asia could be a deterrent. The ISR and surveillance activities should be increased over SCS using spying/surveillance balloons which fly upwards of 80,000 feet, thereby increasing complications for the PLAAF. The US Space Force can also attempt/plan to degrade/blind the capabilities of China's military satellite constellations in future if the situation escalates.

To conclude, the failure of FONOPs/overflight and degrading US mobility/operational capabilities is encouraging China to destabilise the SCS with its risky actions. The above strategies are just sample options that could be exercised, while more strategies should be explored rather than relying on obsolete policies.

But the above alternative strategies can only be fruitful if there is a concrete consensus to deter China using the political will of nations.

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[74] Ratner, E. S. (2024). *Statement By Ely S. Ratner Assistant Secretary Of Defense For Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Office Of The Secretary Of Defense Before The 118th Congress House Armed Services Committee* (p. 6). US Congress. https://www.congress.gov/118/meeting/house/116960/witnesses/HHRG-118-AS00-Wstate-RatnerE-20240320.pdf

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India's Role in the Quad: Implications on India-China Border Dispute

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Abstract

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), comprising the United States, India, Japan, and Australia, has become a critical force in the Indo-Pacific, particularly in response to China's increasing assertiveness. The paper analyses India's participation in the Quad and the Quad's likely influence on the strategies and implications in the India-China border dispute, especially along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in sensitive regions like Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh. Given the border dispute, the study also explores India's alignment with its Quad partners and how it will affect its diplomatic stance and security policies toward China.

The paper will also assess whether the Quad, as a multilateral security initiative, will provide India with strategic leverage in managing the border dispute, and also cooperate in collaborative military readiness, intelligence sharing, and strategic deterrence when India reinforces its position along the LAC. The paper also addresses how initiatives like joint military exercises, infrastructure development, and technological collaboration could enhance India's capacity to respond to border challenges while indirectly strengthening its diplomatic negotiating capabilities in the dispute.

The paper also attempts to analyse the external opportunities and associated risks with Quad's involvement through a detailed review of recent security policies, defence agreements, and diplomatic engagements. Even though both India and China do not want a third party to be involved in the dispute directly, with the changing global order, a multilateral like Quad and its influence may bolster India's border security or risk heightening tensions with China. Moreover, the study will provide insights into the Quad's likely potential to shape India's broader strategic outlook, balancing the need for multilateral security alliances and regional stability goals. Moreover, the paper will also attempt to discuss India's foreign policy, India's border management and the likely balancing of regional engagement in a multipolar Asia. Ultimately, the study attempts to address why multi-laterals are crucial in conflict resolution, how Quad fit in India China Border dispute, how can Quad influence the decision-making process of a bilateral issue, how and through what means can a security dialogue assist a partner country to solve a crisis with a common competitor, how will the changing global order affect in the resolution of India China border dispute and India's strategic posture.

Keywords: Quad, India-China Border Dispute, Line of Actual Control (LAC), Multilateral Security Cooperation, Deterrence, Border Management, Regional Stability.

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Introduction

The Emergence of the Quad in the Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific area is an important worldwide commercial hub, having maritime routes that facilitate major commerce. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), a multilateral project that includes the United States, India, Japan, and Australia, seeks to promote a free, open, and rules-based Indo-Pacific. Originally envisioned in 2007, the Quad has expanded to incorporate marine security, economic resilience, and counter-coercive measures. China's assertive activities in the area, including territorial expansion in the South China Sea and military posturing near disputed borders, have fuelled its comeback. Quad is considered as an important mechanism for being an answer to all the security issues.

Relevance of the Quad to India-China Relations

Long-standing hostilities with China, particularly along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), have influenced India's strategic interests in the Quad. China's aggression is offset by the Quad, which also gives India opportunities to work together on infrastructure, technology, and defence. It quietly conveys a shared stance against coercive actions through joint military drills and declarations on regional stability. India's territorial integrity is directly threatened by China's military buildup along the LAC, underscoring the importance of addressing border issues and strengthening India's security posture through multilateral structures like the Quad rather than relying solely on bilateral procedures (Pande, 2023).

Increasing Challenges along the Line of Actual Control (LAC)

The LAC has been a source of confrontation between India and China, which has brought violent clashes between the two armies occasionally. However, the situation became more serious when, in 2020, deadly skirmishes took place in the Galwan Valley. This brought out the vulnerabilities of not only the existing border control arrangements but also the need to focus on the local perspective. The Chinese constant involvement in the region, with a sturdier infrastructure development, an increase in military presence, and breaches along the border, has brought the issue to light. The aggressiveness of the Chinese side can lead to understanding that they want to change the status quo. These developments state the need for more comprehensive strategic plans to resist China's move, which might include international efforts such as the Quad.

Research Questions

The paper focused on two key research questions. Firstly, it examines how Quad can influence India to form its strategies to solve or diffuse the border dispute between India and China. This also means that how the initiatives by the Quad in the area, such as Joint military exercises and Intelligence sharing, can lead to a better response of India towards China. The second part states what role Quad can play in the settlement of the dispute. It speaks about the ability the organization holds to serve as a force to have a solidified negotiations. It also looks at whether Quad-led collaborations in technology, infrastructure, and marine security indirectly help India's position in the bilateral issue. Through these questions, the study can give a comprehensive picture of how Quad and India

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can work together to not only bring the Chinese aggressiveness low but also influence the larger geopolitical dynamics in favour.

India's Role in the Quad

The rerun of clashes between the armies of the two countries on both the Eastern and Western sides of the border has made the border dispute more consequential affecting the other aspects of the bilateral relations. Although there have been constant negotiations and talks the issue has remained unresolved. India's participation in the Quad is reacting against the environment. It creates a base for India to work with other democratic countries to resist China's belligerence not only on land but across the water as well. Quad's collective deterrent capabilities, can enhance India's position to deal with its security issues especially when it comes to China.

