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INDIA'S SWING FROM SOFT POWER TO HARD POWER IN MODI ERA: IMPLICATIONS FOR PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

India's "Look East Policy" (LEP) rests mainly on the soft power of attraction but deep down consuming it to advance hard power. Yet, its rising military strength has been used strategically ultimately firming up its hard power. Since 2014, India's foreign and domestic policies have been marked by intense religious and extreme nationalism. In his election campaigns, Modi continued to emphasize that, if voted to BJP, he would have a hard line against Pakistan and would place Indian-Occupied Kashmir (IOK) right under the control of the central government—a policy that raised huge fears. Subsequently, India's highest foreign policy objective has been to encircle Pakistan from all sides and isolate it internationally. Major global powers, including Muslim countries, have largely been in favor of diplomatic relations with India, thereby enabling it to strategically use regional and international alliances against Pakistan. Operating without facing much regional or international opposition, India unilaterally abolished the special constitutional status of IOK. Concurrently, Pakistan's reactive foreign policy demonstrated a glaring absence of active initiatives to counter India's strategic actions, which were primarily focused on diminishing Pakistan's status. India has persistently exploited Pakistan's weak and vague diplomatic strategies. One of the key findings of this study is that India's stable democratic framework and political continuity have been instrumental in facilitating effective policymaking and institution-building. Conversely, Pakistan's absence of both these attributes has led to institutional instability, weak governance, and passive decision-making approach. The unfolding of this dynamic swing of India from soft to hard power amid coercive military doctrines adaptation is a foundation of discussion. Against this backdrop, this paper aims to study trajectories responsible for Indian hard power designs with South Asian states and results after changing economic, political and

military agendas. The data collection of this qualitative research is based on secondary data to demonstrate the analysis under the theoretical lens of Neorealism.

Keywords: BJP, RSS, Pakistan, India, US, China, CPEC, Hindutva.

Introduction

Power in international politics is a state's capacity to make other states behave and think as it wishes, in its interests, by intimidation, (sticks) encouragements or magnetism (carrots). Intimidation and economic inducements are the first two and are regarded as components of hard power, while the capacity to attract and influence is soft power (Nye, 1990). The ability of a nation to attract others to its point of view is more a function of its principles and values than of its material resources. Mahatma Gandhi utilized satyagraha (civil disobedience) as a moral power to achieve civil, political, and socioeconomic rights for Indians by employing love and self-sacrifice to persuade the colonial masters. India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, believed that the achievement of independence through non-violent means proved the power of moral authority. From his perspective, the only viable alternative to a world order ruled by power politics was a cooperative and peaceful order—one India could lead by following a policy of non-alignment (M. K. Mishra, 2016).

The states meticulously analyze their internal and external dynamics before committing to any major foreign policy decision. Yet, it has been intensely debated among scholars about the extent to which domestic political, social, and economic factors influence the decision-making process of a state with regard to its foreign policy. Some commentators argue that upon entering into an anarchic international order the state finds itself with two choices: to be "extending domestic matters" or "to be adapting to external environment." With such common past and links of heritage, one would expect that Pakistan and India should have very cordial bilateral relations. Yet their relations have constantly remained strained. Over the control of Kashmir, a region of great importance for both, the two countries fought three principal wars. The two rival South Asian regional powers are still locked into reciprocal contradictions and often antagonistic activity in their battle for regional hegemony.

Pakistan has repeatedly presented initiatives to give a solution to these otherwise long-lasting grievances, but again and again, India would not see the alternative and constantly would revert to its old-pattern ways to undermine Pakistan. Seven decades-plus after inception, the Kashmir controversy with respect to Siachen and Sir Creek, waters rights, border tensions, and counterterrorism, among others, continue to linger (Tourangbam, 2020).

India has managed to fortify its ties with Iran and Afghanistan so as to encircle Pakistan, for its foreign policy is deeply rooted in hostility against Pakistan. India has always maintained close ties with China in the name of economic cooperation, and now, it isolated Pakistan on the international stage. As part of its tactical foreign policy, India continues to weaken the Pakistan asymmetrical military advancement through enhanced defense capacity while threatening Pakistan's economy. Afghanistan is a crucial geopolitical anchor in India's strategic calculation. India has always supported Afghanistan's claim over the sovereignty of Pashtunistan as a stopgap towards strengthening its ties with Afghanistan to dominant its regional authority (Basrur, 2017).

