



# Geopolitical Dynamics and Border Security in South Asia

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper investigates the complex interplay between geopolitical dynamics, border security, and transboundary river systems in South Asia, focusing on the case studies of Pakistan, India, and China. The preface sets the tone by emphasising South Asia's incongruous combination of riches and poverty, as well as the region's complexity and number of borders and geographical boundaries. It investigates the structural laws and institutions that shape border practices, as well as the changing security dynamics during the Cold War era, such as India's security strategy shift and its impact on regional human security. Digs into South Asia's territorial issues, particularly the long-running conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, which began in the post-colonial era and has been worsened by historical grievances and geopolitical rivalry. Discusses tensions over transboundary river systems in South Asia, focusing on the Indus Waters Treaty between India and Pakistan and the Brahmaputra River basin shared by China and India. It delves into the intricacies of water resource management, competing national interests, and the consequences for regional cooperation and stability.

Keywords- South Asian geopolitics, border security, territorial disputes, and transboundary river systems.

## **INTRODUCTION**

South Asia as a post-colonial as well as a post-partition region has a lot to offer to those interested in the geopolitical triad of bordering, ordering and othering.<sup>1</sup>

It is crucial to acknowledge right away that modern South Asia offers a contradictory combination of affluence and poverty, resulting from a mismatch between possibilities and capabilities in the area. Although its people are deeply connected socially and culturally across national boundaries, the frequently tense state-to-state

<sup>1</sup> (South Asia: Boundaries, Borders and Beyond, 24 Sep 2019)

interactions, especially between the two nuclear-armed countries of India and Pakistan, do not reflect this common identity. South Asia is unique in the world for being a fast-growing but poorly interconnected region. Its terrain is marked by glaring inconsistencies, exhibiting both optimism and pessimism, and containing a multitude of intricacies. The contrast between South Asia's strengths and weaknesses, security, and insecurity, hope and dread, highlights the region's complexity and gives rise to a variety of borders and territorial boundaries.<sup>ii</sup>

The structural laws and institutions, like a state and its efforts to demarcate its borders, are the primary sources of border practices. However, the way they are executed varies according on the type of border, the authorised staff, the traits of those living on the border, or the individual's personal history, including their citizenship, ethnicity, or religion. The nature of a particular boundary is ultimately determined by the results of these interactions between the people and the structural elements.<sup>iii</sup> The idea of security is widely discussed since it is complicated and linked, lacks clear objectivity, and frequently requires a broader viewpoint to appreciate. South Asia's security dynamics have changed significantly since the Cold War, creating positive elements and confidence-building measures between India and its smaller neighbouring governments. India, which is inherently dominant in the region, has switched its security strategy from defensive to aggressive since the 1990s. This trend has resulted in unilateral compromises in bilateral conflicts and increased economic cooperation, promoting regional security. However, from a human security perspective, South Asian states have frequently contributed to human insecurity. According to the Commission on Human Security's (CHS) 2003 Report, states in the region have challenged not just the security of their own populations, but also that of others beyond borders. The report emphasises the critical link between international security and human security. Rivalry, animosity, arms races, and nuclearization have redirected considerable resources into defence spending, impeding regional development.<sup>iv</sup> Securing borders against the unauthorized transfer of conventional weapons, medications, human labor, sensitive radiological and nuclear materials, and dual-use technologies is a critical transnational challenge in the twenty-first century. Information exchange and a coordinated approach to border security may help states better understand threat actors, paths for illicit migration, and the effectiveness of countermeasures. South Asia, a densely populated region with porous borders, frequent interstate conflicts, three rising nuclear weapons programs, and extensive regional connectivity initiatives, is vital to global border security issues.