Quad provides India a strong base to strengthen its defence and security capabilities, while further enhancing the technological sector. Malabar exercise, which includes Japan, the United States of America, Australia and India ingress effort on the military Technology, operational knowledge and collaborative training. This collaboration and agreements have provided India with a Net security blanket.

The strong base with these countries through the Quad is a much stronger stand in front of Chinese aggression. The emphasis on the advancement, especially in terms of economics and military, provides India with a tactical advantage in dealing with both traditional and non-traditional security challenges (Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2023).

Furthermore, India's participation in the Quad showcases a shift in India's foreign policy. Traditionally, India's foreign policy has been characterised by non-alignment and a strong dependence on ties with Nations such as Russia. However, the Quad allows India to build up better relations with countries that share the same fear of Chinese aggression, which are extremely relevant issues of contemporary times. India boosts its diplomatic and geopolitical position by deepening connections with the United States, Japan, and Australia, while lessening reliance on old friends (Rajagopalan, 2024).

India holds a great position for the organisation as it emphasises concepts such as Sovereignty, territorial integrity and freedom of navigation. This establishment of a rule-based International order comes at a point when India is struggling with territorial issues, especially in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh. The engagement of India with the forum/organisation showcases its commitment to these ideas and also to connecting Border Management and security to the larger domain of stability in the Indo-Pacific.

The Quad's combined economic and technology projects help India even more by supporting its efforts to improve cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, and 5G capabilities, all of which are required for effective border monitoring and logistics (Baker & Harish, 2023).

At a cost of these benefits, India's engagement with the Quad needs to be balanced sensitively to maintain its strategic autonomy while engaging in international security cooperation. India's historical non-alignment policy shows its commitment to upholding the independence of action in foreign policy. To prevent the ratcheting up of relations with Beijing, India refuses to brand the Quad as an openly anti-China collective. This prudent approach is reflected in India's reluctance to institutionalise the Quad as a security grouping or formally include it in LAC talks. Furthermore, India wants to ensure that its Quad involvement does not jeopardise relationships with other significant allies like Russia or ASEAN, which are critical to its regional strategy.

India is also aware of the concerns in its near neighbourhood over its alignment with the Quad. India's participation in the organisation will lead to a perspective that the smaller South Asian countries like Nepal and Sri Lanka see as a shift towards the Western power dynamics and making them more dependent on the Chinese administration. This will further lead to an imbalance in the region. India has always maintained its autonomous foreign policy and a strong leadership position in South Asia, its neighbourhood first policy, and participation in regional organisations such as BIMSTEC and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). These attempts showcase India's seriousness towards maintaining its friendship but also focus on what is important for national security (Brewster, 2023). Furthermore, India uses the code pragmatically to pursue its strategic and economic goals while maintaining balanced relations with others. India, with the Quad, wants to set up a free and open Indo-Pacific, which also serves as a mechanism to counter Chinese aggression (Cheng, 2024). India has also made sure

that it establishes an individual relationship with the members, hence reducing the over-reliance on the organisation. India's policy of 3 V's, Viksit Bharat, Vishva Guru and Vishwamitra highlights India's solemnity and strengthens its position. It further, with its projects like Aatmnirbhar Bharat, displays the importance of self-sufficiency, decreasing the dependency on external aid.

Quad's Influence on the India-China Border Dispute

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) has become a critical component of India's strategic strategy to address its long-running border issue with China. In June 2020, a violent clash took place in the Galwan Valley, leading to the death of 20 Indian soldiers and an unspecified number of Chinese soldiers. While on the one hand, Quad has expressed the need and importance of a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific, on the other hand, it should also shed light on incidents like the above. The incident highlighted the lack of conflict resolution mechanisms and the need for help in India in solving this dispute. In the same line, Quad can play an important and vital role in not only pressurising China to settle but also by providing military and economic support. The group has already, over the years, helped India in cutting-edge Defence Technologies, allowing India to push Chinese aggression along the LAC. In 2021, the United States transferred MQ-9B secret drones to help India monitor the areas along disputed regions such as Eastern Ladakh. Previously, under the initiative of the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) India has attended geospatial intelligence, which provides more strength and strategic advantages. These intelligence sharing and equipment have helped India during peak tension Times like the Pangong

show standoff of 2021, where timely inputs assisted India in resisting Chinese intrusions. The organisation, which is a security alliance, also extends to Cooperative exercises, which have helped India to enhance its operational and tactical preparedness. The Malabar Naval Exercise, which expanded in 2020 to all members of the Quad, focuses on this facet (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). While naval in orientation, the exercise enhances overall military coordination between India and the other members, particularly in multilateral and risky environments. The 2021 Malabar exercise involved complex training in anti-submarine warfare and maritime domain awareness, which indirectly enhanced India's logistics capabilities for potential land-based confrontations. Furthermore, such drills send a strong diplomatic signal to China, demonstrating the Quad states' joint willingness to combat coercive tactics (Zhang, 2023).

Beyond military readiness, the Quad has fostered the development of essential infrastructure and modern technologies, which indirectly aid India's border policy. The Quad Infrastructure Coordination Group, established in March 2021, prioritises investments in important connectivity projects. These measures have increased India's capacity to swiftly mobilise soldiers and equipment in border areas like Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh. The development of all-weather roads, airstrips, and logistical centres in these locations has improved India's military posture and preparedness. Simultaneously, technical collaboration in areas like as artificial intelligence and cybersecurity has given India cutting-edge technologies for border surveillance and security. AI-powered surveillance systems and satellite communications have improved India's situational awareness, giving decision-makers

real-time data during emergencies (Mearsheimer, 2024).