On August 5, 2019, Narendra Modi, who directed India, abrogated Articles 370 and 35A of its own constitution and muted the special constitutional status of Kashmir. This was done very easily, as the international community was always pro-India and turned a blind eye to the mass confinement of Kashmiris in Kashmir occupied by India. At the same time, the feeble economic muscle of Pakistan and an absence of a strong foreign policy apparatus for it proved certain hindrances to its plea for international support on the issue. Quite a number of nations did not come out to condemn India's act, influenced mainly by India's growing diplomatic influence and fast-growing economy on the brink of US\$3 trillion (Khalid, (2021).)

India's aims are pretty much similar to those of the United States. However, a meaningful explanation of this alignment in cooperation will require persisting commitment, moderate prospects, and a profound comprehension of New Delhi's strategic priorities (Blank, et al., 2015). Between 2014 and 2020, India's strategic diplomacy and well-thought-out foreign policy were very conducive to the powers of the world and of the region. Several of these actions present considerable causes of concern to Pakistan. Enforcing counter measures against India's aggressive ambitions has presented a thorn in the side of Pakistan's foreign policy, which has generally been ineffective at determining the levels of aggression Pakistan is up against. This study will analyze the factors contributing in hard power image transformation from soft power image, in connection to the proactive and strategic policies of India during the Modi's period.

Theoretical Lens of the Study

Neorealism is a theory that explains state behavior based on the structure of the international system in which states operate by taking account mainly of two components: anarchy, which means that there is no authority to rule over states that are persistently fighter. Neorealism argues that states are rational actors that pursue survival and power, mostly hard power, for ensuring security and deterring threats. Neorealist argue that hard power, the military and economic strength, is the most

sanctioned method of ensuring survival, especially as the anarchic world tends to induce security. This has particular phenomenon has similarity with offensive realism: states have their manifest wants dictated by the desire to up-strengthen and get the most power that defeats rivals to secure their own state position. However, the current study analyzes the data with neorealism lens to understand India's recent power transformation. Neorealist states maximize power because powerful states acknowledge threat in case of any weakness rivals observe in them. Therefore neorealist states only believe in power (Waltz, 1990).

Preceding Trends of India

A brief recap of preceding trends of India would enable understanding of historical political conduct. India's political participation in the South Asian region is not spotless because Indian political leadership has been involved in derailing stability and peace in many neighboring states like Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. It has fought conventional wars with China and Pakistan.

Nehruvian India was differently functioning because his vision was not be heavily equipped Indian army and committed to peace and stability. Nuclear arms development was for deterring China. But the geopolitical situation changed after China's nuclear explosion during 1964, significant development of Pak-China relations and the major influence of the US-Pakistan relation amid Cold War transformed regional strategic environment caused the enrichment of military competences (Seethi & Harshe, 2005).

Indira Gandhi had intimidating policies and had robust regional strategies for dealing the external compressions in case of risk. India offered economic and commercial advantages to Bhutan and Nepal due to rising impact of China and provided support to these states at the time of inner struggles. India established connections with the Soviet Union with fabricated treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation 1971. However India escorted civil war in Sri Lanka and Pakistan (East-Pakistan now Bangladesh) was violation of NAM (Rauch, 2008). Indian administration spoiled the peacekeeping policy and had taken benefit of neighboring states internal weaknesses.

Gujral doctrine was indeed a milestone in the turning point of India, from the earlier rigid notion of bilateralism and reciprocity to its current tact in multilateralism and non-reciprocity. India conducted its first nuclear test in 1974, naming it a peaceful nuclear explosion. For twenty-four long years, even after its determination was constantly challenged through one provocation after another, it undertook yet another round of testing in 1998, this time openly manifesting military intent. The doctrine henceforth iterated that India would not insist upon strict dealings with neighbors but would put in strides, sometimes more than halfway, to address their aspirations.