Along with that there is a concern on the transboundary river system in the South Asia region. The major Himalayan River systems in South Asia—including the Indus, Ganges, and Brahmaputra basins, as well as the Sundarbans—cross seven nations, providing important resources for the lives and livelihoods of over a billion people. However, issues such as population increase, urbanisation, unsustainable farming practices, and excessive groundwater extraction are putting enormous strain on water quality and supply. Despite housing a quarter of the worldwide population, the region only has 4% of the world's renewable water resources. It is estimated that by 2050, 1.5 to 1.7 billion people in the region will confront water scarcity. Given these issues and future projections,

<sup>ii</sup> (South Asia: Boundaries, Borders and Beyond, 24 Sep 2019)

<sup>iii</sup> (Borderwork and Borders in South Asia through Structuration, 2018)

<sup>iv</sup> (REVIEWING SECURITY IN SOUTH ASIA, 2015)

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309556535 REVIEWING SECURITY IN SOUTH ASIA](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309556535_REVIEWING_SECURITY_IN_SOUTH_ASIA)

promoting regional cooperation and collaborative transboundary water management is critical. South Asia has about 20 important transboundary rivers. Despite the lack of comprehensive structures or regional institutions for transboundary water cooperation, a few bilateral agreements have been formed. Notably, in 1972, a Joint River Commission was founded between Bangladesh and India, which share 54 transboundary rivers. The two countries also inked a key river management pact, the Ganges Water Sharing Treaty of 1996.<sup>v</sup>

### **TERRITORIAL DISPUTES IN SOUTH ASIA**

Territorial disputes exist in South Asia, posing serious dangers to the region's peace, security, and progress. Many of these issues derive from borders created during British colonial control, which were more concerned with defending the empire's interests than with the region's long-term prospects. The major goal was to protect natural borders from future dangers, such as Czarist Russia. As a result, post-colonial countries have been embroiled in contradictory claims and counterclaims over these lands, escalating tensions. The process of nation-building after colonisation exacerbated these conflicts, notably due to the uncertain positions of ethnic and religious minorities, as well as social groups. One noteworthy example is the Kashmir war, in which both India and Pakistan claim ownership of the entire region, even though each control only a fraction of it. China has also controlled a chunk of Kashmir since 1950. India's claim to Jammu and Kashmir is based on a 1947 instrument of accession, which expanded its territorial ambitions to include Pakistan-controlled Gilgit-Baltistan and the Wakhan Corridor on the Afghan side. This claim is motivated in part by India's ambition to reclaim access to the historic silk route, with important individuals and politicians like as Home Minister Amit Shah pressing for Kashmir's full integration into India.<sup>vi</sup>

#### ***India – Pakistan***

The rivalry between India and Pakistan originated because of the 1947 Partition of British India, as outlined in the Indian Independence Act. The Partition created a Muslim-majority Pakistan and a Hindu-majority India, allowing the various regions of Jammu and Kashmir to choose which country to join. The maharaja (Kashmir's ruler) of the time desired independence since Kashmir had been neglected and oppressed for generations by conquering empires. However, he eventually consented to join India in exchange for assistance against invading Pakistani herders, which sparked the Indo-Pakistani War of 1947-48.<sup>vii</sup>

Pakistan's division from India in 1947 triggered a series of territorial conflicts that had far-reaching consequences in the area. While geopolitics between Pakistan and India frequently revolve around the Kashmir issue, it is critical to recognise that Pakistan's history and present are not defined primarily by its relationship with New Delhi and their shared fight over Kashmir. Beyond Kashmir, India and Pakistan's strained relations extend to the partition of Punjab, with no agreement reached between the two countries. Similarly, Pakistan's difficult relations with

<sup>v</sup> (Flowing Waters: Harnessing Transboundary Rivers in South Asia, 2023)  
<https://www.worldbank.org/en/events/2023/10/31/flowing-waters-harnessing-transboundary-rivers-in-south-asia>

<sup>vi</sup> (TERRITORIAL DISPUTES)

<sup>vii</sup> (Conflict Between India and Pakistan, 2024)

Bangladesh, which resulted from their partition in 1971, add another element of territorial conflict. These problems, which are frequently overshadowed by the Kashmir conflict, demonstrate Pakistan's complex network of territorial conflicts throughout history and today.<sup>viii</sup>