Diplomatically, the Quad has increased India's influence when dealing with China. By agreeing with the Quad's emphasis on a rules-based system, India has successfully moved the backdrop of its border conflict from bilateral to international. This alignment was especially visible during the military discussions in 2021 when India's hard attitude was bolstered by its alliance with Quad allies, who are concerned about China's aggressive actions. Joint Quad statements, like the March 2021 Leaders' Summit ones, reiterate commitments to sovereignty and international law in conformity with Indian territorial interests. Joint Quad statements enhance India's negotiating leverage just as much as they convey firmly to Beijing that Beijing's moves are being held to account by an influential combination.

The Quad's roles in India's border policy are indirect, but wide-ranging and significant. Through the provision of advanced technology, intelligence-sharing mechanisms, strategic ties, and diplomatic cohesion, the Quad assists India in upgrading its role in its struggle with China. As India attempts to find a balance between its pledge of strategic autonomy and its engagement in multilateral mechanisms, the Quad is a crucial element of its overall strategy to resist China's aspiration and maintain peace on the LAC.

Risks and Opportunities with Quad's Involvement

India's active engagement with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) brings a mix of opportunities and challenges, particularly in the context of the India-China border dispute. While the Quad offers India avenues to strengthen its security

posture and leverage multilateral partnerships, it also introduces complexities, including potential escalation of tensions with China and challenges to India's traditional stance on resolving disputes bilaterally.

Opportunities

While security cooperation, especially in the maritime domain, is an important aspect, the agenda of the Quad has also expanded to include a broader range of other strategic objectives (Mehra, 2022). These encompass fostering the robust supply chain by promoting free and open Indo-Pacific, freedom of navigation, advancing key and emerging technologies, as well as improving the infrastructural connectivity in the Indo-Pacific region ("Joint Statement from Quad Leaders," 2021). This ambitious initiative will assist India in fostering its position in the region and fight through the challenges presented to it. For instance, India's acquisition of MQ-9B drones from the United States in 2021 significantly enhanced its surveillance capacity, enabling real-time monitoring of (United States Department of State, 2023) Chinese military movements in sensitive regions such as eastern Ladakh. Agreements such as the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) in October 2020 have enhanced India's capability to leverage geospatial intelligence, which is essential for planning and executing countermeasures during border face-offs.

The major reason for India's state of readiness is the Quad infrastructure support to develop the country better. Even though Quad's focus is more on water security than land, the infrastructure development and investments by the members have brought the integration of both land and sea in the strategic operations. Japan has already invested $35 billion in both private and governmental investments. The U.S

and Australia's investments are, although small but consistent. The Quad has pledged for $50 billion investment in the Indo-Pacific region till 2027, which includes a few in-country projects too.

On the diplomatic front, the Quad allows India to affirm its sovereignty and territorial integrity on a global scale. By partnering with countries that share its commitment to a rules-based international order, India enhances its position in discussions with China. This dynamic was obvious during the 2020 and 2021 border discussions when India's membership in the Quad likely pushed Beijing to engage in talks despite increased international scrutiny. Furthermore, the Quad's combined focus on adherence to international rules acts as a deterrent, signalling to China that any unilateral actions may result in a concerted reaction from major global entities (Watson, 2024).

Risks

Despite its benefits, India's growing participation in the Quad poses considerable concerns, notably in its relationship with China. Beijing sees the Quad as a US-led containment policy, and India's involvement as a direct challenge to its regional supremacy. This perception can further aggravate tensions along the LAC, as was seen in the wake of the Galwan Valley clashes in June 2020. China has since stepped up its military activity, including the construction of infrastructure along Pangong Tso and the deployment of more forces along the contested border. India's joining of the Quad could embolden China to raise the ante on provocations, leading to more intense and frequent confrontations.

Irrespective of the efforts by India through 'Make in India', the trade between both nations has gone from a

record $118.4 billion in FY24, surpassing the previous year's $113.83 billion. China can use this to pressure India both in terms of economy and diplomacy. Its consistent relations with Pakistan and growing ones with Russia and neighbouring countries put India in a dilemma (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2023).

India's long-standing policy of bilateral dispute resolution confronts new challenges as a result of its Quad participation. While the Quad enhances India's stance against China, relying too much on multilateral frameworks risks eroding bilateral processes that have traditionally served as the cornerstone of India-China relations. China might use India's membership in the Quad as a pretext to include its partners in border talks, internationalising the conflict in an unfavourable manner for India. Furthermore, Quad partners may be hesitant to provide direct assistance during a border crisis since their strategic goals are predominantly centred on the Indo-Pacific. This mismatch of expectations may expose India to the consequences of its increased Quad engagement without providing concrete advantages in times of need.

With Indian backing, the Quad can promote greater security in the Indian Ocean, especially as China proceeds with its push for influence through strategic infrastructure spending under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), or One Belt One Road (OBOR). One development in that area is Thailand's planned "land bridge" project—a rail-road network connecting the Andaman Sea with the Gulf of Thailand. This project has the goal of giving China an alternative trade route, lessening its reliance upon the Malacca Strait and folding it into the larger BRI package in order to consolidate Beijing's dominance over key supply chains. China's attempts to create alternative trade routes are part of its larger OBOR strategy, which aims to secure maritime and land-based connectivity routes and extend its geopolitical reach. The growing presence of Chinese-funded infrastructure in Southeast Asia, such as deep-sea ports, railways, and highways, strengthens its economic and strategic foothold. These developments also increase security concerns for India and the Quad, as China's expanding presence in the Indian Ocean threatens regional stability.

In retaliation against India's resistance to OBOR—specifically, its objections to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir—China may heighten tensions along the India-China border as a pressure tactic.

Furthermore, Beijing might resort to economic coercion and military movements to neutralise the Quad's growing presence in the Indo-Pacific. This intricate geopolitical situation points to the nexus of commerce, security, and strategic positioning, where China's OBOR efforts are as much about economic integration as about remaking regional power balances in its favour.

