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## CONTENTS

<b>S.No</b>	<b>Title of Manuscript</b>	<b>Pages</b>	<b>Authors</b>
1.	<b><i>The Concept of Political Success: Reflections on Leftist Politics of Sindh</i></b>	1-14	Amjad Ali
2.	<b><i>Drug Abuse Among Youths in Eswatini: Causes and Possible Intervention Strategies</i></b>	15-43	Mpofu Phumuzani, Vilakati Abel, Machingauta Tatenda Thelma
3.	<b><i>From Parliament to Public Square: The Normalization of Hate Speech in Pakistani Political Discourse</i></b>	44-56	Shazia Saleem, Dr. Ayesha Zafar
4.	<b><i>Rethinking the Dynamics of Bilateral Trade Between Pakistan and India Under Modi's Regime: Implications for the Regional Political Economy of South Asia</i></b>	57-84	Muhammad Abdul Moiz Aman
5.	<b><i>Regional Cooperation and SCO: Analyzing China's Role in Regional Integration</i></b>	85-104	Saher Liaqat, Abu Hurairah Abbasi
6.	<b><i>China's Ascendancy in the Digital Economy: An Appraisal</i></b>	105-119	Rimsha Malik, Shahzad Munir, M. Asghar Mehmood

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## The Concept of Political Success: Reflections on Leftist Politics of Sindh

Amjad Ali <sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

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Success in politics plays a crucial role in today's democratic societies. A political party is considered successful when it wins elections and assumes control of the government. The primary factors that determine political success generally include the party's voter base, organizational strength, cohesive narrative, political vision, resource mobilization, and policies that resonate with the socio-economic and religious context of the country. Left-wing parties in Sindh struggled with these critical components, failing to meet the established standards of political success. This paper examines the concept of political success through a critical study of Sindh's leftist parties, utilizing qualitative methods and scholarly sources. The key findings of this paper demonstrate that left-wing parties fail to meet essential benchmarks of political success, including organizational structure, popular narrative, and electoral performance, leading to their irreversible decline

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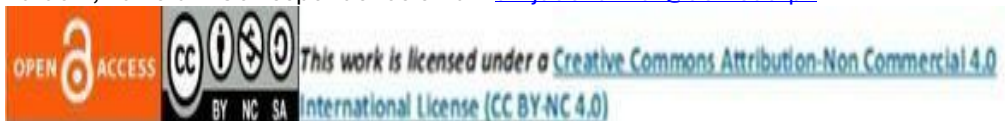
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## **Introduction**

Sindh is one of Pakistan's provinces and has been a focal point for several political movements. Leftist movements have had marginal impact on Sindh's political, cultural, and religious spheres. The left-wing parties have failed to make a significant difference in public realm and electoral politics. Historically, left-wing parties in Pakistan have remained relatively minor and have occasionally seemed to disappear entirely. This can be attributed to factors such as government-imposed bans, including the prohibition of the Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP) in 1954, as well as internal conflicts within the parties themselves. To analyze the evolution of modern left-wing political parties and understand their lack of electoral success in Pakistan. It is essential to identify which parties are considered "leftist" and explore the reasons behind their limited influence (Shafqat et al., 2020). Marxist theory has played a significant role in strengthening leftist movements in Sindh. Organizations such as the Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP), Awami Tahreek (AT), and Sindh Hari Committee (SHC) have actively resisted oppression and exploitation in the region. However, like other communist movements worldwide, leftist groups in Sindh were influenced by the Russian Revolution of 1917.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 has continued to inspire people worldwide, and it was seen as a path toward human freedom and social justice. It had a profound impact on communist parties and leftist movements across both European and non-European countries. Numerous scholars have analyzed leftist parties and communist movements globally<sup>2</sup>. For instance, Bethel (2018), defines a leftist party as one seeks to transform society by redistributing wealth and power. Similarly, Cornell (1968), argues that communist parties vary across nation-states, losing their international identity and adapting to national and local contexts. As a result, these parties adopt different policies and objectives. He also argues that communist parties succeed more easily in weak states where governments lack popular support and legitimacy.

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<sup>2</sup> There is difference between the term "left" and "communist" in their definitions. According to L. Harry Gould (2019), communism is a higher form of society which can develop only after Socialism; and left is broader term for the Communist Party and other genuine militant and democratic groups (p. 22,49). I use the term 'left' to refer the progressive movements of Sindh that followed Marxist and communist ideologies, aiming to bring socialist revolution.

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Vithal ( 1985), focuses on leftists in South Asia and argues that the Communist Party of India (CPI) was the epicenter of South Asian communist movements. Before India's independence, leftist movements had a unified stance and direction. However, after independence, they found themselves in highly distinct ideological and institutional settings. From the outset, leftist movements in region opposed authoritarian regimes and military rule in Bangladesh and Pakistan, along with the monarchy in Nepal. Consequently, unlike in India, the primary concern of communist parties was the fight for democracy and defiance against state repression. The Sino-Soviet divide led to extreme factionalism within the region's leftist movements. Meanwhile, communist parties in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and India attempted to use ethnicity and religion for political purposes, whereas China, Vietnam, and Korea strategically and tactically employed nationalism against colonialism. The decline in the popularity of left-wing parties is evident not only in Europe but also in India. Bose (2019), reflects on the left's electoral position in the 2019 Indian general elections, noting that the left won only five seats in the lower house—four in Tamil Nadu and one in Kerala. The number of seats in the lower house has declined progressively, from 59 in 2004 to 24 in 2009, 10 in 2014, and only 5 seats in 2019. Alongside repeated electoral defeats, the influence of trade unions has also diminished. In contrast to India, left-wing parties notably the CPP, SHC, and AT have never been popular in Sindh and Pakistan. Various factors have contributed to the failure of leftist movements in the country, including military rule, a patronage-based political system, religious orthodoxy, a dominant feudal culture, and a lack of independent social and political institutions. These factors have suppressed the politics of difference and hindered the success of leftist movements in Pakistan. The left, particularly in Sindh and generally across the country, has struggled to establish a strong public image and achieve political success. However, weak organizational structures and ineffective strategies have also played a significant role in their failure. It is crucial to understand why the left has never gained political traction in Pakistan. This study will examine the leftist movement and the reasons behind its political failure in Sindh's political landscape.

### **Research Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the reasons behind the political failure of leftist movements in Sindh. It relies on research papers, journal articles, and other academic sources that address political success. Additionally, the study incorporates reflective and critical analysis, along with observations of Sindh's leftist movements to explore the concept of political success.

## **The Concept of Political Success**

It is widely believed that competence and the exercise of power determine both the success of living organisms in nature and people's success in society. Several conceptions of success demonstrate that there is no fixed definition of success in an abstract sense. However, this study focuses specifically on defining political success rather than success in general. Numerous academics have proposed different definitions of political success. Some argue that it depends on realizing a party's core aims through the exercise of political power via the legislature and administration. Bercovitch (2005, p. 289,302), contends that when a political organization demonstrates strong support and convincing narratives, it can overcome opposition and conflicts and be considered as successful. According to Šuvaković (2005), political power is exercised through parliament, and the government emerges from power relations. Therefore, it can be assumed that successful political parties are those that secure parliamentary representation. Siavelis (2020), offers a different perspective suggesting that success can be defined as consistently winning at least 10% of the vote in five or more consecutive national elections and maintaining stability even after the departure of the founding leader. Van den Berg (2013), emphasizes the importance of a well-organized political party in achieving success. This requires every party member to have a clear understanding of its core values, goals, and strategies for reaching those objectives. A strong organizational plan, combined with voter support is essential. Discussions about a party's organization often focus on its election-winning strategies. Crotty (1971, p. 439,50), argues that we still lack a comprehensive understanding of how political parties function to achieve their objectives, such as winning elections and attaining power. Academics have yet to thoroughly examine how effectively parties accomplish these goals, which are influenced by multiple dependent and independent variables. Ju (1994, p. 63), highlights that factors such as geography, economics, society, and culture play a significant role in explaining political success on a broader scale. Meanwhile, Golovakha (2005, p. 54), asserts that contemporary political success depends on mastering political marketing, management theories, and electoral strategies. Key focus areas should include electoral policies ,voter turnout, elections results, lobbying efforts, public opinion and voters' political intentions

Scholars often identify common elements that define political success in terms of electoral achievements. According to Palda (1975, p. 745,771), the definition of success varies for candidates, officeholders, and political parties, whether in opposition or in power. He suggests that political success for an

individual can range from performing well in an election to attaining a high-ranking position. For those in power, public opinion ratings might also serve as a measure of success. A political party is deemed successful not only by forming a government but also by addressing key legislative priorities. White (2020), outlines six criteria for a successful social movement: societal deprivation, recognition of the deprivation, a proposed remedy, triggering events that set the movement in motion, openness to change within society, and the mobilization of resources. In contrast, Willey (1999), emphasizes the adaptability of Western democratic parties to changing political landscapes. These parties have successfully transitioned from class-based to issue-based politics, allowing them to maintain political relevance. Conversely, parties heavily reliant on class-based politics have struggled during periods of societal and economic transformation. This suggests that a political party's success depends on its electoral performance, ability to gain power, and adaptability to evolving conditions. Class-based politics seem progressively ill-suited to contemporary social and economic realities. Gross and Sigelman (1984), argue that the primary role of political parties are to nominate candidates for office, and the key measure of success is when their candidate win office. However, parties must also represent specific political perspectives, requiring unified policies and organizational strength. Electoral victories are not always assured; however, maintaining a cohesive political vision and mobilizing support for goal-oriented policies are essential components of politics.

In the context of political success, a fundamental requirement for left-wing parties in Sindh was to clearly articulate specific political viewpoints in the public sphere. Electoral victory serves as a primary measure of success, as winning votes is essential for any party's sustainability. Through electoral success, a party can form a government, either independently or in coalition with others. Once in power, it gains the capacity to influence numerous policy decisions at both national and international levels. A successful party can implement reforms and development initiatives that significantly impact society. Achieving electoral success requires a thorough understanding of the political, social, ethnic, and religious dynamics within society. Parties that skillfully adapt to existing parliamentary institutions and shape their narratives to align with both local and national contexts are more likely to attain political success.

### **Reflections on Sindh's Leftist Politics**

Sindh has long been a center for political movements and struggles, both before and after Pakistan's independence. The criteria for political success include achieving key objectives, winning elections, organizing effective parties, demonstrating adaptability, maintaining a clear political

agenda, and acquiring necessary resources. Unfortunately, leftist movements in Sindh have consistently failed to meet these benchmarks, reflecting a significant level of political weakness. For instance, leftist parties have never gained power or secured representation in parliament. They performed poorly in elections, failing to win any seats in Sindh during the 1970s and 1988 (Faiz 2020:90). The 1970s provincial election results showed that PPP won 18 out of 25 seats, and the NAP could not win a single seat in Sindh (Baxter 1971). The electoral defeat of the National Awami Party (NAP)<sup>3</sup> revealed that the leftist had no future in the electoral politics of Sindh. Organizational weaknesses have led to their fragmentation into splinter groups. Many members have defected to right-wing parties, abandoning their leftist ideals. The tendency to adopt the agendas of other parties instead of adhering to their own principles further highlights their organizational shortcomings. As the NAP and other parties used the communist movement for their own ends. Eventually communists failed to establish an independent base for their movement. Thus, communist movement became dependent on the narrative of non-communist leaders within the NAP (Franda 1970). According to Khan (2014), the (CPP) failed to organize workers, peasants, and intellectuals into a cohesive revolutionary force. Lacking a solid political foundation, the CPP resorted to staging the coup with the support of military officers against the civilian government of Liaquat Ali Khan in 1951. Its downfall stemmed from its narrow theoretical vision, as it adhered to the Ranadive thesis<sup>4</sup> of

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<sup>3</sup> The National Awami Party (NAP) was widely recognized for its leftist political stance. Established in 1957, it was founded by leftist leaders, including Maulana Abdul Hamid Bhashani, who was influenced by Marxist ideology, after breaking away from the Awami League (AL). The party originated in Dhaka and brought together various factions, including Bhashani's breakaway group from the Awami League, the Azad Pakistan Party led by Mian Iftikharuddin, Sindh Mahaz led by G.M. Syed, Sindh Hari Committee led by Haider Bakhsh Jatui, Wror Pukhtun led by Abdul Samad Achakzai, Usthaman Gul led by Ghaus Bakhsh Bizenjo, Khudai Khidmatgars led by Abdul Ghaffar Khan, and Ganantantri Dal led by Haji Muhammad Danesh. Until the imposition of Martial Law in 1958, NAP served as a vocal opposition in the National Assembly and played a key role in maintaining a balance of power between East and West Pakistan (Islam 2022).

<sup>4</sup> The Ranadive factions' advocacy for armed struggle was discussed in the Second Congress of Communist Party of India (CPI), held in Calcutta in 1948. The Congress sought to analyze the political situation in the Indian subcontinent and addressed three critical issues: the party's current policy, CPI elections, and formation of Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP). The first two points sparked divisions between rival factions. The Puran Chand Joshi group favored reformist policies, while Bhalchandra Trimbak Ranadive's faction favored militant

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military adventurism, which ultimately led to the collapse of the entire communist movement in West Pakistan.

Several scholars have analyzed the factors contributing to the failure of left-wing movements. Khan(2014) contends that Sindh's communists aligned with the NAP prioritizing ethnonationalism over socialism. Tariq (1971), argues that communists should have focused on building independent organizations rather than relying on the NAP. Amin (1987), suggests that the disintegration of the NAP marked the end of meaningful opposition to Ayub Khan's rule. Malik (2020), highlights the harsh suppression of leftist parties during Zia's regime, while Akhtar (2018), points to the strong influence of religiopolitical forces in shaping Pakistan's social and political structures, weakening radical political movements. A strong political party is defined by coherent policies and the ability to align with societal conditions. The leftist movement failed to benefit from the conducive conditions for radical politics. No political ideology can succeed without internal planning and organisation.(Leghari. 1979 n.d.). However, leftist parties in Sindh often lack unity, leading to internal divisions. Their inability to adapt to the evolving political, cultural, and economic landscape further weakens their position and political narratives. Around the world, political parties often adapt to changing landscapes by addressing current events and pressing societal concerns while striving to achieve social and economic goals. However, leftist parties in Sindh failed to develop any substantial economic or social plans for the people. The CPP lacked genuine political roots, and failed to organize peasants, workers, and intellectual in a revolutionary manner(Khan 2014). Instead, they largely functioned as pressure groups, relying on protests, demonstrations, and strikes rather than operating as organized, ideologically coherent leftist entities. Their political messaging was based on a weak narrative of class struggle, which had little influence on Sindh's political, ethnic, cultural, and religious dynamics. Frequently, these leftist parties pursued their political agendas under the guise of ethno-nationalism rather than asserting class-based ideological principles.