Further, India stopped meddling into the foreign policy decisions of its neighboring states, which it used to consider pivotal to its own security (Sahoo, 2016).

P. V. Narasimha Rao and Atal Bihari Vajpayee Rao and Atal Bihari Vajpayee worked very discreetly through their foreign-policy decisions. But Singh tried, particularly in the last couple of years, to assert Pan-Asianism in the fashion of Nehru's visions (Panda & Baruah, 2019)

Reconfiguration of National Objectives

Considering power soft power also has its significance as hard power is measured. This is Nye who devised and disseminated the idea that power needs clarity regarding capitals and conduct. When it comes to reflect capitals and possessions military and economic strength are the forces of hard power (Nye, 2011). In contrast, magnetism is conduct that is labeled as soft power. However, by employing any capital or possession state can augment soft power but not any conduct can be traced as soft power behavior. There is a stark difference among intimidation and magnetism.

India has experienced a new period of leadership under Prime Minister Narendra Modi (BJP representative) since 2014. Earlier he has served as a chief minister of Gujarat where his political role introduced him to international politics. His political insight has introduced new things to the regional and global politics. His idiosyncrasies have impacted Indian foreign policy that reconfigured national objectives different from Nehruvian policy implemented since inception. Modi has proclaimed catchphrases "Make in India" and "Zero Defect Zero Effect (ZDZE)" to develop the idea of industrial center (Jaffrelot, 2016). However, Modi's policies, military modernization and global collaborations are different in reality because Indian aspiration to become Asian Tiger does not stand with economic, political and strategic partnerships for regional peace and stability.

Strategic Partnership

Within the period of Prime Minister Modi's rule, India coherently fortified bilateral relations with the US. However, this cooperation is not based on historical outlines. The US, as the world's largest democracy and one of the most appealing emerging markets comprising 120 million people, is unable to fit into the ideological framework of a natural defense partner for the US (Weitz, 2017). The modern day Indo-US relationship, to a large extent, is driven by strategic terms. China's overwhelming military strength has prompted India to look for a regional equilibrium. At the same time, the US unites its interests with India while facing challenges to its Asian ambitions from China. For the US, it made absolute strategic sense to bring in Indian support to counter China's strategic and economic influence as it seeks to reshape the politics of Asian (Rajagopalan, 2017). The US-India strategic agreements SOMIA, COMCASA, and BECA are linked to mostly intelligence and information security and these will facilitate

Indian ballistic, cruise and drone missiles in aiming and navigation. These facilities will provide support to hypersonic and supersonic weapons that India will deploy for surgically strike against Pakistan (S. Ali, 2020).

Indian Ocean Politics

India is advancing like other areas in Indian Ocean Region as well under Modi era. These patterns are susceptible to bigger competition in the region. India alone is not expanding despite the US viable support is available as the Pacific region is called Indo-Pacific during 2013 to make India central state responsible for the IOR. The US is augmenting India's role in IOR to configure it with China to monitor the Strait of Malacca. Therefore the US is supporting India for naval modernization so India can limit China (Salman et al., 2023). China's rise is source of concern for the US and India is taking military advantage by becoming part of Quads and AUKUS. India is enhancing relations with the US and its partners, growing its ties with Paris and having connectivity in different fields. India and France have joint military exercises, mutual development of jets and helicopter engines. France has approved the proposal of 26 Rafale fighter jets and diesel propelled submarines in the initial months of 2023 (Tzinieris et al., 2023).

Limited Wars/Proxy Wars

India under Modi's leadership has adopted coercive military policies; therefore, India yearns to have limited conventional war under nuclear hangover. India, for making things in its favor, is stretching diplomatic connections, economy and building global narrative in Indian support against Pakistan. Moreover, Indian military modernization is augmenting asymmetries to the extent where it can take a shape of nuclear conflict. India's Cold Start Doctrine has planned reordering strike corps minimum eight limited division size Integrated Battle Groups that include armour, mechanized infantry and artillery. This plan would enable IBGs to rapidly assemble for limited operation within short time frame 72-96 hours in Pakistan. India's military aggressive posture against neighbors supports war once it starts, limited or conventional war, it is difficult to avoid irreversible damage. This approach was visible through Balakot crisis that finished by hitting down two Indian Jets and seized pilot Wing Commander Abhinandan by Pakistan Air Force (M. Ali & Bukhari, 2022).