The Quad's impact further affects India's position in the larger South Asian area. Neighbouring countries such as Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh may see India's strengthening ties with the Quad as a departure from its previous non-aligned attitude (Sharma, V., 2024). This might affect India's relations in the region, especially if these countries believe the Quad's efforts are adding to polarisation between China and its competitors. Furthermore, India's participation in the

Quad risks alienating regional actors who desire neutrality, which might destabilise South Asia's current power dynamic.

While the Quad provides India with a variety of strategic benefits, it also offers complicated problems that must be carefully navigated. Balancing the benefits of technical and diplomatic partnership with the risks of increased tensions and strategic overreach remains critical as India charts its path in managing its border dispute with China and asserting its regional and global leadership (Laskar, 2023).

Broader Implications on India's Strategic Outlook

India's participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and other multilateral security initiatives represents a strategic shift in its foreign policy, indicating a rethinking of its approach to the changing dynamics of the global order (Kavi, 2024). The United States, Japan, Australia, and India form the Quad, which advocates the goal of a free and open Indo-Pacific. This aspiration is in tune with the broader strategic interests of India, which are to establish its leadership in the region while safeguarding its sovereignty, especially against growing Chinese aggression. The participation of India in the Quad allows for a methodology for addressing China's various issues, including territorial incursions, sea security, and competition in technology, while continuing its traditional stance of strategic independence. In 2024, (The Hindu, 2024) Prime Minister Narendra Modi put India's dedication to this multilateral initiative in the limelight by participating in the Quad Leaders' Summit in Tokyo and meeting leaders on the fringes of the G20 Summit in New Delhi (Economic Times, 2024), where regional security and technological collaboration were

on the front burner of discussions. These relations with the countries have and can further help to stabilise the region and reaffirm its long-term aspiration in the new era (Modi, 2024).

The Quad has now become a must in India's foreign policy (Baruah, 2023), and it is an effective platform to solve both regional security issues as well as larger world challenges. In a world of multipolarity that India has to navigate, the Quad opens the door to new technology, robust defence capacities, and strategic development of infrastructure, which allows India to meet conventional as well as asymmetrical threats more effectively. Defence and security technology is a key field of cooperation in the Quad, with India gaining access to advanced technologies such as satellite-based monitoring, drones, and artificial intelligence, all of which are vital for tracking China's activities along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). Significantly, 2024 witnessed significant advancement in this collaboration, with India further strengthening its defense ties with the (Strategic Affairs and International Relations Review, 2024) United States, with the agreements being centered on collaborative research and development of future-generation defense technologies. These technological collaborations are important for India to improve its surveillance and defense capabilities, especially along its northern and western borders with China. The Quad's backing of infrastructure building, especially in border areas such as Ladakh, guarantees that India possesses the logistical capability to quickly mobilize troops in case of a crisis. These efforts, supported by the Quad, enhance key infrastructure like roads and airstrips, which are instrumental in boosting India's operational preparedness and response times.

Diplomatically, the Quad has enabled India to project its influence globally without abandoning its non-aligned status. India's involvement in the Quad, especially through its interactions with like-minded democracies, gives it a wider diplomatic outreach, projecting its influence beyond South Asia and into the Indo-Pacific. In 2024, India continued to project diplomatically through the Quad, promoting regional stability, economic growth, and a rules-based order. This was seen at the 2024 Quad Summit in Sydney, where India emphasized its dedication to fair access to maritime resources and regional economic integration. These interactions not only enhance India's diplomatic relations with the United States, Japan, and Australia but also increase its capacity to shape global discourse on common issues like climate change, supply chain resilience, and cyber threats. Additionally, India's membership in the Quad reinforces its role in other regional platforms such as BIMSTEC and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) to further position itself as a regional security and development leader (Jha, 2023).

This shift towards multipolarity in the world order has both potential and challenges for India. While it opens up opportunities for India to diversify its allies and leverage itself as a bridge between various centres of global power, it also poses challenges. Through its involvement in the Quad, India gains the technical, military, and economic support of its allies such that it is able to address immediate security concerns even while pursuing long-term diplomatic goals. For instance, India continues to engage with China bilaterally and on international platforms, making sure that tensions are not elevated beyond tolerable limits.

In 2024, India reaffirmed its intention to resolve bilateral issues with China through negotiation, alongside enhancing its Quad relations. This diplomatic equilibrium allows India to defend its strategic interests without getting engaged in an adversary role against China (Bedi, 2024).

At the same time, India's participation with the Quad must be carefully controlled to prevent becoming overly reliant on external players. Strategic autonomy is a cornerstone of India's foreign policy, and as a result, the country continues to interact with other powers such as Russia, ASEAN, and Gulf nations to preserve a diverse portfolio of ties. This allows India to maintain flexibility in its foreign policy, allowing it to negotiate regional conflicts without being limited by a single alliance. The changing global order also emphasises India's capacity to preserve its position as a key force in Asia, where it sees a multipolar balance of power that prevents any single country from dominating the area. India's leadership in the Quad supports this objective by encouraging collaborations.

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Artificial Intelligence and Its Impact on National Security

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Abstract

This paper explores the growing impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on National Security, a field where its potential for both disruption and enhancement has become increasingly evident. While AI has transformed industries such as retail, telecom, and logistics, its influence on national security has raised both opportunities and risks. A compelling example of this is the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, where AI-driven technologies have been deployed both as tools of aggression and defence. AI has enabled cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and deepfake manipulation, threatening state stability. At the same time, it offers solutions for improving intelligence gathering, countering disinformation, and war simulation using AI and strengthening cybersecurity defences. The paper examines the role of Generative AI (GenAI) and Predictive AI in shaping national security, focusing on their applications in countering false narratives, streamlining intelligence analysis, and optimising defence logistics and bringing more real-life simulation in war gaming. It also addresses concerns such as the weaponisation of AI in cyberattacks, and on usage of AI-enabled models to prevent honey trapping, and the challenges surrounding the trustworthiness of AI models in sensitive contexts. Drawing on case studies from countries like India and recent conflicts, the paper highlights efforts to counter AI-driven threats, including the development of indigenous AI systems to protect against foreign influence. The need for ethical AI frameworks, data privacy, and robust security measures to safeguard national cyberspace infrastructure is emphasised. Ultimately, this paper provides a comprehensive view of AI's dual-edged impact on national security, recognising its capacity to both safeguard and undermine state interests, and proposes strategies to harness its potential while mitigating risks.