### **Influence of Ethnonational Politics**

The history of leftist movements in Sindh demonstrates that the politics of left has never ever transcended ethnonational politics. First, there was struggle against the One- Unit scheme under the umbrella of the NAP. Second, the resistance against the military dictatorship of Ayub Khan. Third,

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revolutionary tactics. Ranadive's emphasis on armed struggle influenced the CPI to support the military coup in Pakistan(Khan 2014).

participation in the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD)<sup>5</sup>. Fourth, the opposition of Karabagh Dam and Thal Canals over water disputes. Fifth, engagement in numerous local political issues, such as provincial autonomy, human rights violations, and feudal hegemony. In all these cases, leftist parties in Sindh framed these issues within ethnonational politics. Evidently, the character of leftist politics in Sindh remained predominantly ethnonational rather than Marxist. However, international scholars are divided on the compatibility of Marxism and nationalism. For example, Marxist scholar Rosa Luxemburg viewed nationalism as contradictory to Marxism, whereas Vladimir Lenin saw it as an initial stage toward socialism. The leftists in Sindh may assume that national politics would serve as primary step toward socialist revolution. However, since Pakistan's independence, neither class unity nor an independent class struggle has emerged. It would not be wrong to argue that Sindh is a multifaceted society, divided along ethnic, linguistic, cultural, mystical, and creed lines, even between rural and urban populations. Such deep division make it difficult to pursue a socialist revolution strictly following the Marxist agendas. It was doubly unfortunate for the leftist parties that they failed on both fronts as Marxists and as nationalists in the electoral politics of Sindh.

As Khan (2014), remarks that the leftist struggle in Sindh lost its coherence when it aligned itself with broader movements, as the emphasis on class struggle was overshadowed by the overarching goals of the people's movement. The success of a political party depends on its ability to clearly define and promote its ideas, distinguishing itself from others. However, leftist factions in Sindh struggled to establish a meaningful presence that resonated with the public. Their ideology lacked practical relevance in a predominantly religious society, which hindered its acceptance. The application of Marxist principles appeared disconnected from Sindh's social and cultural settings. Additionally, the left's criticism and dismissal of core religious values undermined its credibility in the region. As Pakistan is a Muslim-majority country founded on religious principles, the leftist movement faced significant challenges. Marxism focuses on material conditions rather than divine or religious authority. It views religion as a tool of oppression that hinders true human liberation. According to Glynn (2012), the ideological divide between

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<sup>5</sup> The Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD) was an alliance of several political parties opposing the military rule of Zia- Ul-Haq regime. The coalition included leftist, right-wing, nationalist, and religious factions led by the Pakistani Peoples Party (PPP) in 1981.

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Marxism and religion is grounded in their fundamental principles. Marxism is rooted in historical materialism, and religion is rooted in faith in a transcendent divine reality. Islam emphasizes on submission to will of God. While Marxism is anthropocentric, its central concern is human beings, their values, and emancipation from exploited classes; without appealing to transcendent divine beings. This perspective directly clashed with the conservative nature of Pakistani society and its religious foundation, making it nearly impossible for Marxist ideas to gain widespread acceptance. A successful political party must resonate broadly and address societal realities in ways that align with current conditions. For example, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) skillfully played with the dominant narratives of his time, particularly democracy, socialism, nationalism, and religion to craft a cohesive message that appealed to a wide audience across Pakistan. Bhutto pledged to eliminate feudalism and implement economic reforms to alleviate financial hardships. In one of his most politically charged speeches, he declared, "Islam is our religion, democracy is our policy, and socialism is our economy"(Abbas 2015). In contrast, leftist politics in Sindh failed to recognize the essential elements of political success. Resource mobilization is a key factor in achieving political influence, as outlined in White's theory, which emphasizes that public grievances can be effectively addressed through the mobilization of various resources—financial assets, labor, social influence, expertise, media, and support from influential elites(White, 2020).

### **Electoral Performance**

Unfortunately, leftist groups in Sindh neglected several crucial aspects, including strategic electoral tactics, political influence, and effective tools for mass mobilization. Moreover, they failed to learn from past electoral defeats in the 1970s and 1988, neglecting to analyze the root causes of their failures. As a result, the leftist narrative gradually lost coherence, leading to a decline in its distinct identity. The credibility of leftist parties has significantly diminished due to repeated electoral failures. While left-wing factions occasionally staged symbolic protests on important issues, political success is not achieved solely through demonstrations, strikes, or disruptive acts. Ultimately, success is measured by electoral victories and the ability to secure governmental positions. Non-parliamentary leftist factions, particularly in Sindh, have struggled to claim significant political achievements, as they failed to develop unifying ideas that resonated with the broader population.

The SHC primarily focused on dismantling the feudal system and advocating for peasants' land rights. However, it struggled to achieve its objectives as feudalism grew stronger, leading to a decline in the party's size and support among the rural population. Despite efforts such as advocating for

land rights of the peasantry class under the Sindh Tenancy Act of 1950, the SHC faced significant obstacles in implementation due to the influence of powerful feudal interests. The architect of the Sindh Tenancy Act of 1950, Hyder Bux Jatoti contended that landlords are a hurdle in the development of the country (Dali and Khuhro 2020). The failure of SHC became evident in the 1953 provincial elections. No single peasant was elected as 90 percent of Sindh Assembly members belonged to landowning families (Maniruzzaman 1966). Similarly, the CPP, which sought to abolish feudalism and champion the working class, faced comparable setbacks. Its strategies failed to bridge the divide between the oppressors and the oppressed, allowing Sindh's ruling elite to consolidate power and marginalize the party. Internal divisions between the CPP's rural and urban factions further undermined its ability to achieve its objectives. Tariq Ali, one of the progressive and leftist scholars remarked that it was regrettable that the CPP failed to operate successfully as a reformist organisation. Even more disappointing that there was no organized revolutionary force in West Pakistan (1971). The decline of leftist narrative can be observed through the electoral contests. Jam Saqi, the CPP's leader, was defeated in the 1988 Sindh provincial elections. He contested in PS.57, Tharparkar-Sindh, securing only 1,052 votes, while the PPP's candidate Haji Ghulam Muhammad Memon, won the seat with 11,862 votes (see Pakistan general election reports). Saqi became disillusioned and founded a new party, *the Jamhoori Tehreek* (democratic movement), in 1991. Subsequently, Paliyo the AT's leader was defeated in the 1988 national elections. He contested in NA.182, Thatta-Sindh, securing only 9,813 votes. While the PPP's candidate Ghulam Hussian alias Babu, won the seat with 53,289 votes (Mehdi 2010). Such electoral defeat demonstrates the insignificant and marginal influence of the leftist movement. The AT, despite its goal of a national democratic revolution, struggled to gain substantial support in Sindh's political landscape. The party also faced difficulties in applying Marxism, Maoism, and Leninism within Sindh's complex socio-economic and religious context, making the socialist revolution even harder to achieve. Additionally, ideological differences further fragmented leftist parties, Such as the CPP sought to build strong connections with the urban working class, while the SHC focused on the emancipation of Sindh's rural peasantry. In contrast, the AT attempted to integrate both agrarian and urban working-class interests within the broader context of regional politics. These divergent approaches prevented cohesive policy formation and weakened the left's overall impact. Although these parties shared the common goal of eliminating exploitation and empowering the people, their policies and strategies varied significantly, preventing unified action. For instance, the SHC, as described by Yaqubi (2019), advocated land

reforms, including land ownership rights for landless peasants, the complete abolition of landlordism, and the establishment of a socialist society. Similarly, the CPP aimed to create a socialist and communist state through revolutionary means. The AT, inspired by the ideologies of Marx, Lenin, and Mao, sought to eliminate feudalism, tribalism, and capitalism through political activism (Palijo, 2007). As a result of these ideological and strategic differences, leftist factions in Sindh struggled to compete with more established political entities in the region. Although their manifestos outlined distinct goals, internal divisions and a lack of cohesive action ultimately weakened their ability to challenge mainstream political forces.

Party/ Leader	Election Year	Constituency	Votes Secured	Opponent & Party	Opponent's Votes	Outcome
<b>Sindh Hari Committee (SHC)</b>	1953 (Provincial)	Sindh Assembly	0 elected peasants	90% seats won by landowning elites	Not specified	Complete electoral failure for peasants
<b>Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP) – Jam Sagi</b>	1988 (Provincial)	PS-57 (Tharparkar, Sindh)	1,052	Haji Ghulam Muhammad Memon (PPP)	11,862	Defeated by a wide margin
<b>Awami Tehreek (AT) – Rasool Bux Palijo</b>	1988 (National)	NA-182 (Thatta, Sindh)	9,813	Ghulam Hussain alias Babu (PPP)	53,289	Heavy defeat

Source: Compiled by the author

## Conclusion

In Sindh, left-wing factions such as the CPP, SHC, and AT are widely regarded as unsuccessful in driving substantial social change. Several factors contribute to their declining influence. First, the patronage-based political culture, feudal dominance, and strong religious sentiments have all limited the

appeal and effectiveness of leftist movements. Second, these parties have failed to establish an independent platform rooted in class-based politics, often aligning with larger, non-communist parties instead. As scholars have noted, political success and progress depend on winning elections and securing government positions. Political parties cannot effectively implement their policies, expand their influence, or drive meaningful social change without these accomplishments. Consequently, leftist movements in Sindh have consistently failed to secure popular support or achieve political success.

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## Drug Abuse Among Youths In Eswatini: Causes And Possible Intervention Strategies

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### ABSTRACT

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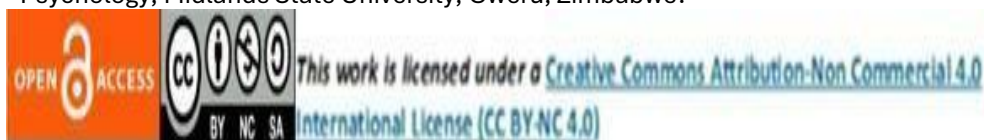
The escalating prevalence of drug abuse among youths in Eswatini poses a significant threat to development, education, and public health, reflecting broader trends in Southern Africa. Despite increased attention on the rising prevalence of drug abuse in Africa, limited qualitative research captures the lived experiences and contextual factors of drug abuse among youths in Eswatini. To address this gap, this research explored the determinants of drug abuse among youths, identified drug types, and informed context-specific prevention strategies. A phenomenological approach, grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, was adopted to enhance the appreciation of participants' multiple realities. Semi-structured interviews with youths and a focus group discussion with parents were conducted for data collection. Reflexive thematic analysis revealed individual, home, school, sociocultural, and environmental factors as determinants of drug abuse. Notably, the study identified Lea and Rocky as emerging drugs of concern. Parental inclusion illuminated holistic insights into home and societal influences in multilevel interventions. Findings propose targeted training and education, community-based interventions, and national-level initiatives. Conclusively, drug abuse is multifaceted, which is critical for stakeholders designing Eswatini context-specific interventions.

**keywords:** drugs, youths, eswatini, interpretivist paradigm

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## **Introduction**

Drug abuse is a modern, pervasive problem that has affected most communities throughout the world. According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime's (UNODC) World Drug Report, 284 million individuals aged 15 to 64 took drugs globally in 2020, a 26% rise from the decade before, according to Vienna (2022). The incidence of substance addiction among young people is concerning, and it is a global public health concern (Somani & Meghani, 2016). This implies that younger generations are mostly responsible for the increased prevalence of drug usage. Thus, Vienna (2022) claims that “drug use among youth has increased; current drug use rates are now higher than those of earlier generations in many nations.”

The rising prevalence of drug use is causing changes in consumption patterns and trends that have a detrimental effect on young people. According to Morgan et al. (2022), there is a high correlation between the initiation of drug use and a number of factors, including academic performance, financial independence, employment, criminal behavior, suicidal thoughts, and physical and mental health, including traumatic stress, despair, and anxiety.

Drug abuse in Africa can be likened to a cancerous ulcer that progressively changes and becomes more hazardous over time. The significant increase in drug usage that has happened throughout Africa over the past 10 years, particularly in countries like South Africa and Nigeria, can be attributed to the addictive properties of crack cocaine, which can be up to 90% pure (Njuho & Davids, 2010). Tracing the trends and patterns of drug misuse throughout time reveals concerning changes that necessitate the formation of a united front in Africa to combat this issue. Although young people in Africa consume less alcohol on average than in more developed regions, there is evidence in the region that suggests alcohol consumption is increasing at a faster rate (UNFPA (2017)). The rapid rise in drug abuse among youths necessitates awareness and an emergent reaction. Today, due to drug abuse, we are raising a wasted generation of irresponsible and immoral people. Adamu et.al (2019), propound their study, ‘Nigerian youth drug use has given the country a reputation for moral bankruptcy with its youths frequently labelled as "decadent" and "wasted generation," in need of collective revitalization and saving’. Drug misuse has long been known to interfere with normal brain function, leading to irrational and risky behaviour in users, consequently, Zinyama, (2019) posits, that in South Africa, drug addiction is connected to crime, aggressive behaviour, risky sexual behaviour (which increases the chance of HIV infection and STIs), poor health, and psychological consequences on families.

Therefore, if we want to manage the surge, we must comprehend the dynamics of teenage drug consumption and the reasons behind. Rummage (2019) indicated that the most common demographic groups consuming illegal substances in South Africa were youths, and people of black African descent, due to ease access to drugs, lax parental supervision, violence, and high rates of unemployment and poverty.

According to the UNFPA (2017), Eswatini is experiencing a significant demographic shift, with a rapidly growing youth population and a declining birthrate. While the youth are central to the country's future, they face overwhelming challenges, particularly in the form of widespread drug abuse. Ndlangamandla (2013) notes with concern the alarming rise in alcohol consumption among youths as young as 15 years old, especially during weekends in Mbabane and Manzini, which have become hotspots for drinking. An example of this trend is the MTN Bushfire Festival, originally meant to celebrate music, culture, and the exchange of ideas, but now often turning into a gathering where young people indulge in alcohol, drugs, and engage in immoral behaviors.

The rapid increase in drug and substance abuse is having a detrimental effect on the nation's moral fabric, social structure, and culture. This situation demands urgent and informed intervention (Dlamini and Makondo, 2017). Majola (2023) highlights the alarming statistics, reporting that in 2020, approximately 14,474 individuals in Eswatini consumed an estimated 3.3 metric tons of cocaine (both crack and powder), based on population size and usage patterns. Beyond identifying the root causes of youth drug abuse, this research aims to present a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon to underscore the critical roles of the government, civil society, and families in mitigating drug abuse within communities. Given these pressing concerns, this study is crucial in guiding stakeholders particularly the government in the development of policies aimed at reducing drug abuse among young people.

### **Research questions**

The study was directed by the following research questions;

1. What are the determinants of drug abuse among youths in Eswatini?
2. Which drugs are commonly abused by youth in Eswatini?
3. What are the most effective strategies for preventing drug abuse?