India's intelligence agency RAW (Research and Analysis Wing) is starkly involved in hybrid warfare and harming through terror networks, intrusion from borders and amplified spying activities in Pakistan. Moreover, India with support of cyber warfare is augmenting modern propaganda tools and exploiting information as military strength. India is enlarging AI contour for forged data spread and propaganda with digital army (Butt et al., 2025). India is, with the help of media, creating frustration and depression among people and youth. Moreover, India is investing in building negative

image internationally. Pakistan is facing Indian launched proxy war since long; India is not only funding terrorist camps in Afghanistan but in Balochistan as well. These anti-state militants (BNA, BLA and TTP), banned military organizations and terrorists are involved in target killings. India through proxies damages CPEC and target Chinese engineers and employees to dismantle the joint Pak-China economic project. These trained militants damage important people, projects and properties to inflict maximum damage to Pakistan (Times, 2024).

Military Advancement

In the second decade of the 21st century, discussions on the Indian foreign policy have found many points of focus: the role it plays in global politics and the consequent economic growth. Much of this discussion was similar to China's notions from a decade prior (Parashar & Parashar, 2015). Whether they're building on tangible achievements is another matter altogether. Several factors point toward India being unlikely to opt for a pro-active foreign policy, and none of these expectations have really panned out. Between 2009 and 2018, India was the world's second-largest arms importer, accounting for 9.5% of global arms purchases. Of course, there was no other South Asian state within the top ten arms importers in that period (SIPRI, 2020). Traditionally, almost 70% of its weaponry was sourced from Russia (S. A. Khan et al., 2018), but in recent years, this has gone down. It is believed that this dramatic decline, per the 2019 SRI Arms Transfer database, is due to a re-evaluation of India's import policy regarding armaments. This change in policy adversely affected Russia's defense sector as, within a short window of time, arms exports to India had dropped steeply by 42%(SIPRI, 2020).

India's Defence Expo 2020 represented the country's rising ambitions to position itself as the global manufacturing hub for defense equipment (DefExpo, 2020). India is galloping towards becoming known for space with its growing measures, which entrust the capability of power extending beyond its territories. It claimed to have successfully destroyed a satellite in space on March 27, 2019, (Grover, 2020) signaling the extension of military might beyond the continent. With this, the Defence Space Research Agency (DSRO) was established to ensure more efforts in further development and strengthen the Indian Defense Space Agency (IDSA). In a similar comparison, a Defence Cyber Agency (DCA) was created to focus on Cyber security-Cyber warfare (DefExpo, 2020). The political controversy that encircled the procurement contract for the Rafale hit the Modi government but nevertheless managed to secure an \$8.8 billion deal with Dassault Aviation of France, with the first delivery made shortly thereafter. An important aspect that adds huge value to this deal for India is Dassault Aviation's agreement to a limited transfer of technology to Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL). The reinvestment plan has also included that half the value of the contract is to be

reinvested into India's defense sector (Scimia, 2016). The dominance of the major global powers in the region may pose a significant threat to Indian interests at national security level. Among the greatest threats to Indian national security is the US and China decision to provide military and financial support to Pakistan. While the US influence is evident in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, Chinese growth through the "String of Pearls" strategy has made inroads into most South Asian nations, disrupting India's regional dominance (Mitchell, D. , (2014))

Doctrinal Transformations

In the South Asian war theatre, India has adopted several military doctrines, prompting a major change in conducting strategic operations since the year 2003. Among the initiatives comprising the CSD, surgical strikes, the integrated Joint Armed Forces Doctrine, and the 2018 Land Warfare Doctrine all enact a conceptual shift to rapid, limited engagements well below the nuclear hangover directing Pakistan. The strategic change seeks to enhance offensive capabilities and operational flexibility, redefining the security calculus in the region. The changes provide evidence that India is ready for multi-front warfare and strategically forced to counter threats perceived from Pakistan. This is more dominantly practiced during the period Modi joined office. Indian tri services are dominantly working under aggressive mindset (Khattak & Al-Saba, 2024).