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Usage of Generative AI to combat disinformation

Disinformation campaigns can play a great role in creating instability within a country. In the context of India, ethnicity-related violence in Manipur[3] was being promoted by a disinformation campaign. Similar incidents have happened all over the world, where fake news, deepfake videos have been used to create chaos.

So, the need of the hour is to fight this disinformation campaign. Disinformation campaigns can be addressed across two fronts:

1. Having strict compliance and ethical AI-based frameworks in place, so that when using Generative AI (GenAI), fake news cannot be produced.
2. Another way is confronting the narratives by having counter counter-narrative with correct facts and figures in place.

The second approach is of utmost importance, as even with the compliance in place, there can be some leakage. Counter-narrative building must be done at a very high pace with the right facts and properly researched content. So, to achieve that, we must get this process automated. Hence best way to combat GenAI-related disinformation is by using GenAI to build a counter-narrative with the right facts and figures.

The approach for this is by using **Retrieval Augmented Generation (RAG).** An approach where the Large Language Model is integrated with an external data source, which can be domain-specific. For any press brief post incident, various data sources are being used, like on-ground reports, reports filed by the security forces, intelligence inputs, etc.
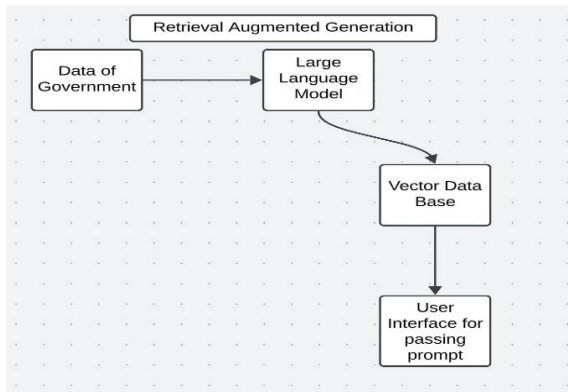
Similarly, for RAG, we can use all this data. All this data can be passed into a centralised database, which serves as a single source of information. This information is then fed into the LLM model, which will embed it and store it in a vector database.

By passing the right prompt, a very accurate well well-researched summary with precise facts and figures can be presented at a much lesser time and with much more accuracy than a human being.

Reactive approach is a way where entire web sources like social media, news channels will be crawled, and in case any information is present that is sensitive in nature, it will be compared using the state-owned Generative AI model. If the facts don't match, then this news can be flagged, and counter counter-narrative can be built. This entire process can be automated, thus cutting down on time and effort (Figure 1).

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[3] https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/how-fake-news-and-videos-inciting-violence-in-manipur/articleshow/102065845.cms

Figure 1: AI-Based Counter-Disinformation Model. This figure illustrates how Generative AI, combined with Retrieval Augmented Generation (RAG), can be used to identify and counter disinformation campaigns by analysing multiple data sources and generating fact-based narratives. (Created by the author.)

Generative AI in Streamlining Intelligence Analysis

In case of any country, terrorist attacks can be prevented effectively with fast and accurate intelligence input analysis.

Intelligence related data might come from various sources like Human Intelligence, Signal Intelligence, information gathered across various border check posts or change in patterns across certain geographies within the country or outside the country, all this can be an actionable insight. Now for an intelligence analyst the task is to combine all this data and discover the hidden pattern within this to derive the conclusion.

In many cases, like the 26/11 or 9/11 terrorist attacks, it has been noticed that although a lot of information was present, the dots were never connected, and hence the attack was not prevented[4].

In such cases, today's Generative AI can play a key role in converting, detecting, and summarising intelligence data. First, let's understand what Generative AI (GenAI) is. GenAI is a process of Artificial Intelligence where based on User prompt information is being generated. Below snapshot is one such example (Figure 2).
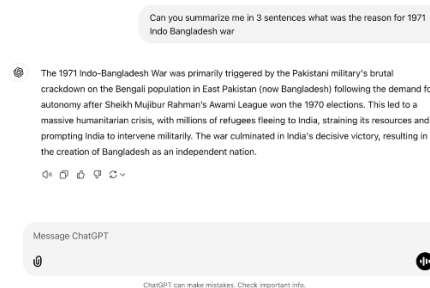
Figure 2: Snapshot of Chat GPT. This figure represents the process of using Generative AI. Here, the author tries to demonstrate that when an input is being passed as a prompt, the content against that prompt was generated by summarising the results from all the available sources. (Created by the author.)