### **Research objective**

To explore determinants of drug abuse among youths in Eswatini, identify commonly abused drugs and examine effective strategies for prevention integrating both parental and youth perspectives.

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## **Theoretical framework**

This study adopted Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory (1979), which organizes the contexts of development into five nested levels of external influence: the Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, Macrosystem, and Chronosystem (Psychology Notes Headquarters, 2019). According to Guy-Evans (2024), the Microsystem consists of bi-directional relationships, meaning that individuals within the environment can influence the child and vice versa. For example, a child whose family, friends, or schoolmates engage in drug use may be more susceptible to peer influence. The Mesosystem, as described by Psychology Notes Headquarters (2019), refers to the system of interconnections between different Microsystems. This includes linkages such as those between home and school, peer groups and family, or family and community. It highlights how a child's neighbourhood, school, and relationships with parents and teachers are interconnected. In the Exosystem, the child is not directly involved, but they are still affected by the interactions within this system. For instance, a child may be influenced by their parents' work schedules, which could be long due to overtime needed to meet basic needs (Paquette & Ryan, 2009).

The Macrosystem, according to Paquette & Ryan (2009), represents the outermost layer and includes cultural values, customs, and laws, which have a cascading impact on the other layers. For example, cultural attitudes toward drug abuse can influence individual behaviour and societal norms. Bronfenbrenner (1994) explains the Chronosystem as encompassing changes or consistency over time in both the person and their environment, such as shifts in family structure. In today's technologically advanced world, changes in drug use patterns have occurred, with drugs becoming more sophisticated and increasingly irresistible to youth. The Ecological Theory is particularly relevant in this context, as it accounts for the multifaceted influences that shape individual behaviour.

## **Literature review**

The progression of the drug abuse phenomenon was laid out based on the conceptual framework highlighted below

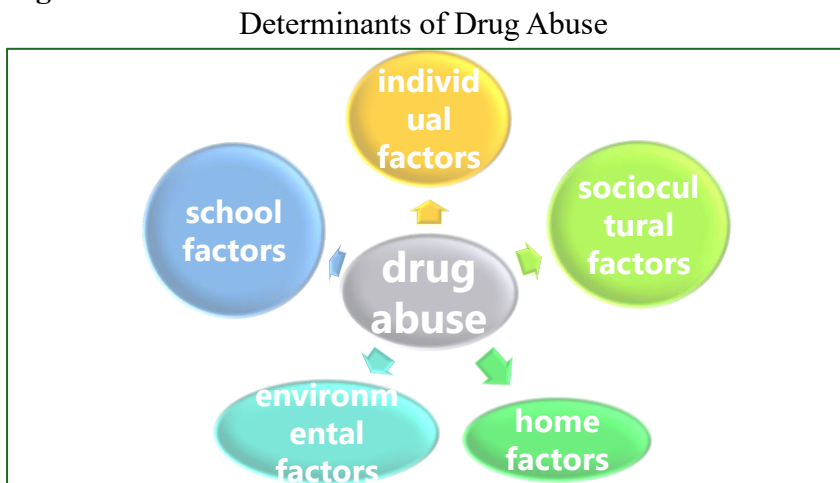
**Individual factors** of drug abuse include heredity, history of abuse and homelessness. A genetic cause is sometimes postulated when parents of delinquents themselves are violent or manifest other forms of antisocial behavior or psychopathology such as alcoholism and substance abuse (Loeber & Stouthome-Loeber, 1986). Genetics predicts an individual's behavior, the drug abuse traits just as criminality, they lay dormant and then manifest later in life. Ali & Tariq (2020) conducted a study to identify factors which contributed to the prevalence of alcoholism and drug addiction among

sexually abused women in an ultra-conservative society. An abused person engages in drug abuse to escape their trauma, hurt and pain. Childhood abuse and homelessness are independently associated with substance use (Ararso, et.al 2021). Most youths are living with relatives who are abusive, emotionally, physically, etc., to numb pain and emotions, they engage in drug abuse. According to Somani & Meghani (2016), 74% of children and young adults living on the street were found to be drug addicts. Drug abuse can cause one to be homeless or to engage in substance abuse because of the pressures of living in the streets.

Home factors of drug abuse could include family structure, negligence and alcoholic parents. According to Mhlongo (2005), family factors can influence the genesis of adolescent drug abuse and behavioral problems, where poor relationships with parents and inadequate child rearing practices being closely linked to adolescent substance and drug abuse. The increase in the number of working females means that children are unattended, or maids are the ones who are looking after the children in the absence of mothers (Kundwei & Mbwirire, 2020). Nui, (2022) posits that insecure attachment patterns and parental response styles in parent-child interactions have a significant relationship with adolescent alcohol addiction. The parents' lack of interest, attention and monitoring permits youths to engage in drug abuse to cope with neglect and loneliness. Kundwei & Mbwirire (2020) indicated that some students were into drugs because their parents or guardians used drugs. Having parents who abuse drugs drives a child to adopt similar behaviors and attitudes as significant others are role models.

**School factors** of drug abuse include academic challenges, lux school environment and high rate of law-breaking. According to Martin (2005) behavior associated with youthful drug users included run-ins with adult authorities, participation in crime, counter-cultural or 'underground', lifestyles, truancy and poor academic performance. Poor academic performance can lead to stress among youths which can trigger drug abuse. Attending schools with high rates of lawbreaking impacts the individual. Sabia (2016) notes that attending schools with a more delinquent culture and lower levels of school dedication increased risk of violent involvement for immigrant youths' whereas native-born youths' violent involvement was relatively unchanged.

**Figure 1**



Source: Compiled by the authors

**Sociocultural factors** of drug abuse include social media platforms, culture and political and economic instability. Many television critics say that most teenagers are prone to adopt features of the models, because the adolescent is at an age period of doubt and insecurity (Kundwei and Mbwirire, 2020). Fanaticism among the youths could lead them to imitate their celebrity role models portrayed in movies and music videos. Some cultures are permissive, marula products also feature in traditional ceremonies, such as the Buganu ceremony, celebrated annually where people gather with their King and Queen Mother to celebrate (Murye & Pelser, 2018). Siphopho, Dlamini & Nxumalo (2013) highlight how the marula fruit is healthy hence most Swazis including children are motivated to drink leading to abuse of the privilege. Peer pressure and exposure to drug-related marketing activities are predisposing factors for adolescents to initiate drug abuse (Somani & Meghani, 2016). Peer drinking behavior and attitudes toward alcohol or other substances can also have an impact on adolescents (Nui, 2023).

**Environmental factors** of drug abuse include social settings, and a nation's socioeconomic status. According to Somani & Meghani (2016) adolescents reported starting drug use at 11years and younger, they accessed

the substances from friends, at home, shops or street vendors. Drug abuse and criminality have been linked to the availability of guns, gangs, drug-markets, overcrowding, and a lack of recreation. Crime watch (2023) alludes that drug trafficking and dealing is attributed to the increased rate of unemployment, especially among youths, which is driven by different socio-economic factors. According to Zulu (2020), striking is that the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) report, revealed that Eswatini cultivated illegal herb on 1 500 hectares of land. Cannabis cultivation give income to many families, hence increasing availability of the drug.

### **Type of drugs use by youth in Eswatini**

Technological revolution has influenced modification of drugs used by youths. *The drugs mostly used by adolescents are cigarettes, tobacco, alcohol, marijuana, glue, paint, paint thinners, aerosols and polish remover* (Mhlongo, 2005). Youths are using readily available household products such as glue, gasoline, spray paint, deodorant etc. which are mostly household products. According to Crime watch (2023) the most prevalent illegal drug is cannabis as most youths are being involved in the peddling and use of the drug. *Eswatini is a major cultivator of high-quality cannabis in Southern Africa, with thousands of hectares devoted to this cash crop* (Global Organized Crime Index, 2023). According to Majola (2023) Eswatini has over 14 000 users of cocaine countrywide as it is finding its ways across South African and Mozambiquan borders. Alcohol is being abused by youth in Eswatini, Gugu & Makondo (2017) posits that in rural areas, they grow marijuana and brew alcohol, youths indulge because of availability.

### **Effective prevention strategies for drug abuse**

Effective prevention strategies for drug abuse are crucial in safeguarding the future of the next generation. Addressing the drug abuse crisis requires a coordinated and responsive approach, enabling relevant stakeholders and the broader society to develop practical solutions aimed at mitigating this issue (Nhapi, 2019). According to Vienna (2022), the UNODC World Drug Report underscores the importance of engaging key stakeholders such as civil society, governments, and the international community in efforts to protect societies by strengthening prevention, treatment, and tackling the illicit drug supply. In Rwanda, community policing is a strategic approach that fosters collaboration among community members to address the root causes of crime and social disorder (Gonis, 2018). Community members serve as ambassadors of the police, actively contributing to crime prevention and safety efforts.

Ettekal and Mahoney (2017) highlight that organized out-of-school activities represent a valuable microsystem encompassing a wide range of youth programs, such as sports, academic clubs, service projects, and faith-based groups. These activities play a crucial role in keeping young people engaged and away from risky behaviors, including drug use. Somani and Meghani (2016) argue that policy reforms at all levels are essential to reducing access to drugs and increasing support for public awareness campaigns about the dangers of drug abuse. They also stress the importance of media involvement in these efforts. As Somani and Meghani (2016) emphasize, the media has the power to influence societal perceptions and behaviors, making it an essential tool for fostering positive change in the fight against drug abuse.

## **Methods**

This research adopted an interpretivist paradigm, which primarily collects qualitative data from participants (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). A qualitative approach was used, guided by a phenomenological research design, which focuses on understanding phenomena as they are experienced or lived by individuals (Sundler et al., 2019). The researchers posited that the phenomenon of drug abuse has multiple realities and interpretations, as knowledge is inherently personal and subjective. Purposive sampling was employed to select 11 parents and 2 young people with rich knowledge of drug abuse. In this study, the deep detailed first-hand encounters, community observations or peer-related experiences give experiential insights into the determinants, types of drugs and prevention strategies in relation to drug abuse is 'rich knowledge'. Subsequently, snowball sampling was applied to the two youths, a method in which one participant refers the researcher to additional potential interviewees (Bhattacharjee, 2012). This approach was chosen because drug users, especially youths who often abuse drugs in peer groups, represent a vulnerable population, and snowball sampling helped identify other willing participants.

A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted with parents as a primary data collection instrument. In this method, a selected group of individuals engages in an in-depth discussion of a particular topic, guided by a professional external moderator (Van Eeuwijk & Angehrn, 2017). The researchers also carried out semi-structured interviews with the youths, providing participants the opportunity to express their views in depth (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Data was analysed thematically. The researchers began by familiarizing themselves with the data through listening and rereading notes, transcribing recorded materials, and following the framework set by Braun & Clarke (2006). Thus, Braun & Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis was employed which allowed the researchers subjectivity, in-depth

and reflexivity engagement with collected data. Patterns, trends, and themes were identified to ensure a systematic and rigorous interpretation of the data.

The study was conducted with careful attention to ethical considerations during data collection. Participant identities were kept anonymous, ensuring that the collected information could not be traced back to individuals. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were clearly informed about the study's purpose and nature. Privacy was maintained, and data was stored securely, used solely for research purposes. Confidentiality was emphasized, with sensitive information not being disclosed. To encourage honest and candid responses, participants were reassured that the data would be handled with the highest degree of confidentiality.

### **Inclusion criteria**

- In this study the inclusion criteria was
- Voluntary participation from willing participants who gave informed consent to participate in the focus group and interviews.
- Youths aged 15 to 24 living in Eswatini either with peer knowledge or first-hand experience of drug abuse.
- Parents or custodians of youths with observable knowledge of youth drug use in their household or community.
- Participants willing to participate in audio recorded discussions or interviews.

### **Results And Discussion**

The data will be presented and discussed using excerpts from youths, denoted as [Y], and from parents, denoted as [P]. Similar responses were grouped and synthesized into a single representative extract.

The first research question sought to reveal the determinants of drug abuse among youths in Eswatini, the following themes emerged and are first presented in a table.

Major themes	Subthemes
1. Individual Determinants	Experiences of abuse Peer Approval and Seeking Attention Stress copying Mechanism

2. School determinants	Relaxed School Environment Academic challenges Limited extra-curricular activities
3. Home determinants	Broken homes Loose security at home
4. Sociocultural determinants	Abuse of Cultural Events
5. Environmental determinants	Influence of Media Unemployment

Source: compiled by the authors

### Individual determinants

This study identified the individual as a key determinant of drug abuse, with subthemes including, experience of abuse, attention seeking behaviour and stress copying mechanism.

### Experiences of Abuse

The data indicate that experiences of abuse may contribute to drug use among youth. This was expressed by the youth participants, as highlighted below

*[Y2, Y3, Y4, Y6] Ukhandza ukutsi usisi uya abhuseka from ekhaya, kulabo malume. Uyareshwa so ngalondlela ukhandza umntfwana sekatsike ...aah angisena bani, kuncono ngitsatse naku ngoba malume ngiphilisana mpilo naye, so kuze mine ngithokhona kuba right kuncono ngiti drug' ("You will discover that the girl is experiencing abuse at home, including sexual abuse by her uncles. As a result, she is deeply troubled and feels isolated. With no one else to turn to, she begins using drugs as a way to cope with the trauma."*

*[Y4, P2, P8] "Abuse... yes, it happens in relationships. Sometimes, women turn to alcohol to cope with the emotional or physical abuse they experience from their partners. Similarly, some men may feel overwhelmed by their relationships and use alcohol as an escape. It can go both ways."*

It can be inferred that youths who experience any form of abuse are more likely to develop substance abuse problems as a way to numb emotional pain. Harrison et al. (1997) found that physical and sexual abuse were associated with an increased likelihood of using alcohol, marijuana, and other

drugs. Similarly, Bensley et al. (1999) reported a correlation between a self-reported history of abuse and both drug and alcohol use among youth, including early initiation of substance use. Young people who face abuse often turn to drugs as a coping mechanism to escape emotional distress and social difficulties.

### **Peer Approval and Seeking Attention**

The data also revealed that some youths use drugs as a means to gain approval from their peers.

*[P2, P6, Y8] We are judged by our peers based on everything we do. Whether it's taking drugs, smoking, or other actions, people form opinions and assign grades to us. There's constant pressure to fit in and prove your intelligence, especially when you want to become the center of attention at school.*

*[P1, P6, P9] They may act out to get your attention. This happens because they want to feel noticed. A child might feel that their parents are not paying enough attention to them and, as a result, might do things to capture their parents' focusespecially when the parents are always busy with work.*

It can be inferred that adolescents engage in drug use as a means of projecting a desirable social image, attaining status, and garnering attention, often embracing the label of being 'rebellious' or 'deviant.' From the perspective of parents, youth behavior such as mischief or self-harm is interpreted as a deliberate attempt to attract attention. Correspondingly, Maupa and Abioha (2017) observe that young individuals partake in substance abuse both to seek recognition and to alleviate familial stress. Consequently, involvement in drug use can be understood as both a coping mechanism to escape underlying problems and an implicit plea for support or intervention.