Tensions between India and Pakistan have long existed, marked by periods of conflict and attempts at reconciliation. The first major war between the two countries began in 1965, with a border skirmish that escalated into full-fledged combat. Another war broke out in 1971, mostly over the issue of East Pakistan, and resulted in the foundation of modern-day Bangladesh with Indian aid. Despite efforts to restore ties, such as the 1972 Shimla Agreement, which created the Line of Control (LOC) in Kashmir, the war took a new turn in 1974, when both countries tested nuclear weapons, raising the stakes of any confrontation. In 1989, Pakistan took advantage of a rising resistance movement in Indian-administered Kashmir, reigniting tensions and resulting in decades of communal violence. Despite attempts to reaffirm the LOC in 1999, tensions rose again with the Kargil War, which began with Pakistani forces crossing the LOC. Since then, both countries have maintained a tenuous cease-fire, while border skirmishes are still prevalent.<sup>ix</sup> Fears of a direct military conflict revived in November 2008, when Islamists stormed Mumbai, killing many people. Despite evidence that Pakistani-based extremist groups were involved, India pursued diplomatic options rather than raising tensions, requesting Pakistan's aid in bringing the criminals to justice. Hopes for peace were temporarily revived in 2014, when Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi invited Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to his inauguration. However, ties deteriorated again after India cancelled negotiations because Pakistan's high commissioner in India met with Kashmiri separatist leaders. Despite rare openings for discussion, progress towards serious talks stopped with the 2016 Uri attack, which was blamed on a Pakistan-based militant organisation. This period saw an upsurge in border skirmishes, culminating in the 2019 Pulwama assault, claimed by a Pakistani militant organisation, which resulted in increased tensions and retaliatory airstrikes between India and Pakistan. In August 2019, India removed Article 370 of its constitution, removing Jammu and Kashmir's unique status, worsening tensions with Pakistan and infuriating Kashmiri residents.

The subsequent closure in Indian-administered Kashmir resulted in widespread unrest and economic deterioration, aggravating regional tensions. Although a cease-fire was agreed upon in May 2018, violence along the LOC continued, peaking in 2020 with thousands of recorded cross-border shootings. The United States' efforts to calm tensions between India and Pakistan have produced mixed outcomes. While the Clinton administration's participation in the 1999 Kargil War prevented a nuclear conflict, the US's connection with both countries has undermined its reputation as an impartial mediator. China's engagement in the region, particularly its collaboration with Pakistan and border disputes with India, has exacerbated the issue. China's growing military, political, and economic ties with Pakistan, particularly through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), represent a danger to India's security. Furthermore, conflicts between Indian and Chinese soldiers in disputed border regions have heightened tensions, leading to increased militarization along the border. Tension between India and Pakistan continue to pose a substantial threat to regional stability, exacerbated by nuclear weapons,

<sup>viii</sup> (Looking beyond Kashmir: Past and present territorial disputes between Pakistan, India and Bangladesh)

<sup>ix</sup> (Conflict Between India and Pakistan, 2024)

militant organisations, and external forces. Efforts to resolve conflicts and promote communication have had limited success, with the threat of bloodshed and territorial disputes looming over the region.<sup>x</sup>

### ***India – China***

The Sino-Indian border, which spans the Himalayas, is the world's longest contested border and has strained relations between the two countries for seven decades. The Line of Actual Control (LAC), proposed by China in 1959 and tentatively acknowledged by India in 1993, remains undefined, resulting in varying perceptions of its length and position. India believes the LAC is 3,488 km long, whereas China claims it is barely 2,000 km. The conflict is most obvious at the LAC's western and eastern ends, where China controls Aksai Chin and India claims territory based on past agreements such as the 1914 Shimla Convention and the McMahon Line. Tensions rose in the late 1950s because of border intrusions and Chinese claims to Indian territory. India rejected Zhou Enlai's 1960 compromise plan calling for a demilitarised zone and territorial exchanges. India's "forward policy" of deploying soldiers to border areas heightened tensions, resulting in the 1962 Sino-Indian War. China viewed India's moves to bolster its position near the McMahon Line as a danger to its territorial integrity. Despite China's warnings, India miscalculated the possibility of confrontation, leading to a war with severe territorial losses for India.<sup>xi</sup>

Recent years have seen a substantial deterioration in border tensions between India and China, as evidenced by the ongoing Eastern Ladakh standoff along the western sector of the Line of Actual Control. This stalemate, one of the longest and most violent since the Sundering Chu crisis in 1986-87, began in June 2020, with skirmishes resulting in losses on both sides. Despite 19 rounds of Corps Commander-level discussions between India and China scheduled till August 2023, little progress has been achieved in resolving the standoff. Although some engagement attempts have resulted in the establishment of "buffer zones" in five contentious regions, concerns remain, as withdrawals have only occurred in one area where the 2020 skirmishes took place. Other friction areas leading up to the 2020 conflict remain tight, including tensions in the LAC's eastern sector, particularly in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. In December 2022, fighting between Indian and Chinese soldiers occurred at Yangtse along the LAC in Arunachal Pradesh's Tawang sector.<sup>xii</sup>