This same approach can be taken for intelligence analysis. In the case of GenAI, there are 2 major components: Prompt and LLM. Prompts are for taking user inputs, and Large Language Models (LLM) are to capture relationships amongst the data in the form of word embeddings and then using attention mechanism to detect the relevant data amongst the data sources, summarizing them and then transforming them into meaningful context and presenting it in front of the user. Now, LLMS mostly use web data. But for an organisational-specific task, we need to use the data specific to that organisation. Data is being fed into the

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[4] https://ctc.westpoint.edu/improving-indias-counterterrorism-policy-after-mumbai/ , https://www.brookings.edu/articles/9-11-and-the-reinvention-of-the-u-s-intelligence-community/

LLM, which is known as **Retrieval Augmented Generation (RAG).**

In the case of Intelligence analysis, the data captured can be an image, an audio clip, or data captured using Human intelligence. All of this can be fed or passed to the LLM model. The LLM model then converts this into embeddings and stores them in a vector database. Now, when an analyst passes a prompt like "Can you spot me suspicious audio clips in the last 2 months originating from Kashmir?" Then it will be an easy approach to fetch those records, but also fetching that data will be much faster, efficient as compared to previous approach, which might have involved either writing a SQL query or looking for data based on the STD code, etc. Here, due to the capability of the LLM to summarise, it can fetch records of calls which are present in the dataset captured using triangulation, fetch records based on the STD code, and based on the satellite phones, etc. Today, there are Gen AI models that are so advanced that they can do in-depth analysis of audio and images. If such different kinds of models are being chained, then, like a human analyst, it can give insights based on a combination of satellite imagery, signal intercepts, and human inputs.

The analysis in this case will be much more insightful and can derive many more hidden patterns due to the neural networks, which could have been missed by human beings.

Cyber Attacks and the Impact of AI

Worldwide cyberattacks have always been a menace. Whether it's a DDOS attack or a breach like Target

Corporation, cyberattacks lead to vital information leakage, which can cause financial losses, but more importantly, it can impact national security as bad actors are getting access to critical applications.

In India in 2024, 1.2 billion cyberattacks occurred. In the case of India's financial sector, 16 million cases have been dealt with by the Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT), which was just 53000, seven years back in 2017.[75]

The famous ransomware attack at AIIMS, Delhi or a similar attack with small Indian cooperative banks are amongst famous ones.

This number is going to increase in future.

AI coming into the scenario; cyberattacks become much more dangerous. AI assisted cyberattacks known as offensive AI can lead to faster and deeper breaches. Hence damage will be much more.

Earlier the cyberattacks were being done mostly by lot of human efforts. Human efforts included analysis of the software vulnerabilities by using different network scanning tools and web scanning tools. This would make the process slower. Even phishing emails were generated manually. Thus, DDOS attack, phishing, unauthenticated access all that could have been detected using rule-based detection engines and prevented.

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[75] https://www.darkreading.com/cyber-risk/india-s-critical-infrastructure-suffers-spike-in-cyberattacks

But with AI, the attacks are becoming much more sophisticated. For any cyber-attack, there are various phases. The first phase is the reconnaissance, where the hacker explores the application and the network to understand the vulnerability. Today, with tools that utilise neural networks, exploration and learning happen much faster. Thus, resulting in faster and more efficient reconnaissance. The second phase is the actual attack. This attack can be by Brute force to bypass authentication. Today, there are tools that have been trained on passwords from previous breaches and hence can generate much closer passwords to bypass the authentication. Similarly, image detection and AI are being used to bypass the CAPTCHA mechanism. For phishing attacks, the email generated using Generative AI looks very real and authentic. Thus, misleading the user, who in turn ends up clicking the phishing links. Similarly, the DDOS attacks can be automated using AI.

The third phase for any cybersecurity attack is evading detection. For any attack there are identification signatures. Today with the help of AI the identification signatures can be changed very fast thus evading detection (Figure 3).

So, when Generative AI is available as an open-source technology and similarly lot of machine learning models are available in open source, they can be utilised for breach; this becomes a scary space. Similarly, lot of datasets to train these models are equally available.

This establishes the fact that not only attack count will go high as even novice hackers can try a breach; but also, the damage will be much higher in magnitude and preventing it would be a challenge. Thus, thinking holistically with lot of foresightedness in cybersecurity space is need of the hour.

As a country cybersecurity framework must be brought in at the national level. The framework must have strict compliance when it comes to cyber infrastructure, and there must be a stress for indigenous infrastructure in place so that other hostile state actors lack the advantage of supplying a faulty piece of hardware that can be breached. Security testing of applications must be rigorously done, and AI must be adopted for testing that software so that we can simulate attacks. There should be a stress on having own datacentres and data encryption, so that no data goes out of the country and security is guaranteed. This approach will ensure fewer attacks like Man in the middle attack (MiM). When such an ecosystem is being built, which promotes strict compliance, strict security testing and usage of secure indigenous systems, then we can expect a sanitised cyberspace within the country.
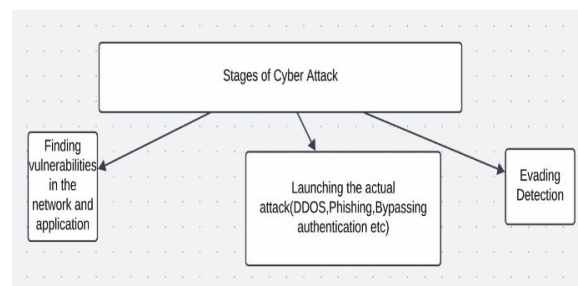
Figure 3: AI-Powered Cyber Attack. This figure demonstrates 3 stages of AI based cyber-attack. This includes network analysis, launching of attack, evading detection post attack (Created by the author.)

Usage of AI to Prevent Honeytrapping

Honey trapping is one of the oldest trades in spy craft. Back from ancient India, Chanakya utilized Vishkanyas for the purpose of leaking sensitive information related to enemy.

India has been victim of honeytrapping. Famous cases of honeytrapping involve Madhuri Gupta case, Brahmos engineer being honey trapped and a senior DRDO official being honey trapped which lead to leakage of sensitive vital information.

Now counter-intelligence teams can be successful in detecting such compromised individuals and take legal actions; but the damage is already done. Hence it should be prevented using early detection approach.Artificial Intelligence can play a great role. Whenever any user exists over any social media, he has a particular pattern which identifies his behavior. Such behavior-based segmentation is widely used in ecommerce websites for recommendations.

Such patterns can be used for anomaly detection. In case of social media genuine users with no intent to cause any espionage and unwanted accounts with sole aim of connecting with someone and then developing relationships to extract information will have different behavior.