### **Stress Coping Mechanism**

Another subtheme of personal determinants is stress coping mechanisms. Sometimes, youths turn to drug use as a way to cope with stress. They may believe that using drugs is their best option, but this often leads to more problems. Over time, this can result in addiction.

*[Y1, Y5, Y6, Y8] In Swaziland, we grew up being told about 'tibi tendlu' (family secrets). Things can happen to me that I cannot disclose, we keep it family issue. This is how people used to cope with issue*

*es. I had a friend who would say "ngishisa tinkinga" makabhema ('I'm burning my problem' when she smoked). It's the situations we go through like rape, physical abuse or neglect that leads people finding comfort in drugs.*

*[Y2, Y4, Y8] Stress obviously, usually the school kids become stressed with their academics and background. Obviously, stressed when they see their*

*peers with better things, ukhandza batsi yooo (they will think) ...to distract ourselves kubona abanye abantfwana ba so (seeing others like this) let's take drugs. Some because they don't have enough income, prefer drugs as a distraction.*

Therefore, young people often resort to unhealthy coping mechanisms to escape life's challenges. This finding aligns with Masiye and Ndhlovu (2016), who identified personal and emotional issues driven by poor parent-child relationships, easy access to drugs and alcohol, and peer pressure as key contributors to substance abuse. Similarly, Mhlongo (2015) noted that adolescents who are depressed, struggle with low self-esteem, or feel socially isolated are particularly vulnerable to developing serious alcohol and drug problems. These stressors commonly lead youths to engage in maladaptive behaviors such as substance abuse as a means of coping.

### **School determinants**

Another major theme that emerged from our first research question was the influence of school-related factors. Schools are not uniform in their environments some provide conditions that may foster drug abuse among students. The subthemes discussed below highlight specific aspects of school settings that can create an environment conducive to drug abuse..

### **Relaxed School Environment**

As previously indicated, certain schools exhibit inadequate control mechanisms, thereby creating an environment more conducive to drug abuse among learners. A notable example can be found in Manzini, where a particular high school was colloquially referred to as the "Zoo" due to the pervasive disorder and lack of effective governance within the institution. This reputation underscored the severity of the disciplinary issues present. The following are selected remarks from participants on this matter:

*[Y6, Y7, Y8] "In schools, certain behaviors often become normalized. As someone who went through high school, I've seen how it happens—what begins as a habit can quickly turn into a trend, and eventually, a widely accepted standard. For example, students smoking tobacco or weed behind the toilets, unnoticed by teachers or school authorities, becomes just another part of the daily routine."*

*[P10, P11] Some students are increasingly unruly one was caught with bottles of wine in their bag and, when questioned, revealed that friends had helped buy the alcohol. These were final-year students meant to be preparing for exams. The school's response was to send them home with no punishment, asking them to return once sober. In another case, a group of boys were found at a bar wearing raincoats to hide their uniforms, but a fellow student spotted them and reported it with photographic evidence.*

It can be assumed that some schools are too lenient to effectively monitor students' activities. Additionally, teachers' behavior and attitudes toward students can contribute to drug and substance abuse among learners (Dlamini & Makondo, 2017). Therefore, when the school environment is overly permissive, drug abuse among students becomes more likely.

### **Academic Challenges**

Another notable factor that can lead children to drug abuse is academic difficulty. This may stem from poor instruction by teachers or from the child's own learning challenges, prompting them to turn to drugs as a coping mechanism.

*[Y4, Y7, Y8] "Some young people drop out of school due to drug abuse, especially when they are unable to manage it effectively. Often, they turn to drugs as a way to escape academic pressure and feelings of failure."*

*[Y6, Y7] "Young people often use drugs in high school and college to boost confidence and mood. They believe substances like marijuana enhance focus and intelligence, leading to regular use and eventual abuse."*

As highlighted above, youths who faced academic challenges used drugs as an escape route. Academic failure may increase risks of drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, and delinquency (Abdul Jalal, 2005). Youths who face academic challenges end up being school dropping-outs to escape embarrassment. Dlamini & Makondo (2017) posits that school environments pushed students to abuse drugs, stressful name-calling by teachers, big school such that one hides within crowds and instead of punishment, teachers made fun of intoxicated learners. Relaxed schools are training grounds for drug abuse, serious security and monitoring is required.

### **Limited Extracurricular Activities**

Young people naturally enjoy being active and engaged. They are drawn to play and recreation, making access to recreational facilities essential. Providing a variety of sports and activities helps keep them occupied in positive ways, reducing the likelihood of drug involvement.

*[Y1, Y3, Y7, Y8] The mind always needs to be busy, boredom cause youths search for fun, which is found in things that make them high, like drugs. During school trips youths consume drugs in food like the muffins, snacks, sweets, alcohol in non-transparent juice-bottles. Alcohol is trending among youths for fun and vibe. In this age if you don't drink, you're considered as having no 'vibe'.*

*[P11] One day, after lunchbreak a teacher caught a student having some popcorn instead of going to study. The teacher took the popcorn forcefully, after a struggle the student handed over the popcorn. He went to*

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*the staffroom, shared with his friends, later some got sick and behaved strangely as they consumed popcorn that had been mixed with marijuana.*

Presumably, unoccupied time for youths led to boredom. They will look for something to give them vibe which is drugs.

### **Home determinants**

In this study, most participants illuminated how the home influenced the development of drug abuse. Themes that emerged include,

#### **Broken homes**

Nowadays, it is common for parents to divorce and sometimes involve their children in their conflicts. This can have a negative impact on the children, sometimes leading them to turn to drug abuse. Some young people shared their thoughts on this issue:

*[Y6, Y7, Y8] We're from broken families, where there is one parent, either the mother or father or sometimes with a stepparent. Parents don't have time with their children, they're busy chasing after money. We've no-one to talk to, so drugs help us cope and forget our parents' fights, divorce and absenteeism.*

*[Y9, P10, P11] Most children are from broken families, being raised by single parents or and a stepparent such that you'll find that they're coming from homes with challenge becomes their burden. To find comfort, love and peace, they turn to drug abuse.*

It can be inferred that broken homes contribute to youths engaging in drug use. Similarly, children raised in fragmented family environments may seek to fill the emotional void left at home by forming connections with peers outside the family (Maupa & Obiaho, 2017). Savignac (2009) found that juveniles from broken homes exhibited higher rates of drug abuse and problematic behaviors such as classroom indiscipline, running away, and truancy. Additionally, Maupa and Obiaho (2017) suggest that children raised by divorced or single parents often turn to drugs or alcohol as a means of escaping their home problems. Children from families marked by conflict, divorce, or single-parent households frequently use substances to cope. It is crucial for parents to understand that their actions profoundly affect their children's emotional well-being.

#### **Poor Parenting Practices**

Sometimes, parents can be too lenient and fail to adequately monitor their children. This lack of supervision may create opportunities for children to engage in harmful behaviors, such as drug abuse. Parents often overlook the fact that parenting is a full-time responsibility that cannot be delegated or neglected.

*[P3, P6, P7, P8, P9] You find that we are too busy most times such that we don't monitor our children, we are always out and about. Also, you find*

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*that mothers and fathers are now busy with tik tok such that they don't have time for the child.*

*[Y1, Y2, Y6, Y7] Most of the drugs abusers have absent parents. In some cases, the parents are alive yet not present. They give the child everything but don't follow up on the kid's activities. No-one monitors the children; to escape their challenges they choose drugs.*

It can be inferred that lax security and supervision at home contribute to an increased likelihood of drug abuse. In line with this, Dlamini & Makondo (2017) found that many participants reported their parents were frequently preoccupied with work, leaving little time for family interaction. Similarly, Maupa & Obiaho (2017) argue that single parenting can sometimes lead to neglect, as single parents often spend extended periods away from their children due to work or business obligations. This absence results in insufficient monitoring, supervision, and guidance. In an environment where parental control is weak, young people may be more vulnerable to engaging in drug abuse.

### **Sociocultural determinants**

According to this study, the major themes that emerged as sociocultural determinants of drug abuse among youths were

#### **Abuse of Cultural Events**

The misuse of cultural events emerged as a contributing factor to drug abuse, as highlighted by the participants.

*[P2, P4, P7, P8] It's known that during buganu (marula ceremony) the number of children in classes drops. Back then it wasn't as serious as it is now, it's like everyone is free to drink. The narration and principles of buganu have changed, it's now including the underaged, hence destroying our culture. The family structure is destroyed, everyone participates, with mothers being promiscuous and the children getting drunk.*

*[Y1, Y7, Y8] Marula events occur between February and March, alcohol will be plenty such that everyone is allowed to drink, even kids. In high school we used to carry buganu in big bottles...we'd hide them, teachers wouldn't get to know anything.*

Cultural events can be seen as playing a significant role in shaping behaviors related to drug abuse. In particular, a breakdown in the social structure, particularly within the family unit and its role in instilling moral values in the younger generation, has contributed to the rise of drug abuse (Shibalika, 2021). Additionally, Dlamini and Makondo (2017) highlight that *maganu*, a traditional beer once considered sacred and revered, is celebrated by the Swazi monarchy, making its consumption prestigious in Swaziland. However, the growing permissiveness within certain cultures has led to the erosion of cultural moral fibers, further facilitating the spread of drug abuse.

## **Gangsterism**

In Eswatini, a growing trend known as gangsterism is emerging. This phenomenon resembles a cult, with strict rules that all members are required to follow. One of these rules involves the use of drugs, which is often a condition for joining the group. As a result, children who become involved in these groups are pressured or forced into drug use.

*[Y3, Y5, Y8] There is that issue of gangsterism that has become familiar among the youths. We have 26 gangs and 28 gangs, where the youths are being pushed to drugs. The gangs have different principles e.g. the signs, tattoos, and drugs they should use. These gangs start in jails and spread influence outside jail.*

*[P1, P4, P8] now adays people are misinterpreting the bible on alcohol issues. It has become a spiritual issue that is passed on to generations. Also, there is the issue of gangsterism 28 and 26 gangs gaining momentum among youths, resulting to strange behaviors including abuse drugs.*

As highlighted by the above narratives, it can be presumed youths who get initiated in gangsterism get involved in drug abuse. Similarly, Gilman et al. (2014) posits that gang membership amplified substance abuse due to peer influence, economic reliance of gangs on drug trade profits, which simultaneously fuels usage among members and communities they operate in (Howell and Griffiths, 2018). Gang affiliation pressures members to conform to group behaviors like drug abuse.

## **Using Drugs to Treat Certain illnesses**

Some youth use drugs like marijuana because it is believed it treats certain ailments like asthma. Unfortunately during this process they get addicted and end up abusing them.

*[P1, P4, P7, P11] Traditionally marijuana is known to have medicinal properties for diseases like asthma. It was also used to alleviate pain for those who got injuries and serious pains.*

*[Y6, Y7] I have asthma, and I was told to use insangu (marijuana) as medicine, where I w boiled and drunk. After my first experience, I stopped the medication. I know someone who used insangu asthma treatment, they got to a point where they were addicted to the medicine. The effects were like those of smokers.*

As highlighted by the quotations above, certain drugs are used for self-medication. The study found that some teenagers grew up believing that marula alcohol is used to cleanse the stomach (Dlamini & Makondo, 2017). This suggests that traditional knowledge has long recognized the medicinal properties of certain plants. Unfortunately, such knowledge is often misapplied or misused

## **Environmental determinants**

The environment in this study emerged as a theme for determinants of drug abuse among youths. Subthemes include,

### **Influence of Media**

The data revealed that media influence is one of the contributing factors to youth drug abuse

*[Y4, Y6] "We're a generation full of knowledge, but that can be a double-edged sword. For example, I'm listening to a Ricky Rick song and see someone smoking a hubbly it looks trendy, so I think, 'Why not try it?' The problem is, we often explore things without fully understanding them first."*

*[P1, P3, P5, P9] "Maybe it's the influence of social media people watch things on TikTok and do them just for content. Role models also play a big part. Your child might follow a certain personality, and if that person smokes weed or hubbly, the child may think it's acceptable too. For example, when artists like Maphorisa or DJ Tira show it in music videos, kids might think it's trending."*

The excerpts above highlight the significant role media plays in promoting drug abuse among youths in Eswatini. Martin (2005) argues that popular entertainment whether on screen or through audio channels often presents harmful lifestyles such as drug use, sexual irresponsibility, and defiance of parental authority in a glamorous and appealing manner.

### **Unemployment**

Unemployment emerged from this study as the most commonly cited factor contributing to drug abuse among youths, as reported by the participants.

*[Y5, Y7, Y8, P2, P6] "When we're unemployed, boredom drives us to seek distraction. We often look for a 'vibe' something to fill the emptiness and it's usually found around the shops where others hang out, smoking and drinking. With nothing productive to do, idleness leads us to join in, and once intoxicated, we feel like we've found that vibe we were searching for."*

*[Y2, Y4, Y5, Y7] As young people, we often believe that farming marijuana will bring us quick money. But many of us end up using it ourselves, which can lead to poor decisions even crime due to being under the influence. I find myself thinking, "Ngifundzile kodvwa angite umsebenzi" ("I'm educated but unemployed"), so I look for ways to earn an income, like growing and selling marijuana. Unfortunately, in the end, we often end up consuming it ourselves, even mixing it into food.*

It can be inferred that drug use and trafficking among young people is often driven by economic hardship. In alignment with this view, Dlamini and Makondo (2017) found that participants in their study reported using profits

from marijuana cultivation to finance their education and purchase livestock. Marijuana farming has become a common and normalized source of income for many youths in the country. Furthermore, Khutsala Artisan (2021) notes that a significant number of young Swazis engage in drug abuse, deviant behavior, criminal activities, and excessive alcohol consumption primarily due to idleness and lack of opportunities. Many young people turn to drugs as a means of coping with unemployment, alleviating boredom, and creating a sense of social engagement.

#### 4.2 Types of drugs used by youths in Eswatini

The second objective of the study established the types of drugs commonly used by youths in Eswatini.

**Table 1**

Types of drugs commonly used by youths in Eswatini

<b>Drug</b>	<b>Description by Participants' (Parents and Youths)</b>
<b>Marijuana</b>	farmed, traded, used and consumed in food like popcorns, muffins
<b>Alcohol</b>	purchase wine, whisky, spirits
<b>Tobacco/cigarettes</b>	Farmed in the country, vendors are not age strict, they access cheap cigarettes and e-cigarettes.
<b>Shoe glue</b>	Purchased on the street markets and shops
<b>Nyaope</b>	Mix quite of substances including ARVs
<b>Benzine</b>	misused for intoxication
<b>Spirit, sanitizer</b>	Consumption of alcohol-based spirits or sanitizers
<b>Cocaine</b>	Illegally imported into the country
<b>Crystal meth</b>	Crystal or ice-like substance
<b>Rocky</b>	Snowflake-like substance burnt and inhaled
<b>Lea</b>	Mixture of sprite, cough syrup, and codeine for intoxication
<b>cough syrups</b>	Overdose of cough mixtures for intoxication

The types of drugs used by youths appear to be broadly similar across countries. Mohasoa and Mokoena (2017) identified nicotine, cannabis, alcohol, and heroin as commonly used substances among young people. Similarly, Shibalika (2021) noted that youths often resort to legal and affordable substances such as alcohol, cigarettes, inhalants, and cough syrup. Gotsang et al. (2017) also reported the use of marijuana, cocaine, glue, mandrax, and alcohol among youths. However, the present study identified two additional substances Rocky and Lea that had not been previously documented in the literature.