India is focusing on proactive military strategy and India's New Land Warfare Doctrine (2018) is the most planned and functionally doable design of Cold Start campaign. It also promises the forces vigilance for active and mechanically refined actions. This enunciates India's tactical relocation depending upon proactive preemption and power plan that is emphasized by India's approach towards the world as a regional power with offensive military capabilities (Butt et al., 2025). India is amplifying this through its aggressive military designs against Pakistan and China, influencing its position as regional power through these hostile military designs.

Akhand Bharat/ Hindutva

India is optimizing its hard power with its strong Hindu national narrative. Currently, Hindutva is a populist trend in India; this ideology has never been the identity of the state since inception. Populist ideology got more recognition by populist leader Narendra Modi whose political career is deep rooted in BJP. Modi being a populist leader has iconic similarity with Hindutva and both are aggressive in action. Before elected as Prime Minister Modi served as chief minister of Gujarat from 2001-2014 and his national politics in case of Gujarat massacre of Muslims 2002 was hostile. His hostile behavior and Hindutva nationalistic approach significantly influence India's security trajectories because Hindutva is influenced by violent right-wing Hindu-controlled nationalist Advani (Ogden, 2013).

Hindutva marginalized Muslims and Christians from ownership in India as their home because that ideology preaches this as holy place dedicated to Hindus only, though this place is origin of multiple religions (Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism) in India. Other campaigning of Hindutva is Akhand Bharat 'Undivided India' that suggests one state which was previously under British rule (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh) before partition in 1947 (Bjornson, 2018). BJP, otherwise, carries policy based on 'Islamophobia' that depicts hatred against Pakistan (Haynes, 2008).

Implications for Pakistan

1. Nuclear and strategic stability

On August 17, 1999, India's National Security Advisory Board published a draft nuclear doctrine that specifically incorporated a No First Use (NFU) policy. Nevertheless, this pledge was subsequently modified in India's official statement of 2003, which introduced a crucial stipulation: "In the event of a substantial assault on India, or Indian forces globally, utilizing biological or chemical weapons, India will reserve the right to respond with nuclear weapons (Narang, 2013). This alteration engendered doubt over India's No First Use commitment, prompting inquiries into its legitimacy and consistency. During the 2014 election campaign, concerns over the revision of India's nuclear doctrine intensified under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) administration. The BJP manifesto clearly articulated its aim "to revise and update (the nuclear doctrine), to render it pertinent to contemporary challenges"(Rajagopalan, 2016). This idea rekindled discussions over the NFU policy and the possible modification of India's stance on major retribution. The uncertainty around India's No First Use (NFU) commitment was further emphasized in 2016 when Defense Minister Manohar Parrikar scrutinized the NFU doctrine (Sundaram & Ramana, 2018). Despite subsequent clarification that his views were personal beliefs, they reignited enduring discussions on the doctrine's relevance and credibility.

In contrast to India, Pakistan has abstained from openly articulating a detailed nuclear doctrine. Its nuclear policy is articulated by a restricted set of meticulously crafted public declarations that offer scant insight into its nuclear position. Significantly, these remarks do not imply a No First Use (NFU) pledge. Pakistan has adopted a policy of credible minimum deterrence, primarily aimed at countering India's conventional military dominance. This doctrine is further strengthened by Pakistan's implementation of a "full spectrum deterrence" (FSD) strategy, exemplified by the development of the short-range tactical nuclear missile, Nasr. The FSD seeks to rectify identified deficiencies in Pakistan's deterrence strategy, specifically in reaction to India's Cold Start doctrine a limited-war approach allegedly devised by the Indian Army in 2004 to execute rapid territorial incursions into Pakistan without inciting a nuclear response (Ahmad, 2017).