By using clustering models, we can segregate these accounts into different clusters based on their behaviour. These segregated clusters can be studied further, and exploratory data analysis can be performed on them to understand their behaviour. Based on these findings, we can come up with features that can be fed now into supervised learning models. Now these models are trained based on these features and labelled data marking which communication or account type is a honeytrapping account; these models can now be employed to detect anomalies and flag communications that are suspicious. Data from previous honeytrapping cases can also be used to enhance model accuracy.

Another approach is based on the usage of AI-based honeypots (Figure 4). A **honeypot** is a decoy system or resource set up to attract, detect, and study unauthorised access attempts.

Similar honeypots can be used to attract those actors who are involved in honeytrapping. The hostile elements can end up believing that this account belongs to a person of importance. They might initiate honeytrapping conversations which will help intelligence agencies to identify them and isolate them.

By using Generative AI we can create authentic identity which will lure the attackers. The interaction can be made more realistic using GenAI. The learning from these conversations can be faster by using machine learning. This learning can now be fed into ML models which are being used to detect anomalies in the communication content. Thus detection and isolation of the hostile elements are being achieved faster.
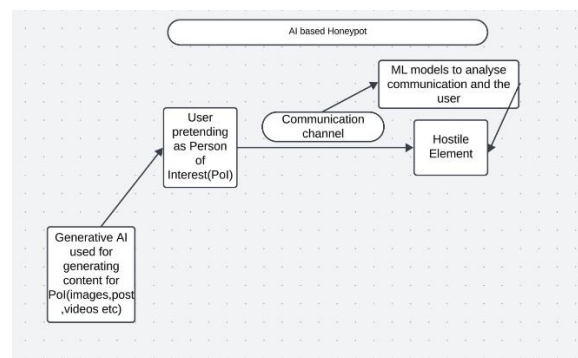
Figure 4: AI-Powered Honeypot. This figure demonstrates the usage of Generative AI to create Honeypots (Created by the author.)

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Trustworthy AI systems and Data privacy

With usage of AI across every sector, there is a dire need to have AI systems which have a certain level of trustworthiness. Trustworthy AI are the systems which are explainable, fair, interpretable, robust, transparent, safe and secure. These qualities create trust in AI systems.

In past there has been certain cases where AI models have shown bias or inaccuracy. For example, Amazon recruitment system used one ML model which preferred male over female.

AI models are being used for Governance systems and critical applications, where fairness is of utmost importance. If AI models are not robust and fair, then certain areas concerned with national security can be impacted. Like Cybersecurity AI based detection engines can fail, misinformation campaign can be promoted using Generative AI, Autonomous weapon systems can be sabotaged causing collateral damage, detection systems can be erroneous thus attacks won't get prevented, governance systems like traffic management can malfunction causing accidents, intelligence gathering and analysis can be wrong, economic systems like stock prediction can go wrong causing financial instability.

Thus, ensuring Trustworthy AI must be part of national security strategies. AI models can be compromised by two forms of attacks.

Evasion attack*:* The Model is misled during runtime, like wearing spectacles can cause failure of the image detection system.

Poisoning attack: Data is being corrupted so that the model gets trained on wrong data; eventually causing wrong predictions or content generation.

When it comes to countries like the USA or European countries, a lot of steps have been taken to ensure trustworthy AI models. In the case of USA, a framework has been defined which is known as NIST AI Risk Management Framework to ensure trustworthy AI models. In case of European countries European AI model has been defined to ensure trusted AI system.

India does not have a single comprehensive AI framework in place, although initiatives have been taken by NITI Aayog. Indian AI framework needs to stress on below points:

1. Robustness of the AI systems: The AI model must be prone to small perturbations and hallucinations.
2. Data Diversity: Any AI model must be trained with data across all segments, so that results are fair.
3. Explainability: Behind any prediction from AI model; there should exist some form of explanation. This is lacking specially for deep learning models. Some common frameworks which can be adopted are Local Interpretable Model-agnostic Explanations (LIME) and SHAP (Shapley Additive explanations).
4. Evaluation: Evaluating AI model output by subject matter experts.
5. Data Privacy: Data privacy is an important aspect for any AI model. If data privacy is breached poisoning attack can be performed. In case of European Union a much matured framework exist to protect the data of European citizens. But in India Digital Personal Data Protection Act (DPDP Act) is concerned of data processing within India.

6. Thus the very same data can be exploited by the hostile nations to run analysis and target certain segments with misinformation.

7. Development of indigenous systems: For trusted AI systems, data must be protected, shielded from analysis, data integrity must be maintained, data should lie within India, and procedural bias should not be introduced during model development. To ensure all this, we need indigenous systems. Open source or foreign technology is prone to breaches and misuse of data. We need data centres within our country; we need indigenously developed hardware for such data centres so that any form of malicious patches is not being deployed. For the interoperability of data amongst various government organisations, it will be best to have our own fully developed cloud framework to ensure data integrity during transmission. We need to take giant steps towards software development, too. LLM models that exist today on the internet are black box in nature and lack explainability. Whether these models internally have some sort of bias is not clear to us. In such cases, to combat disinformation, we should have our own exclusive data sources and also own indigenously developed AI models or GenAI models.
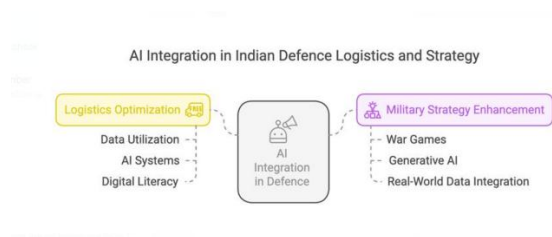
Indian Defence Logistics and AI Integration