#### 4.3 Effective Strategies for Preventing Drug Abuse

Our last research question sought to come up with effective strategies to help prevent drug abuse among the youths of Eswatini. The following strategies were identified.

Major theme	Sub-theme
Training and education	Raising awareness about drug abuse among all ages Psychoeducation
Community-based interventions	Community Security Enforcement Establishing Vibrant Recreational Centre for Youths
National level prevention initiatives	Government to create employment opportunities Government led partnerships Enforcing strict penalties
Parental involvement in children's lives	Parents should create relationships with their children Parents modeling Positive Behaviour

Source: Compiled by the author

##### 4.3.1 Training and education

Participants suggested training and education as a major theme on effective strategies for preventing drug abuse. Subthemes derived include.

**Raising awareness about drug abuse among all ages:** from this study was proffered as an effective strategy for preventing drug abuse as most participants exclaimed,

*[P5, P7, P9, P11] Awareness to fight substance abuse is needed. Singasukuma sigwalu 'mgwaco kuvele kuvakale kutsi sitsi no to drugs (if we arise and fill the streets so that it can be heard that we are saying no to drugs) campaigning as parents.*

*[Y5, Y6, Y8] We need to talk more of the causes, like give lessons on radios, televisions...everywhere, the youth that haven't started using drugs should know the causes and how to prevent and what to do when you find yourself in the situation.*

Awareness-raising is widely recognized as an effective prevention strategy. Supporting this, Gotsang et al. (2017) emphasize the role of awareness campaigns in prevention, highlighting that television and print media should focus on educational content about drug abuse rather than inadvertently promoting it. Such initiatives empower young people with essential knowledge. Similarly, Shibalika (2021) notes that the Drug Enforcement Commission, through its Institution of Learning Programme, conducts awareness campaigns in schools to educate learners about the dangers of drug and alcohol abuse. The media plays a vital role in promoting awareness, and celebrities can contribute by participating in drug education campaigns across various platforms.

### **Psychoeducation**

Psychoeducation emerged as the fourth strategy potentially effective in preventing drug abuse. Participants emphasized that:

*[Y1, Y4, Y5, Y6] Group programs can be designed, where they can make use of drug abuse survivors and volunteers to be peer educators as well as provide education on drug abuse.*

*[Y6, P2, P5, P8, P9] As parents we should also be coached and trained in good parenting as well as get updated on the generational gap so that we may be able to understand the child for us to be able to help them. For us parents, when a child acts outside our values all we say is, ngitawushaya' (I'll beat you).*

It can be inferred that psychoeducation may serve as an effective prevention strategy. In line with this, Masiye & Ndlobvu (2016) found that sensitizing youth and providing them with guidance and counselling could help reduce incidents of drug abuse. On the other hand, Shibalika (2021) argues that teachers often lack the necessary skills to identify and manage drug abuse, highlighting the importance of psychoeducation. Therefore, programs focused on crucial topics such as youth development, effective parenting, and drug abuse should be developed to educate parents and guardians.

### 4.3.2 Community-based interventions

This study highlights community-based interventions as an effective strategy for preventing drug abuse. Identified subthemes include:

#### Community Security Enforcement

Participants noted that community-based security enforcement has become a key strategy in addressing youth drug abuse.

*[Y5, P3, P7, P20, P11] We can make use of the neighborhood police, who'll monitor activities, raid farms and drugs sellers. Communities can unite against stores that sell alcohol and cigarettes to underaged people. Strictness on ages is needed. Any community member or stranger selling drugs to our children must be taken to task.*

It can be inferred that community-based security enforcement may be effective in preventing drug abuse. Supporting this idea, Gonis (2018) suggests that Rwanda implemented a program aimed at eradicating drug abuse called "Neighbors' Eye" (locally known as *Ijisho ry'umuturanyi*), where local people actively watched over one another. Communities should revisit past practices, as Moyo (2018) describes, where unity prevailed, responsibilities were shared, and children were nurtured collectively, embodying the essence of *ubuntu* and vigilant guardianship. Through collective efforts, communities can act as ambassadors for law enforcement by reporting information to combat drug abuse.

#### Establishing Vibrant Recreational Centre for Youths

Another strategy suggested by the participants was establishing vibrant recreational centres for youths.

*[Y1, Y3, Y5, Y8] "Engaging the youth through recreational activities and establishing sports centers where they can participate in community tournaments will keep them occupied and away from drugs."*

*[Y3, P10, P11] "Schools should keep children engaged at all times, as idle moments can lead to mischief, including drug use. Social groups and clubs in both schools and communities should be established to keep the youth occupied."*

Recreational centres for youth play a significant role in reducing drug abuse. This is supported by Shibalika (2021), who highlights that engaging young people in structured activities helps steer them away from substance use in the district. Similarly, Masiye and Ndlobvu (2016) emphasize that participation in sports and clubs such as anti-drug campaigns, anti-AIDS programs, debate, drama, and wildlife conservation raises awareness and helps prevent drug abuse by keeping youth actively engaged. Recreational activities are essential for redirecting young people's focus from drugs and delinquent

behaviours. In the absence of such facilities, youths may face boredom and excessive free time, increasing the risk of substance abuse..

#### **4.3.3 National level prevention initiatives**

It was found that national-level prevention initiatives were effective strategies for preventing drug abuse. The subthemes that emerged include:

##### **Government to create employment opportunities**

Some participants believed that young people are falling into the trap of drug use due to unemployment, as the saying goes, "An idle mind is the devil's workshop." They therefore suggested that the government should create more employment opportunities for the youth, which could be achieved by incorporating vocational training into school curricula.

*[Y2, Y5, Y8] We need practical intervention, government should create jobs and projects for us. The government should empower us with the ability to make money...something to keep us away from drugs.*

*[Y2, Y3, Y8] Sometimes waiting for the government to create jobs can take forever. Youths should be encouraged to work hard, use their skills and taught about self-employment.*

It can be argued that when the government creates opportunities, a significant number of youths will find employment, thereby reducing idleness. In support of this, Silverman et al. (2016) highlight the vital role of employment in combating poverty and its potential in addressing issues such as drug addiction. By providing financial support for projects, creating job opportunities, and fostering entrepreneurship, the government can help alleviate the stress associated with unemployment and empower young people to contribute positively to society.

##### **Government led partnerships**

Another strategy proposed by the participants to combat drug abuse was the establishment of government-led partnerships. In this approach, the government would collaborate with a variety of stakeholders, including local communities, healthcare organizations, law enforcement, and educational institutions, to create a united front against drug abuse. This collaborative effort would pool resources, expertise, and support to effectively tackle the issue from multiple angles, ensuring a more comprehensive and coordinated response.

*P1, P3, P6, P8] The government should be in the forefront in creating partnerships with stakeholders that work with children...NGOs, teachers, health providers, etc. E.g., a collaboration between parents and*

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teachers...children believe in their teachers a lot. This could help in creating a united front in fighting drug abuse.

**[P10, P11]** Children spend most of their times in schools, if age-appropriate education on drugs can be offered in schools it might help prevent drug abuse among the youths in the nation.

If the government takes the initiative to form partnerships with various stakeholders, drug abuse could be effectively prevented. Vienna (2022) highlights the need to encourage stakeholders including civil society, governments, and the international community to strengthen efforts in drug treatment, prevention, and combating the illegal drug trade. Collaboration among youth-focused stakeholders can play a key role in supporting anti-drug abuse initiatives. For instance, the Ministry of General Education (MoGE) has been collaborating with the Drug Enforcement Commission to deliver preventive education in schools (Shibalika, 2021).

### **Enforcing strict penalties**

Participants suggested enforcing strict penalties to those who will be found selling drugs to minors. These penalties will act as deterrents to be offenders.

**[P1, P5, P11]** The thing is they know they'll get a bail, if they get arrested for selling drugs. Maybe if they know they won't get out of prison they'll not take chances. The offences should not be bailable.

It can be argued that enforcing stricter laws may serve as an effective strategy for preventing drug abuse. In line with this, Ondieki and Mokuu (2012) emphasize the importance of parents and schools taking a strong stance against drug use among students, while suggesting that the government should reconsider the legal drinking age, recognizing that some high school students are over 18. Additionally, Masiye and Ndlobvu (2016) highlight that in Zambia, prevention efforts focus on law enforcement against offenders, complemented by anti-drug clubs, life-skills training, and counseling. Stricter regulation and enforcement concerning the production and importation of drugs are crucial for reducing their availability, distribution, and consumption.

### **4.3.4 Parental involvement in children's lives**

This study revealed that parental involvement in children's lives could be effective for preventing drug abuse. The following subthemes emerged.

#### **Parents should create relationships with their children**

Participants expressed the belief that parents should maintain strong relationships with their children. When a child is distant from their parent, they

may seek attention elsewhere, which can be risky. In such cases, parents may be unaware of the influences or environments their children are exposed to.

**[Y2, P5, P10]** *As a youth I'm also a mother...being a friend to my son, giving him attention made him open about his friends etc. Parents should create a platform where you can talk about anything...also stay or move with your child when work transfers you to keep the bond.*

**[Y3, Y6, Y8]** *Guide children's activities... spend enough time...create friendship with your kids let them open about their friends...you can control their circle and activities.*

It can be believed that parents creating positive relationships with their children can strengthen bonds. A child given attention is happy, stress-free and assured of parental support. Ondieki and Mokua (2012) found that drug-free children not only felt closer to their parents but considered it important to get along with them. Similarly, Mhlongo (2015) alluded that inadequate child rearing practices and poor relationships with parents were closely connected to youthful drug abuse. Thus, strong relationships with children yield good behaviors.

### **Parents modeling Positive Behaviour**

It is natural for children to view their parents as role models, a concept supported by Bandura's observational learning theory. According to this model, children often learn behaviors by observing and imitating those around them, especially their caregivers. It is deeply concerning, then, to witness adults using drugs in front of children, as this can send harmful messages and negatively influence the children's behavior and development. Some participants had this to say

**[P1, P4, P7, P11]** *As parents, we must be mindful of our actions, as children often mimic what they see. It's important to model healthy lifestyles and coping strategies, especially when dealing with stress. Teach them the value of communication and seeking help, rather than resorting to harmful habits like drugs. Ultimately, being a positive role model is crucial, as everything they witness will leave a lasting impression on their memory..*

**[Y2, Y6, Y8]** *Children are exposed to many things in societies, adults smoking and drinking alcohol but the parents to shape their child's life by exposing them to good behavior...you can't drink and smoke in front of your child and expect to kuta (reprimand) him makayenta (when doing) what they saw you doing. Families just need to be involved in children's lives and be positive role models.*

It can be assumed that when parents serve as positive role models, drug abuse can be prevented. Supporting this view, Shibalika (2021) argues that if adults, such as parents and grandparents, engage in drug abuse, the youth in that

family are more likely to misuse similar or different substances. For example, when parents and other family members abuse substances, children may develop a variety of emotional, behavioural, cognitive, and social issues (Mhlongo, 2015). Therefore, it is essential for parents to set a good example, as children tend to observe and imitate their behaviour. Following recommendations have been proposed in order to overcome the situation ;

**Parents:** Be present, recognize factors that may lead to rebellion or drug abuse, and serve as relatable role models. Address children's concerns with empathy, rather than relying on rigid disciplinary methods. Understand their struggles and guide them positively.

**Community/Schools:** Focus on preventing drug abuse through life skills training, career guidance, counselling, and recreational activities. Schools should provide professional support and a safe environment, especially for those from troubled backgrounds.

**Policymakers/Government:** Implement stricter laws to regulate drug sales and protect minors from exposure. Focus on reducing drug availability and addressing the issue at its roots through effective legislation. Further research into the prevalence and severity of drug abuse is essential to highlight the urgency of prevention efforts among youth.

## Conclusion

This study utilized an ecological approach to examine youth drug abuse. It found that while youths engage in drug use, there is a lack of sufficient research on its prevalence and incidence. Several factors were identified as key determinants of drug abuse. However, many practitioners and organizations focus solely on eliminating drug abuse without addressing its underlying causes. Understanding these causes is essential for developing effective prevention strategies and interventions. Youth drug use is a complex issue that requires a multifaceted approach, including prevention, treatment, and support programs. Most importantly, youths should not be seen only as victims but also as agents of change. Empowering them to take control of their own lives can help reduce drug use and promote a healthier future.

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## From Parliament to Public Square: The Normalization of Hate Speech in Pakistani Political Discourse

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### ABSTRACT

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The current study examines how hate speech has become more commonplace in Pakistani political discourse, following its development from National Assembly sessions to the Senate and beyond. The media serves as a conduit for this hate speech, amplifying and digitally spreading it throughout the populace. The research highlights important discursive techniques such as heterogeneity, fear appeals, religious and ethnic marginalization, and abusive labeling using a strictly qualitative approach that combines critical discourse analysis of parliamentary debates and social media content. The findings also reveal a recurring pattern: political celebrities use hate speech in their speeches to criminalize opponents and to create an atmosphere of excitement, and media outlets further magnify these stories, captivating the public and encouraging them to use the rhetoric in political contexts. The study also points to the normalization of hostility in public encounters and the perilous deterioration of democratic planning. This study is a valuable addition to Pakistan's political literature since it makes recommendations such as the implementation of strong restrictive frameworks, media literacy initiatives, and a collective sincerity from stakeholders to encourage an honorable and thorough discussion of Pakistan's political picture.