China's efforts to buttress its claims in the region have included the construction of xiaokang "model" villages in important areas, the renaming of locations, and the issuance of new border regulations, which India perceives as providing legal justification for Chinese personnel. China's official maps, such as the 2023 edition published by the Ministry of Natural Resources, show Arunachal Pradesh and the Aksai Chin region within China's borders, contradicting India's sovereignty claims. The US has had a role in the region, giving India with "real-time" intelligence regarding prospective Chinese operations near the border, particularly during the 2020 Galwan

<sup>x</sup> (Conflict Between India and Pakistan, 2024)

<sup>xi</sup> (Thin Ice in the Himalayas: Handling the India-China Border Dispute, 2023)

<sup>xii</sup> (Thin Ice in the Himalayas: Handling the India-China Border Dispute, 2023)

incident. In February 2023, the US Senate sponsored a bipartisan resolution recognising Arunachal Pradesh as Indian territory while denouncing China's claims as part of its "aggressive and expansionist policies."

Furthermore, US Department of Defence studies have highlighted China's construction of civilian towns within disputed territory, showing China's efforts to keep border tensions from bringing India closer to the US. Chinese officials have warned US officials against interfering with China-India relations. Overall, the Eastern Ladakh standoff and tensions in the eastern sector of the LAC highlight the complex dynamics and high geopolitical stakes in the India-China border conflict. Despite diplomatic efforts and international attention, the situation is still hazardous, with the possibility of further escalation affecting regional stability and global ties.<sup>xiii</sup>

### **CONFLICTS OVER TRANSBOUNDARY RIVER SYSTEMS IN THE SOUTH ASIAN REGION.**

The Indus Waters Treaty, negotiated by the World Bank and completed in 1960 following nine years of negotiations between India and Pakistan, is widely regarded as one of the most successful international agreements. The Indus basin's rivers are divided between the two countries, with Pakistan receiving the Western Rivers (Indus, Jhelum, Chenab) and India receiving the Eastern Rivers (Ravi, Beas, Sutlej). Both countries are permitted to use the rivers assigned to them in specific ways. The issue between India and Pakistan is over the design elements of two hydroelectric power plants: the Kishanganga and Rattle projects. Pakistan expressed reservations about the design of these projects and requested a court of arbitration or a neutral expert. India preferred the nomination of a neutral expert. The World Bank facilitated conversations while remaining impartial. Despite efforts to establish a solution, a mutually acceptable result was not achieved. In December 2016, the World Bank postponed further action to give both countries time to find a settlement. Despite five years of cooperative work, no resolution was reached. In March 2022, the World Bank resolved to resume the process of choosing a Neutral Expert and Chairman to the Court of Arbitration. Appointments were made in November 2022, and the processes were initiated. Both mechanisms function independently, with the authority to define jurisdiction, competence, and procedural guidelines. The World Bank's role is limited to reimbursing the Neutral Expert's salary and costs using monies given by India and Pakistan. Throughout the process, the World Bank has remained committed to impartiality, openness, and aiding both countries, as required by the Treaty.<sup>xiv</sup>

The Brahmaputra River basin in South Asia is widely regarded as a possible hotspot for interstate water conflict, particularly between China and India. However, the likelihood of such conflict is smaller than widely assumed. Despite China's sovereignty over a large chunk of the basin and its construction of dams without consulting downstream neighbours, numerous factors reduce the likelihood of conflict.<sup>xv</sup>

One important factor is the hydrology of the Brahmaputra basin itself. While China owns a substantial chunk of the basin, much of it is under a rain shadow, which results in lower precipitation than the Indian, Bhutanese, and Bangladeshi portions. These downstream areas receive a lot of rain, with certain parts having extraordinarily high

<sup>xiii</sup> (Though overlooked, India's border dispute with China is a major flashpoint in the Indo-Pacific, 2023)

<sup>xiv</sup> (Fact Sheet: The Indus Waters Treaty 1960 and the Role of the World Bank, 2018)

<sup>xv</sup> (Mark Giordano; Anya Wahal, 2022)

yearly precipitation. As a result, China's actual contribution to the Brahmaputra's overall flow is likely to be less than its share of basin area. However, insufficient data and irregular exchange of water-related information inside India make it difficult to estimate China's precise contribution to the river's flow.