The Indian defence services have traditionally relied on a variety of SAP platforms for the management of logistics or inventory needs, like the ILMS (Integrated Logistics Management System) for the Navy, IMMOLS (Integrated Material Management Online System) for the Indian Air Force, and the Inventory Management System of the Indian Army. In these platforms, tremendous amounts of data are generated with respect to procurement behaviour, stocks, maintenance plans, etc. This data could be considered as a robust base for training ML models, which will enable predictions and better intelligent decision making to optimise defence logistics. There are numerous challenges with logistics. For example, during Operation Snow Leopard, Israeli missile systems deployed in high-altitude detachments required missile replenishment from the parent base within a designated period because they can only remain on the launcher for a limited number of days. After that, the missiles must be sent back to the base for testing. This task can only be accomplished using C-17 or IL-76 aircraft; hence, the Air Force needs to optimise air movements every month. The goal is to ensure that missiles are collected from the parent base, transported to high-altitude locations, and the older missiles are brought down for testing, all with minimal movement. There are no automated systems in place to manage this process. If the unit's operations head forgets to raise the air requisition on time, the movement may not happen as scheduled. This type of coordination is time-consuming and inefficient. If AI systems are implemented, the entire workflow can be streamlined. Due to the lack of such automation, missiles often exceed their allowed deployment period. AI has the potential to transform inventory management by automatically determining the reorder levels and quantities. Like Amazon or Target, which use ML for such scenarios, it is possible to produce a demand forecast that is accurate based on snag trends with seasons and usage, to support critical material inventory without excessive accumulation. It could introduce new search mechanisms for procuring materials or performing orders from uncertain

vendors. Sophisticated platforms like AnyLogistix, capable of returning defence-like dashboards, easily integrate into real-time supply chain control systems. Thus, dynamic routing of freight and predictive maintenance for cost-effective and timely logistics support.

But before it can be fully leveraged by the Indian defence services, there is a critical need to address basic deficits in digital literacy. A significant amount of procurement and logistics continues to be paper-based, and even in digital systems, the use of facilities is not maximised due to an insufficient knowledge of basic tools like Microsoft Excel. Without addressing these deficiencies, the introduction of AI introduces the risk of inefficiencies. Hence, digital literacy must be addressed.

Figure 5: AI-Integration for Logistics and Strategy.
This figure demonstrates the usage of AI for logistics planning and War gaming (Created by using Generative AI, ChatGPT.)

Military War Games and Strategy Development

The Indian Army has a longstanding tradition of conducting war games to enhance strategic planning and operational readiness. These exercises, ranging from battalion-level simulations to large-scale operations like Operation Brasstacks, have been instrumental in refining military tactics and doctrines. However, what often follows these exercises are tabletop discussions that lack in-depth analysis.

Instead of conducting live drills, participants rely on photography to simulate outcomes. For example, during a simulated attack on an airfield, defenders would send interceptors to engage attackers. Capturing an opponent on camera signifies a successful hit. Finally, an umpire evaluates the plans, their execution, and the evidence to declare the winner. Gen AI into an online war-gaming platform can revolutionise risk management by creating immersive, dynamic simulations that mirror complex real-world scenarios. Generative AI enables these situations to be responsive and interactive, changing according to players' choices and adding new factors, thus checking improvisational skills and critical thinking. Players can play the roles of decision-makers, advisors, or operators and are challenged using AI as both a partner and adversary.

Real-world data derived from economic reports, weather reports, or news reports can be utilised to design the game's sequence. E.g., a simulated cyberattack may lead to financial destabilization, and participants may be asked to devise solutions to reduce the damage.

Due to utilisation of AI in such platforms; actions taken can be evaluated and the same feedback can be utilised for training the model further. Generative AI being integrated into such model allows user to experience very real time intricate scenarios and also allows multiple participants thus enhancing strategy making skills and interoperability and coordination.

Conclusion

Artificial Intelligence is rapidly transforming national security, acting as both a shield and a sword. On one hand, AI-driven technologies help nations strengthen their defences, detect cyber threats, and streamline intelligence analysis. On the other hand, they introduce new risks such as deepfake-fuelled disinformation, AI-powered cyberattacks, and sophisticated espionage tactics.
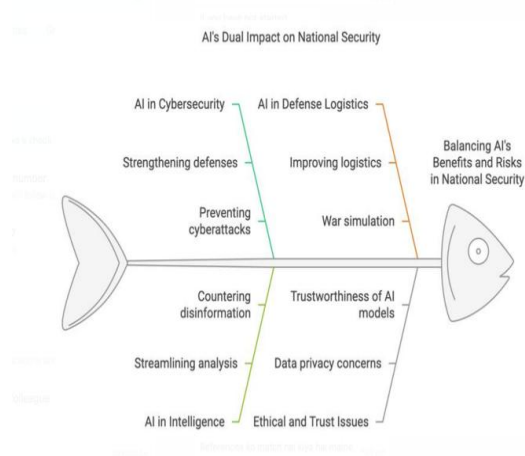
Figure 6: Conclusion (Created by using Generative AI, ChatGPT)

The challenge is clear: while AI can protect a nation, it can also be weaponised against it. As seen in conflicts like the Russia-Ukraine war and domestic security incidents in India, AI's role in shaping modern warfare and information control is undeniable. Governments must act swiftly to harness their potential responsibly while building strong safeguards to prevent misuse. The path forward lies in creating indigenous trustworthy AI system, ones that are ethical, transparent, and resilient against manipulation. India, like many other nations, must invest in indigenous AI development, enforce strict cybersecurity policies, and prioritise digital literacy across defence sectors. AI alone isn't a solution; it's a tool that must be wielded with foresight and responsibility. By fostering collaboration between policymakers, technologists, and security experts, we can ensure that AI remains a force for protection rather than a source of vulnerability. In the end, the true measure of AI's impact on national security will not be just in its capabilities but in how wisely we choose to use it.

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