**Keywords:** hate speech; political discourse; social media as facilitator; democratic decline; public perception

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## Introduction

Pakistan has observed a troubling tendency in its political speech permitting for an increased normalization of hate speech that has diffused in parliamentary debates, media content, and public discourse within last few years. Political body often fire derogatory language, personal attacks, and rejection rhetoric to frame opposition not merely as political rivals but as a danger to national safety, religion, and morality (Munir & Ahmed, 2024). This process is not only specific to Pakistan but goes worldwide, where populist leaders use language as a weapon to divide societies (Kakar, 2023). Yet, as far as Pakistan is concerned, the interaction of religious sensitiveness, cultural diversity, and a bombastic political environment is like adding fuel to fire in the impact of this hate rhetoric. Hate speech is defined as “Any kind of communication in speech, writing or action, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, i.e. based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor”(United Nations, 2020, p. 2). Discussions inside the walls of national assembly and senate, the places once visualized as areas for democratic planning, now are degenerating frequently into platforms for delivering hate speech, where ministers and senators throw accusations like “gaddar” (traitor) or “kafir” (infidel) on political rivals (Hassan, Qureshi, & Javed, 2020). The media finds itself in a great opportunity of high rating and plays a role of an unlawful character in broadcasting rabble-rousing and proactive statements without disapproval (Mahmood, Khan, & Ali, 2024). Social media further exaggerates it adding more spice creating such rooms where this hatred echos with more resonance just for the sake of getting an echo (Shafiq, Jamil, & Zaman, 2024). Showing a concern for democracy, this study also intends to investigate the structure and consequences of hate speech in Pakistani political discourse with a focus on intervening devices through which legislative language diffuses into public sphere. Therefore, for this purpose critical discourse analysis and content analysis of social media interactions have been conducted to reach the findings that how this hate speech is structured, delivered and perceived by public through spot lighting the damage it has caused to Pakistan’s democratic values.

### Objectives:

1. To critically analyze the structures and demonstrations of hate speech in Pakistani political body’s discourse by questioning how such rhetoric surpasses parliamentary boundaries and diffuses into public sphere.
2. To examine the role of political discourse in normalizing hate speech

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in Pakistani sociopolitical scenario through spot lighting its impact on public mind, inter-group relations, and democratic discourse.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study has a significant quality for knowing the developing dynamics of political discourse in Pakistan, especially the normalization of hate speech from parliamentary discussions to public discourse channels. Through a systematic analysis about political leaders' conflict in exchanging hate speech and diffusion of this rhetoric in public cognition, this research serves as a testimony to a critical comprehension of the interplay between language, power, and ideology in Pakistan's democratic act.

The study also suggests a visual perceptible for the wider implications of hate speech in a fragile democratic context, where political polarization and intolerance are aggravated by instigation of expressive style. It highlights how democratic values are undermined through this normalization of hate speech. It further causes mistrust in institutions and fuels social disagreement, finally making it horrifying for the artefact of Pakistan's pluralistic society.

The findings are also helpful in providing structural implications for policymakers, media control, and civil society management through a distinguishing composition of hate speech that offers evidence-based recommendations for confronting its ripening. The study also contributes in academic discourse by filling a critical gap in the literature on political discourse of Pakistan, where systematic analyses of hate speech in both parliamentary and public fields remain tense.

In an internationalist context, this research is a good addition to the growing awareness on the rise of populist and extremist rhetoric in present-day politics, offering a case study exemplifying that hate speech is not simply a linguistic act but a weapon used for power, surveillance, and social handling.

### **Literature Review**

Hate speech in political discourse is not restricted to Pakistan's parliament only rather its a worldwide phenomenon, about which experts predict that it's playing a havoc in eroding democratic values and polarizing societies (Mudrov, 2022). In Pakistan, the puzzling web of politics with religious and ethnic identities makes this issue particularly intense (Akbar & Safdar, 2024). According to its definition Hate speech is a language that incites discrimination, hostility, or fury against a group based on identity markers (UNESCO, 2022), has become an important tool in Pakistani politics to mobilize supporters and criminalize opponents (Munir & Ahmed, 2024).

Research proves that parliamentary discussions in Pakistan look often as if arenas for hostile rhetoric, where political leaders are busy in constructing rival identities through "disparate" language (Munir & Ahmed, 2024). Phrases like "anti-state elements," "enemies of Islam," and "agents of foreign powers"

are common to brand rivals and criminalize their political credibility (Hassan, Qureshi, & Javed, 2020). This trend matches with Van Dijk's (1998) ideological quad rate framework, where "we" are constructed as morally noble and "they" as heinous or deviated.

The issue is exacerbated more on social media platforms like Facebook and X. Studies have demonstrated that political figures, their political workers and followers use Facebook and X as battle fields where they use the weapon of hate speech, targeting not only political opponents but also ethnic groups (Shafiq, Jamil, & Zaman, 2024). The recursive composition of this platform is just enabling public to participate for the sake of participation over accuracy along with a thrill distribution and divisive content (Riaz, Hussain, & Tariq, 2024).

The psychological impact of hate speech delivered in parliament is deep on the minds of public. Exposure to hate speech fosters fear, mistrust, and a hesitation to take part in national discourse (Rafique & Saleem, 2024). This curve of silence on one hand effect individuals' self-censor to avoid confrontation and on the other hand undermines democratic involvement shrinking the space for pluralistic argument (Kakar, 2023). Furthermore, the normalization of hate speech legitimizes aggression against meager groups, there are many cases manifesting the fact where mob ferocity fueled by inflammatory rhetoric engulfs the democracy, there upon present research calls for robust restrictive frameworks to scrap up the hate speech, but regrettably, implementation always remains weak in Pakistan (Saeed, Malik, & Hashmi, 2023). The issue of hate speech is further aggravated in Pakistan due to its ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity. Investigations have shown that manifestations of hate can diverge notably across regions such as, ethnic derogation and patriotic rhetoric in Balochistan may dissent from sectarian language in Punjab or religious framing in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Akbar & Safdar, 2024). Emerging works must study these regional and linguistic diversities more critically, for a deeper conceptualization of the mechanisms through which hate speech works in different ways across social and geographical landscapes.

For checking hate speech Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) has issued guidelines but social control about this is unsupported, and political thinking group to a great deal influences this enforcement (Kakar, 2023). Experts have spoken a lot in favor of media literacy program to authorize people to critically pursue the political content and defy manipulative and artful tales (Saeed, Malik, & Hashmi, 2023). Studies conducted on hate speech rate hate speech in Pakistani political discourse as a general issue, deeply tangled with media activity, social media dynamics, and weak restrictive performance. The present study has built upon

this modality, providing an extensive analysis of parliamentary language's diffusion into public square where it becomes normalized in routine political talk.

### **Theoretical Framework**

**Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)** is acting as a primary theoretical framework for this study, especially the works of Fairclough (1995, 2013) and van Dijk (1993, 2006) are utilized to explain the inter relatedness between language, power, and ideology hence, providing instruments to critically probe into political discourse that is shaped by social structures and interactions of control. Employing CDA, the research investigates the mechanism through which hate speech in Pakistani political speech is constructed, normalized, and disseminated across formal (parliamentary debates) and informal (public gatherings and social media) transmission.

In addition, the study also uses **Habermas's (1989) Theory of the Public Sphere**, which explains the reality through which communicative places originally meant for rational-critical discussion can be co-opted by powerful players, directing the democratic discourse to distortion. This framework helps in qualifying hate speech, as a form of exclusionary discourse that undermines the ideals of thoughtful democracy in Pakistan.

Collectively, these frameworks render a robust logical construction for investigating the normalization of hate speech by highlighting the interaction between discourse, power, ideology, and public perception in Pakistani context.

### **Methodology**

This study employs a pure **qualitative research approach** using **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)** as primary framework to examine the normalization of hate speech in Pakistani political discussion. Fairclough (1995) and van Dijk's (1993) CDA models give a perfect suitable theory for examining language construction its reinforcement, and dissemination in a society in terms of power and ideologies.

### **Data Collection and Sampling Strategy**

The data-set has been built on a **purposive sampling strategy** to assure the inclusion of **relevant, high-impact political texts** that manifest hate speech in Pakistani political discourse.

The corpus consists of **Parliamentary speeches** from the National Assembly and Senate archives (2018–2024), centering on key discussions on national security and political opposition, **Political rally speeches** by major political party leaders (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, Pakistan Peoples Party), recovered from public recordings and transcripts, **Social media posts** (X and Facebook) by verified accounts of prominent political figures, holding public statements and trends during key

political events for example elections, protests, and crunch. These texts have been analyzed in order to recognize the patterns, themes, and rhetorical strategies that form hate speech, arousal to violence, degradation of political opponents, and the use of religious, ethnic, and denominational slurs.

A total of 90 documents were selected: 30 parliamentary speeches, 30 rally transcripts, 30 social media posts (sampled for high activity and political connection). These were known through purposive sampling supported by three criteria: (1) prominence of the speaker (e.g., party leaders, senior ministers); (2) public engagement in disseminating the hate speech (e.g., trending hashtags, number of shares); and (3) relevancy to the political events such as elections or national crises.

A thematic coding framework has been formulated based on present definitions of hate speech (Parekh, 2006; Waldron, 2012; United Nations, 2020) that directly refers to political opponents or negative voices, also containing explicit or implicit language that is indicative of hate speech. Further, those texts which are transitionally distributed across leading political events such as elections, protests, and legislative sessions are included to ensure representation of discourse across time. The data has been analyzed manually by using thematic analysis techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006), that ensures a profound and context-sensitive consideration of the language, metaphors, and framing devices used by political actors. Therefore, this qualitative design allows for an in-depth understanding about hate speech's construction and its transmission in Pakistani political discourse by suggesting an imagination towards its effects on public perception, social cohesion, and democratic notion. To mitigate researcher's bias, the work has been adhered to a consistent coding framework and has employed a peer cross-checking to increase the reliability. Future research may integrate inter-coder reliability tests or software-assisted coding for an improved objectivity.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis determined by Fairclough's (1995) and van Dijk's (1993) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) frameworks, reveals the construction of hate speech its transmission and normalization in Pakistani political discourse. Five core themes, each with distinct sub-themes that exhibits the multilateral nature of hate speech in the political domain has been discovered from thematic coding and manual investigation of the selected texts comprising 30 parliamentary speeches, 30 political rally transcripts, and 30 social media posts from 2018 to 2024.

### Thematic Coding and Labeling Framework

The following table represents the key themes, sub-themes (labels), and the sample extracts which have been recognized through the analysis:

Table 1: Thematic Coding and Labeling Framework

Document ID	Source Type	Date	Event Context	Theme Code	Label	Exact (Sample Text)	Notes
1	Parliamentary Speech	2022-03-10	National Assembly session on political opposition	T1-EF	Framing as Enemy	“These traitors are trying to destroy Pakistan from within.”	Clear framing of opposition as nationalistic threat.
2	Political Rally	2023-11-15	Protest rally in Lahore	T3-WM	War Metaphor	“This is not a political campaign , it’s a battle for Pakistan’s survival!”	Rally speech – high emotional intensity.
3	Social Media Post	2024-05-05	Elections 2024	T2-ES	Ethnic Slur	“These Baloch separatists should be crushed once and for all!”	Ethnic targeting, definitive hate language.
4	Parliamentary Speech	2021-06-20	Budget session	T1-CA	Corruption Allegations	“Opposition leaders have looted billions	Fixing opposition with corruption narrative.

						from the nation's treasury."	
5	Political Rally	2024-02-28	Pre-election campaign	T3-CA	Call to Action	"We must rise up and teach them a lesson they'll never forget!"	Spurring action against political opponents.
6	Social Media Post	2023-07-14	Post-flood political crisis	T2-RV	Religious Vilification	"These people are working for anti-Islamic agendas!"	Religious framing of political opponents.
7	Parliamentary Speech	2022-08-09	National Assembly debate on protests	T4-NH	Normalization of Hate	"This is just political rhetoric; it's how politics works here."	Hate speech treated as normal in discourse.
8	Political Rally	2023-12-18	Protest against opposition	T3-DL	Dehumanizing Language	"These snakes in the opposition must be crushed!"	Animal metaphor to humiliate opponents.
9	Social Media Post	2022-10-22	Protests against fuel price hikes	T5-PP	Public Polarization	"We hate these corrupt leaders; we'll never accept them!"	Indication of hate speech influencing public opinion.
10	Political Rally	2024-03-30	Pre-election campaign	T5-DE	Democratic Erosion	"Democracy has failed us; we need a strong hand now."	Sabotage democratic values.

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### Utility of the Table :

- ✓ **Document ID:** A specific number has been allotted to each document.
- ✓ **Source Type:** Parliamentary Speeches, Political Rally speeches, and Social Media Post
- ✓ **Date:** Production date of the text
- ✓ **Event Context:** particular time when discourse was produced e.g. during elections, protests or crisis.
- ✓ **Theme Code:** Use codes from the codebook (e.g., T1-EF, T2-ES).
- ✓ **Label:** The specific theme/sub-theme label
- ✓ **Extract (Sample Text):** Copy-paste key quotes from the text showing hate speech.
- ✓ **Notes:** observations, tone, audience reaction, or contextual insights.

The results from Table1. show that hate speech is profoundly constituted in Pakistani political discourse which is strategically utilized to **criminalize opposition, instigate public emotions, and promote division.** War metaphors (e.g., "battle for survival"), religious defamation (e.g., "anti-Islamic agendas"), and ethnic slurs are frequently used by politicians for framing rivals as enemies of the country. Also indicating that social media exaggerates this rhetoric by blurring the lines between political criticism and provocation to violence. This kind of rhetoric pattern reflects deep drifting of political communication worldwide, where polarization, populist strategies, and digital expansion create a breeding land for hate speech (Wodak, 2015; Mudde, 2019).

Moving forward the analysis reveals that the **normalization of hate speech** (T4-NH) has been a recurrent theme in political engagements indicating politicians' dismissal of violent language as "a mere rhetoric." This corresponds to van Dijk's (1997) argument that upper class's discourse plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions and strengthen ideological disagreement. The presence of **democratic erosion** (T5-DE) in speeches further conveys an impulsion for domineering inclination that raises concerns about the long-term effect of this divisive rhetoric on democratic criterion and civic reliance. Though this study potently criticizes the proliferation of hate speech yet it is important to communicate counterarguments. Some defenders of current political discourse may credit it as an expression of freedom of speech or cultural norms that endure expressive or provoking language. In Pakistan's political practice, aflame expressive style is considered a rightful way of summoning support or manifesting disagreement. Nevertheless, this explanation often becomes questionable when such rhetoric instigates aggression, marginalizes communities, or erodes democratic action.

Therefore, the leveling of freedom of expression with its integration against provocation is required, and upcoming policy must account for this strain by crafting context-sensitive juristic explanation that can distinguish between law-abiding criticism and hate speech.

Eventually, academic institutions have also a role to play in fighting the normalization of hate speech. Integrating remarkably potent media literacy into university curricula can enable students to break down political language and defy dissentious narratives. Cooperation among academia, civil society, and media regulators could lead to more subtle and influential engagement.

A relative view about regional democracies like India and Sri Lanka informs similar tendency, yet Pakistan's case is ambiguous due to its vivid plan of action that has been integrating religion with state identity since the time of its creation. This perplexes the legal responses to religious hate speech, making legislation both sensitive and argumentative.

Furthermore, interviews conducted with media professionals unveil a need for institutional reinforcement to oppose political pressure. Journalists account self-censorship and editorial compromises when covering political events that are relevant to hate speech, undercutting the media's watchdog role in democracy.