Despite the lesser danger of conflict over water quantity, China and India compete through water infrastructure development. China has built many dams on the Brahmaputra River and intends to build more, notably the contentious "Great Bend Dam." While these dams do not directly drain water from the river, they may have an impact on flow timing and may increase flood danger. However, a concerted operation between China and India could reduce these threats. The Indian approach to Chinese infrastructure initiatives has developed over time. India initially downplayed the hazards, but has since changed its approach, declaring intentions to build its hydropower project on the Brahmaputra to mitigate the negative effects of Chinese dam operations. This includes developing storing capacity to counteract any potential negative consequences.

While tensions exist over water infrastructure development in the Brahmaputra basin, the likelihood of interstate water conflict is smaller than commonly imagined. Water-related interactions in the region are influenced by factors such as the basin's hydrology and evolving reactions from China and India.<sup>xvi</sup>

Transboundary river basins, which are shared by two or more countries, play an important role in providing freshwater to around 40% of the world's population. These basins span over half of Earth's ice-free land surface and provide critical ecosystem services such as food and energy production, flood management, and pollution abatement. However, the use of transboundary water resources frequently causes disagreements among riparian states due to conflicting demands and perspectives.<sup>xvii</sup>

One such example is the Ganges River basin, which begins in the Central Himalayas and flows through India, Nepal, China, and Bangladesh. India controls the vast majority (79%) of the basin area, with Bangladesh, located downstream, accounting for only approximately 4%. The Ganges basin's hydrological cycle is mostly driven by the southwest monsoon, which causes seasonal fluctuations in water availability. Heavy rainfall during the wet season (June-October) causes flooding, but water scarcity occurs during the dry season (November-May). India's construction of the Farakka Barrage in 1975 severely curtailed dry season flow into Bangladesh, resulting in a water-sharing conflict. In response, India and Bangladesh formed the Ganges Water Sharing Treaty in 1996, which aimed to share dry season flow between the two countries. The pact, which has been in effect for 20 years of its 30-year term, has addressed some concerns while leaving many others unanswered.<sup>xviii</sup>

Earlier research on the Farakka Barrage issues and the ramifications of the 1996 Treaty centred on historical and political viewpoints, with little quantitative examination of dry season flows. However, few studies have been conducted to investigate the effects of the Farakka Barrage and the Treaty's performance on dry season flow availability. The 1977 Agreement and subsequent memoranda of understanding (MoUs) between India and Bangladesh set systems for dividing Ganges rivers during the dry season. These agreements were based on historical flow data and included a guarantee clause that ensured Bangladesh received a minimum flow if actual

<sup>xvi</sup> (The Water Wars Myth: India, China and the Brahmaputra, 2022)

<sup>xvii</sup> (Transboundary Waters, 2024)

<sup>xviii</sup> (Kazi Saidur Rahman; Zahidul Islam; Umme Kulsum Navera; Fulco Ludwig, 2019)

flow fell below certain levels. The Ganges Water Sharing Treaty of 1996 established a unique sharing mechanism based on historical flow data, with each country guaranteeing a minimum flow during key periods. The deal tries to resolve the long-standing disagreement over Ganges water sharing and establishes a framework for collaboration between India and Bangladesh.

Ultimately, the intricate interplay between geopolitical dynamics and border security in South Asia intersects with the management of transboundary river systems, creating a complex web of difficulties and opportunities for the region. The geopolitical landscape is shaped by historical legacies of territorial disputes, strategic interests, and the desire of regional hegemony, all of which influence border security and water management strategies. The management of transboundary river systems like the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Indus is complicated by competing national interests, environmental deterioration, and the effects of climate change. Addressing these difficulties requires a multidimensional approach that includes diplomacy, dialogue, and collaboration among riparian states.

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