Although Pakistan retains the possibility for the first use of nuclear weapons, it has not clearly delineated the "redlines" that would provoke a nuclear reaction (S. Mishra, 2017). This intentional ambiguity functions as a strategic deterrent, designed to dissuade aggression from India at all levels. The absence of clearly defined redlines heightens the danger of mistaken escalation during a dispute. Ambiguous thresholds for nuclear retaliation may result in opponents mistakenly crossing them, potentially leading to disastrous outcomes (Akhtar, 2013).

2. Growing Economy

Economically, the disparity in defense spending and the broader economic trajectories of the two countries create additional pressures on Pakistan. While India's growing economic strength enables it to invest heavily in defense and strategic initiatives (Joshi, 2017), Pakistan's economic challenges constrain its ability to respond effectively, necessitating a reliance on asymmetric strategies and external support. The transformation of India's strategic doctrine under Narendra Modi's leadership reflects a broader realignment of South Asia's geopolitical landscape. Driven by a combination of domestic political imperatives, regional rivalries, and global strategic alignments, India's shift from soft power to hard power marks a significant departure from its historical approach to security and foreign policy (Fisher, 2017). For Pakistan, these changes present a complex array of challenges, necessitating a comprehensive reevaluation of its security policies and diplomatic strategies. As South Asia continues to navigate these turbulent dynamics, the interplay between India's doctrinal evolution and Pakistan's response will be critical in shaping the region's future security architecture. By understanding the underlying factors driving these transformations, policymakers and scholars can better anticipate and address the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

3. Security Issues & Cyber Warfare

India's doctrinal transformation has profound implications for Pakistan's security and the broader stability of South Asia. The shift towards hard power and pre-emptive strategies undermines the traditional balance of power, forcing Pakistan to reassess its security policies and strategic posture. One significant concern is the erosion of strategic stability, as India's development of advanced conventional and nuclear capabilities challenges Pakistan's deterrence framework (Koblentz, 2014). The increasing focus on hybrid warfare, including cyber operations and information campaigns, further complicates Pakistan's security landscape. These capabilities not only disrupt traditional military calculations but also pose significant challenges to internal stability. Additionally, India's alignment with global powers and its growing influence in international forums limit Pakistan's strategic options, exacerbating its geopolitical vulnerabilities (Kane & Nielsen, 2017).

4. Impact on Kashmir issue

Kashmir is disputed legacy between India and Pakistan. India violated partition scheme and occupied illegally on princely state. Despite of UN resolutions India did not resolve the dispute and it led to multiple clashes since independence between India and Pakistan. This issue is also one of the reasons that India has adopted aggressive posture that is threatening strategic environment (D. M. Khan & Khan, 2023). India's hard power trajectories already have created chaos and disorder for peaceful solution of Kashmir, as Modi exacerbates Kashmir issue to gain Hindu sympathies for votes during the elections both times. India under his administration exploiting soft power tools for hard power by using alliance with the western governments and aspirations for permanent membership of UN Security Council to get a decision in India's favor instead of considering the justice for the Kashmiri Muslims rights. Indian government has mobilized the IOK with Indian army and does not allow international media to capture real facts to the world. India is suppressing Kashmiri Muslims by revoking article 370 in 2019 and reducing Muslims identity. Indian government is exploiting political and economic situation by limiting liberty of action and opinion.

Conclusion

These all factors are contributing to India's hard power swing; Narendra Modi has already exercised aggressive political approach in domestic politics as chief minister of Gujarat. Since his political origin has germinated from BJP and this party is the sole promoter of Hindutva and Akhand Bharat so these dynamics are instigating him right wing hardliner. Moreover, conceptualizing aforementioned features of Modi's tenure determine that India is aggressive in approach regarding region instead of magnetism, though Indian culture offers a lot as soft power. However, India is expressing hard power by utilizing its soft power landscapes. Modi's strategic agreements, reorientation of military doctrines, assertive relations with Pakistan are optimizing hard power. These encompassed the influence towards self-reliance and proactive defense, an agile, multipolar position and understanding. All this justifies India's intimidating approach and military policies, entailing a potential loss of some institutional autonomy and, eventually, opening up the door for politicization of security decisions.

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