An extra challenge lies in the lack of a united legal definition of hate speech in Pakistan's legal framework. While multiple provisions exist across penal and cybercrime laws, the need for clarity promotes conflicting enforcement and opens avenues for misuse against disagreement rather than authentic regulation.

Digital platforms not only maneuver hate speech dispersion but also favour it algorithmically. Content that evokes powerful emotional reactions usually anger or fright hold a stronger profile. This structural inducement creates a response loop where hate speech is both a political agency and a digital vogue. The normalization also marginalizes cautious voices in politics. As parties intensify rhetoric to maintain visibility and support, moderator or reformist perspectives are frequently drowned out. This radicalization of discourse sidelines creative discussion, polarizing not just the leadership but also the people. Moreover, the outcome of this discourse on youth political socialization is in particular horrifying. Young voters, frequently active on digital platforms, go desensitized to aggressive language, unwittingly following such norms in their own political actions. This upholds a series where hate gets on a normalized mode of political communication.

## **Conclusion**

The current study proves that hate speech has gone along as a normalized and strategic feature of Pakistani political discourse, particularly during the time of intense political competition such as elections, protests, and crunch. To divide public sentiment and call up support through parliamentary speeches, public gathering, and social media posts, political figures prefer to use a variety of rhetorical devices including framing opposition as enemy, humiliating remarks, religious derogation, and definitive calls for action. This inclination not only undermines democratic state of affairs but also promotes

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an intolerance further endangering the legitimization of hostility as a means of political expression.

This study reinforces Van Dijk's (1997) thought that the language of elite shapes ideologies and societal power structures. The results stress on an urgent need for an action to cope with the normalization of hatred in political language because there has always been an unrestrained dispersion of this sort of hate speech in there that is eating away social cohesion and fueling up an inter-group enmity harming the democratic structure of Pakistan.

### **Recommendations**

To be aligned with the results, this study recommends to construct a multifarious notion to treat the normalization of hate speech in Pakistani political discourse. The first thing to consider is a desperate necessity to vitalize Pakistan's statutory frameworks by aligning national government with international human rights standards as defined by the United Nations (2020). Further, there should be laws particularly designed for providing clear, context-sensitive definitions of hate speech that account for Pakistan's socio-political occurrences, assuring freedom of expression. Secondly, there should be an infrastructure incorporated in parliamentary role to determine, criticize, and approve hate speech in parliamentary discussions leaving political figures accountable for their use of language. Thirdly, there is an utmost need for an eloquent media literacy, initiating measures particularly formulated to contour public perception for acknowledging the damage caused by hate speech and repercussion of artful political talk. Enterprising in this regard can let public to see and resist divisive narratives that undermine democratic growth. It is also essential to set up cooperative networks among government, public, and technology control points to monitor the freedom of digital platforms. These cooperative networks should further focus on content moderation, particularly for high-profile political stories that may contain hate speech or inflammatory aggression. Lastly, there is a need for fostering an explicit political culture to promote counter-narratives that insists on social harmony, respect for heterogeneity, and democratic action. Following necessary steps by managing the structural, institutional, and societal contents that play a role of enabler in spreading hate speech, Pakistan can take over a significant course towards safeguarding its democratic rise and strengthening its social cohesion.

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## Rethinking the Dynamics of Bilateral Trade Between Pakistan and India Under Modi's Regime: Implications for the Regional Political Economy of South Asia

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### ABSTRACT

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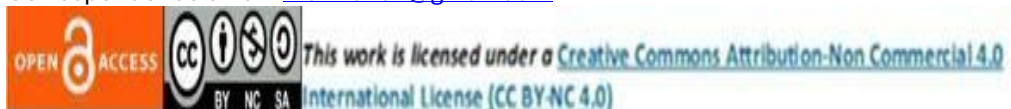
This paper examines the tendency of bilateral trade between Pakistan and India during the tenure of Prime Minister Modi. Mutual relations between the two states have taken a new turn since Modi became the Prime Minister of India in 2014. In the first phase, bilateral trade relations were cordial due to surprise visits from both sides. In the second phase, the pattern of trade fluctuated with gradual increases and decreases, reflecting the dynamic geopolitical climate. Nonetheless, in the third phase, trade was suspended by Pakistan due to the revocation of Article 35-A. The reinstallation of Modi is once again a clear indication that trade talks will not be taken seriously, despite continuous efforts from the Pakistani side. Similarly, this study also sheds light on South Asia's challenges due to the weak and zilch bilateral economic relations between Pakistan and India. Against this backdrop, the central theme of the paper circles around the impacts of modi-nomics on the bilateral relations between Pakistan and India. The current study is significant for academics, politicians, policymakers, and political economists to know how the mutual hostility between Pakistan and India has reshaped the region's economic relations and has made South Asia the least-integrated region of the world.

**Keywords:** Pakistan India trade, south asian political economy, bilateral trade, economic nationalism

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## **Introduction**

The Bilateral trade between Pakistan and India has long been a subject of intense scrutiny, mainly because of the geopolitical tensions and historical rivalry between both nations. The history of both states has always been on a bumpy ride, marked by a series of deep conflicts, full-fledged wars, territorial disputes, and diplomatic stand-offs. Although there have been gradual efforts to normalize bilateral relations and promote economic cooperation, no fruitful results have been yielded. Mainly, the trade relations have been constrained by the political tensions and security concerns. The absence of normalized trade relations has not only hindered economic growth and development in both countries, but has also impeded regional integration and stability in South Asia. The mutual trade between Pakistan and India has fluctuated, which is directly connected to the geopolitical circumstances of the region. The changing regional order and global paradigm shift have also had a critical impact on bilateral trade relations. In this regard, under the leadership of Narendra Modi, trade relations between the two countries have undergone significant shifts, with implications extending to the entire region. Prime Minister Narendra Modi assumed office in 2014 with a mandate to revitalize India's economy to support its Hindutva approach (Khurshid & Khawaja, 2023). His approach to bilateral trade with Pakistan has been characterized by a mix of pragmatism, assertiveness, and occasional gestures of conciliation. His government has adopted a selective engagement with Pakistan, seeking to balance economic interests with strategic imperatives and domestic political considerations. For this, the bilateral trade between both countries has witnessed a seismic shift. Right after his assuming office, he signaled a few goodwill gestures towards Pakistan. Resultantly, the trade pattern became stabilized. The middle years had seen a steady decline, while in 2019, trade suspended totally between the nations. The revocation of the special status of Kashmir is the main bone of contention in all this. However, the progress towards normalizing the trade has also been hindered by security incidents, cross-border terrorism (Shabbir & Zeb, 2019), and divergent political interests. Moreover, the domestic opposition, bureaucratic red tape, and chauvinistic sentiments further complicate efforts to liberalize trade between the two countries. Consequently, the persistent bilateral trade between Pakistan and India poses serious repercussions for the South Asia region as well. The failure to address the issues of bilateral trade results in the political instability of the whole region, while the region has delved deep into political confrontations. The regional states become rivals with each other in the region. Next, due to the weak trade interdependence among the states, the region of South Asia has been divided into two main superpower economic camps. (Masahiro, 2021). This has created a strong sense of dismemberment in the

region. The lack of proper infrastructure has also been a significant impact of the weak bilateral relations between the states, as all states have been dependent on the global big markets for their trade. If they trade themselves, it would open a great opportunity for the whole region to progress leaps and bounds (Lei, 2019). However, the mutual trade among SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) states has great potential and must not be let go unheeded. For this, the need is to reformulate the economic policies and adopt a win-win policy for bilateral trade. This study uses a mixed-methods research approach. It is primarily focused on qualitative design, grounded in discourse analysis. By examining how languages, narratives, and political rhetoric shape the leadership perception and policy outcomes at the national level, it provides a deeper understanding of the interaction between politics and economy between Pakistan and India. Along with this, textual analysis of the rhetorical communication has also been done to craft the most relatable meanings of the subject. This helps to understand political views, constructive narratives, and established agendas in both states. Contrastingly, it also integrates the quantitative data in the form of trade figures, economic indicators, and graphical representation to analyse the economic trends and trade patterns between Pakistan and India. Hence, this mixed-methods approach enhances the depth of analysis by supporting qualitative interpretations with numerical evidence. Furthermore, the research primarily relies on secondary sources, including academic journals, policy papers, think-tank reports, and media coverage from the reliable regional and international media outlets. However, to enhance the credibility of research, primary sources like major leader's remarks, official economic documents, the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) manifesto, and speeches of key leaders are also taken into account. Therefore, this study examines the impact of domestic politics and geopolitical factors on Pakistan-India trade, highlighting its significance for regional stability, economic development, and policy-making in South Asia. In short, there is no denying the fact that the stability of the region is dependent upon peaceful political relations and high-class inter-regional mutual trade, specifically between Pakistan and India.

## **Literature Review**

Pakistan and India gained independence from the British Raj in 1947. Although both states have been in continuous conflict since their inception on multiple fronts, the bilateral trade has always fluctuated between them. In this regard, Padder in his research reveals the fact that right after their independence, Pakistan and India signed a standstill agreement that allowed both states to trade duty-free. As a result, trade relations between India and Pakistan boomed to 70 % and 63 % respectively. The bilateral trade continued

to grow until 1965. The 1965 war between them created a large rift in the bilateral relations, specifically the bilateral trade, between both states (Padder, 2014). After this, a trade embargo was imposed in the post-war scenario. Resultantly, foreign states started to incentivize the Pakistan-India trade markets, which further kept both states apart from each other.

In this regard, both states remained engaged as rivals in the informal war of 1971 in East Pakistan, however, Mirza in his study argues that the Post-war Shimla agreement in 1972 opened a new phase of trade between Pakistan and India. They awarded the status of (MFN) Most Favoured Nation to each other. Resultantly, mutual trade spiked from 3.8 \$ million in 1975-1976 to 24.04 \$ million in 1988-1989. Indeed, this was the developing time for both states. However, bilateral trade between both nations remained exposed to geopolitical unfavorable circumstances, which was the most prominent resistance between both nations (Mirza, 2005). Unluckily, this balance of trade could not achieve its desired results and deteriorated gradually.

Ashraf noted that in the next decade of this hostility, mutual trade surged to 209 \$ million in (2001-2002) from only 122 \$ million in (1995-1996). In the decade of 90's, bilateral trade was little hindered by the nuclear politics of both states. Pakistan too had detailed its nukes at the end of the century. However, the visit of the Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to Pakistan in 1999 further strengthened bilateral trade agreements. The yearly growth rate of 7 % had been noticed at that time, which was seen as a welcoming step. The bilateral trade was booming with unprecedented growth, but unfortunately, the political instability and regional tensions once again loomed largely across the border and curtailed the economic growth between both nations (Ashraf, 2020). Nonetheless, Regmi et al. propagate that the establishment of SAPTA (South Asian Preferential Trade Agreement) in 1993 also opened the door to tariff-free treatment to its member states, from which Pakistan and India benefited largely. In addition to this, a new hallmark was achieved in the form of SAFTA (South Asian Free Trade Agreement) in 2006, as well. The core aim of SAFTA was to enhance regional integration and tariff-free trade among regional states. The SAFTA focused on trade liberalization, para-tariff, non-tariff barriers, technological support to Least Developed Countries, and revenue competition. In the middle years, the trade did not get maximization because of the 2008 Mumbai Attack and the suspension of the Composite Dialogue between both states. But, due to the large room for cooperation in SAFTA, the trade pattern between Pakistan and India boomed simultaneously. In the year 2015-2016, the trade was (2612.16 \$ million) as compared to the 2014-2015 trade of (2354.49 \$ million) (Regmi et al., 2017).

Kumar contends that for a better trade-off and long-term economic commitments, political stability is the most eminent prerequisite for nations.

Unfortunately, the absence of political stability between Pakistan and India is the chief reason for weak economic relations between them. In this regard, the geopolitical tensions in the region rose to an extreme level in the aftermath of 2016. The Modi government's hibernating attitude, along with the security-led terrorism mantra against Pakistan, halted the mutual trade between both states once again. Therefore, in 2014, a new disastrous turn between Pakistan and India emerged as Mr. Narendra Modi was sworn in as the new Prime Minister of India. Due to his active advocacy of RSS ideology and his commitment to Hindutva politics became a matter of grave concern for the stability of Pakistan (Kumar, 2018).

Apart from this, Ijaz claims that along with the political ideology, the long-standing security circumstances and social variables also hamper economic growth between Pakistan and India. The border of both states always remains on alert during Modi's tenure. Similarly, the main issue of this restrictive trade is the tariff and non-tariff trade barriers. The stance of the common man in both states turned hostile against each other due to rising nationalism. In the same way, overall trade policies of the Modi government were designated against Pakistan, due to which bilateral trade between both states was stuck at only 2612.16 \$ M, which was officially estimated around 4710 \$ M (Ijaz, 2017).

By the same token, the highest Indian exports to Pakistan were calculated in 2017-2018 at 2412.83 \$ M amid many political tensions. Unfortunately, the revocation of Article 370 altered the mutual relations between the states. The trade gradually downgraded, and Indian exports to Pakistan fell to only 282 \$ M in 2020 (Economics, 2024). Hence, the Indian allegations of cross-border terrorism, the abrogation of Article 370 in Kashmir, the hard stance of Modi against Pakistan, and the shifting paradigm of regional dynamics all play a crucial role in the hindrance of the mutual trade between Pakistan and India. To cope with all this, Pakistan altogether suspended its bilateral trade with India in response to the abrogation of Article 370. For this, both states have been bearing extreme economic losses by abandoning their trade relations with each other.

Liaquat and Abbasi discussed that among this rivalry and non-cooperation, it is not only the people of these states that have been suffering economically, but the whole trade power of South Asia is at stake. Due to their nonchalant behavior, economic cooperation among SAARC states is negligible. Recently, trade volume among SAARC states lies at only 2300 \$ M, which could spike to 6700 \$ M. The inter-rivalry and hegemonic aspirations of India and Pakistan intend to influence the other small nation-states in the region (Liaquat & Abbasi, 2023). This is why the structure of mutual trade in South Asia is lackadaisical and even short of basic trade

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facilities. The economic cooperation among them is not up to the mark. Hence, the lack of economic interests of both nations in smaller states has made South Asia a “Least Integrated Region”.

### **Theoretical Overview**

Neo-classical realism provides the most suitable framework for analyzing the complexities of bilateral trade between India and Pakistan. This theory posits that, although international structure is anarchic in which power is unevenly distributed, the state remains a primary actor in shaping its foreign policy and political decisions. Furthermore, it asserts the role of domestic variables like government structures, societal values, and leadership in influencing state behaviour within this anarchic system. For instance, it tells the factors that how Modi’s economic constraints and Pakistan’s retaliatory trade policies shape Pakistan-India trade rivalry. The domestic factors like religious sentiments, historic rivalry, local politics, and citizens’ political aptitude drive the economic relations between the two states (Rajagopalan, 1998). For instance, the bilateral trade volume, which peaked at 2600 \$ M in 2018, fell drastically to less than 400 \$ M by 2022 (Abid & Chaudhury, 2025). Consequently, Pakistan starkly resisted the political decisions of India in Kashmir and vented its anger over the decision to terminate bilateral trade with immediate effect. This was not only the response of the state institutions of Pakistan, but was the amalgamation of the domestic counterpart circle that revolved around India. This demonstrates that domestic narratives are strong tools to shape the national-level policies of Pakistan and India.

Additionally, a chief premise of the theory revolves around the role of leadership in state affairs. The perception of leadership leads to interpreting the international environment and the country’s stance through domestic politics, historical experiences, and cultural context (Sridharan, 2020). These leadership variables then instigate leaders to shape foreign policy and bilateral relations accordingly. In this regard, “Modi’s Make in India” initiative and “Goods and Services Tax (GST) Reforms” prioritize the domestic market and exports to larger economies like China, specifically sidelining Pakistan. Despite having a political tussle with China, PM Modi reemphasized bilateral trade with China, which volumed to 127.7 \$B in 2024. Surprisingly, after the US, China is the second-largest partner of India in trade, marking Modi as a leader who uses the policy of “Economic Statecraft as a Tool of Power Projection” (Chowdhury, 2023). Despite shared borders and historical trade relations of India with Pakistan, the economic potential goes unrealized, which can be explained by these unit-level characteristics mediated through leadership goals.

Neoclassical realism also helps explain why, despite external pressures for cooperation, such as from international financial institutions, regional forums, and global economic trends, the trade relations between Pakistan and India remain highly politicized (Michael, 2018). These are not only the domestic factors between both states that hinder the trade relations, but the international factors or the global economic order are also critical in this regard. The international financial institutions, regional economic forums, and the global economic trends, to which India strongly aligns itself, make India deal with Pakistan on a minimal level. On the other hand, Pakistan and India are in opposite economic global blocs. India garners the backing of the West and the US, while Pakistan has the support of China. Regardless of the fact that India does trade with China more than Pakistan does, the geopolitical realities indicate the point of divergence in the economic alliances of both states. This chain of difference is also a driving factor that trade between the states cannot be utilized to the full extent. Following this, geopolitical relations of South Asia have always been marked by power asymmetry and regional anarchy. The South Asian regional economy is heavily impacted by great countries, and outside forces are occupying the trade markets. This makes the inter-state multilateral trade among SAARC states very negligible. The data reveals the fact that trade among SAARC states is limited to 22 B\$, encompassing only 3% of the whole trade of the region (SCCI, 2021).

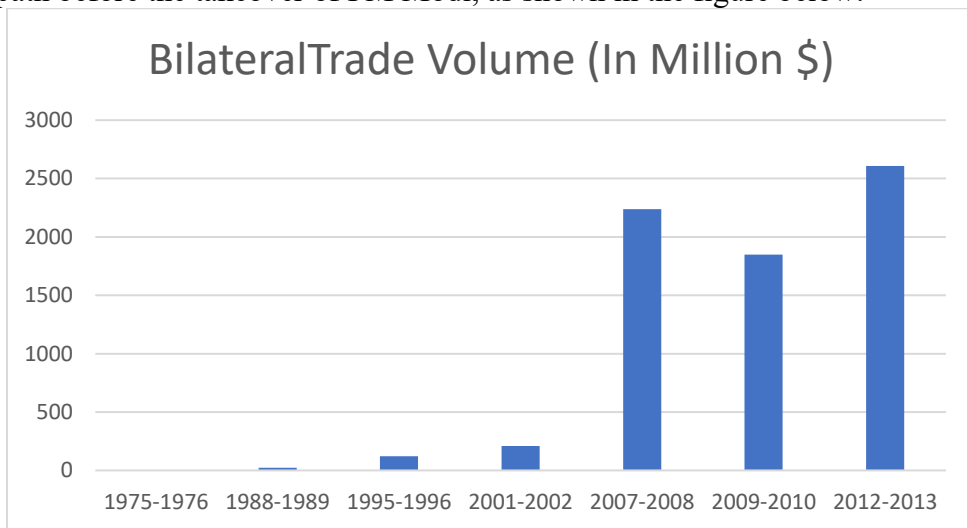
In essence, domestic factors between Pakistan and India have the most significant impact on shaping their bilateral relations. The deep-rooted societal values, strategic miscalculations, historical grievances, and persistent sentiments of rivalry hinder opportunities for mutual economic cooperation. Furthermore, the role of national leadership, such as Narendra Modi, is very decisive in formulating and sustaining bilateral relations with Pakistan. His personal charisma and RSS ideology advocate his stance against Pakistan. Therefore, the neo-classical approach diametrically fits in the analysis of the bilateral economic relations and trade value between India and Pakistan.

### **Pakistan-India Bilateral Trade: A Historical Overview**

India and Pakistan were economically interconnected at the time of independence. In 1948-49, India accounted for more than 50% of Pakistan's imports and over 24% of its exports. At first, both countries explored deeper economic connections, including the possibility of a customs union. However, tense relations resulted from ongoing political confrontations over currency, water rights, asset divisions, and frontiers (Pasha et al., 2012). Trade was suspended for nine years as a result of the 1965 conflict. While bilateral trade with India fell precipitously as tensions increased, Pakistan's commercial priorities switched to other allies, especially the USA. Due to a lack of domestic

production capability, Pakistan was largely dependent on Indian produced goods during the partition, including bicycles, soap, vegetable oil, and textiles (Naqvi, 2007).

Gradually, in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a significant shift has been occurred in the bilateral trade between both states, that continued to grow by the second millenia of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The trade volume witnessed a steady path before the takeover of PM Modi, as shown in the figure below:



(Source : Data Compiled by the Author)

The data illustrates that since the decade of 1970s, bilateral trade between the two has experienced a gradual upward trajectory. A significant jump occurred after 2001 due to the diplomatic engagements and official visits of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, which stabilized the trade path between both states. However, this momentum was disrupted due to the Mumbai Attack in 2008, which led to a temporary decline in the bilateral trade (Taneja, 2007). Despite this setback, the government-led facilitation of trade by the incumbent Congress Party rebounded trade strongly in 2012-2013, once again hitting all-time-high figures. The main reason for the trade facilitation before the Modi regime was the less polarized politics of India. At that time, India was considered a liberal democracy, and the governments of that era, mainly the Indian National Congress, showed a positive attitude towards economic matters (Kumari et al., 2023). Another consideration was that India did not have such a strong economy at that time. The total GDP of India in the decade of 1980s revolved around only 186.3 \$ B, which slightly fluctuated to 484.5\$ B in 2001. The main reason for the high trade between the two countries was also the trade liberalization policies of PM Manmohan Singh, which openly

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catered to Pakistani markets for the maximum utilization of the Indian economy (Vaid & Miani, 2014).

### **Investigating the Trends of Mutual Trade During Modi's Tenures**

In 2014, a staunch advocate of Hindutva ideology, Narendra Modi, was elected as the Prime Minister of India. His era of power has been a continuous time of crisis for Pakistan. The bilateral trade relations between India and Pakistan have fallen to the zilch level. Therefore, to assess the deep-rooted impact of Modi-nomics on the bilateral trade between Pakistan and India, 03 phases of PM Modi's tenure have been assessed:

#### **Phase 01 (Surprises of Modi)**

The enthronement of Modi in 2014 opened a new Pandora's box in the politics of Pakistan. His previous record did not favor Pakistan due to his anti-muslim rivalry. However, at the very start, Modi surprised Pakistan with his two goodwill gestures. Firstly, he invited Mr. Nawaz Sharif, the then PM of Pakistan, to his inauguration ceremony. The bilateral rivalry seemed to be declining as both leaders wanted to revive the bilateral trade. Right after the ceremony, the commerce secretary-level talks started, aiming to revitalize the trade relations. On the other occasion, PM Modi visited Pakistan to congratulate the granddaughter of PM Sharif on her marriage. Both leaders had good formal meetings, and the speculation of peaceful neighbors once again spiked to an extreme level (Barry & Masood, 2015). PM Modi emphasized that trade must be carried out between Pakistan and India. As a result, the official talks started in 2015 once again on trade efficiency. Unluckily, the internal repression of both states did not favor the trade talks to gain fruitful results.

Consequently, exports of Pakistan to India increased from 84 \$ M in 2013 to 312 \$ M in 2015. The imports increased from 1400 \$ M to 1669 \$ M in a few years. In 2014, the trade deficit of Pakistan with India lay at 1710 \$ M. However, in 2015 it decreased to only 1360 \$ M (PBC, 2017). This shows the positive impact of Modi's surprise on the bilateral trade between Pakistan and India. It has also been speculated that Pakistan-India trade may touch 10 \$ B by 2015, if trade and internal barriers are removed (Ishfaq, 2020).

#### **Phase 02 (Fluctuations of trade)**

The post-2015 era saw no such high and low demands from both sides. In 2016-2017, although the trade increased to 2610 \$ M, the trade volume was a positive sign for the enhancement of economic cooperation. In 2017-2018, the bilateral trade once again plummeted to 2410 \$ M. The trade balance led to a surprising 1300 \$ M, the export data stood at 1830 \$ M while the imports gathered at 4560 \$ M (High Commission of India, 2019). Hence, the middle

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years of PM Modi witnessed an unstable trade pattern between both nations, with no clear purpose and road to follow.

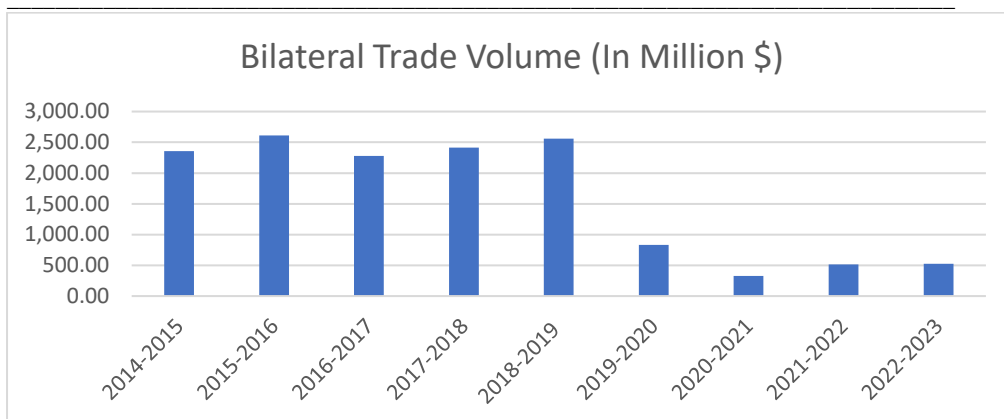
### **Phase 03 (Post 2019 - The no-return move of suspension of trade)**

The year 2019 marked another critical era of relations between Pakistan and India. As Kashmir is the main bone of contention between Pakistan and India, it has historically deteriorated the economic relations of the two countries as well. Articles 370 and 35-a hold an important place in the history of Kashmir. The fascist policies of PM Modi led to the revocation of the articles that provided Kashmir a special status. Even though there was a large hue and cry against this policy by Pakistan, the Modi government remained determined to change the legal status of Kashmir (Ahlawat et al., 2020).

In response to this Indian atrocity, Pakistan suspends its trade ties, diplomatic relations, and closes its airspace. The suspension of trade was decided by PM Imran Khan, which was also endorsed by the National Security Committee and the Joint Session of Parliament. Along with this, Pakistan also suspended imports of Indian goods under the Pakistan-Afghanistan Transit Treaty. This decision lifted India to the list of Israel, as Pakistan has banned its bilateral trade with Israel as well. Hence, the Kashmir issue once again derailed the prospect of high-level mutual trade between both states (Khan, 2019).

On the contrary, India was adamant about its trade relations with Pakistan. India has not been affected much by the unilateral decision of Pakistan. In this regard, this decision favored India. It left Pakistan in a looming crisis, as India was the 6<sup>th</sup> largest trading partner of Pakistan, while Pakistan remained at the 48<sup>th</sup> position at that time. The financial analysts claimed that Pakistan must not take this step in a hurry, and in the disguise of nationalism. Pakistan's foreign reserves at that time stood only at 7.76 \$ B, which was even lower than Bangladesh's 32 \$ B. The GDP forecast is down to 4 pc. As inflation stood at 9 % in 2019, it was not a wise decision to suspend trade with India (Kapoor & Sharma, 2019). It has only hurt the economy of Pakistan badly.

Regardingly, the mutual trade during the Modi era witnessed a steady rise and then a permanent decline, commonly referred to as "Zig-Zag Economy", as mentioned in the figure below:



(Source: Data compiled by the author)

It is clear from the data that bilateral trade in the Modi regime has always been in an unstable mode. While bilateral volume remained high, touching 2700 \$ M in the early or middle years of the Modi Regime, however, after the revocation of Article 370 in 2019, the trade became suspended and the bilateral trade fell even below 300 \$ M in 2021 (OEC, 2025). There is no denying the fact that in Modi's regime, the Indian economy strengthened with an all-time high GDP. According to the sources, the GDP of India in 2024 surged to circa 4 \$ T with an estimated yearly growth of 6.4 % (Panagariya, 2025). Comparatively, the GDP of Pakistan stood at 373 \$ B in 2024. This mammoth difference shows that India does not give an inch to Pakistan in economic strength. Therefore, the pulmetaion of bilateral trade between both states impacts Pakistan more than its counterpart.

### **The Modi Regime's Strategic Approach: Regional Ambitions and Pakistan Calculus**

The Modi regime's strategic approach is shaped by a blend of domestic political imperatives and regional geopolitical ambitions. However, Pakistan enjoys a special place in PM Modi's political strategems. Therefore, the economic policies of PM Modi are largely driven by the factors discussed as follows:

#### **1. Domestic political gains**

Modi has, over time, strengthened his political status by portraying himself as a common leader of India, who always secures the Hindu population with the Akhand Bharat ideology (Mushtaq et al., 2024). As time passes, the rapid spike of religious nationalism has been witnessed in Modi's India. Hindu nationalism under his control aims to exclude the other minorities, like Muslims and Sikhs. Methods that are similar to Jim Crow in the US are now being utilized against minorities. For instance,

executing law, segregation, and vigilant violence are now tools and tactics to subdue Muslims. Judiciary too has become the handmaid of Modi's Sarkar, which proves slow to play its assigned role as well (Varshney & Staggs, 2024). All this led to the game of Domestic Political Gains, which Modi effectively used against Pakistan. On this matter, the anti-Pakistan rhetoric has proven advantageous for the electoral politics of the BJP. It also mobilises nationalist sentiments for the Hindu vote bank. There are continuous assessments that PM Modi has consolidated deep-rooted power in Indian politics by playing the victim card of terrorism and taking a stance against Pakistan.

## **2. Geopolitical positioning of India**

Apart from this, PM Modi is actively advocating for a strong foreign policy to maximise the political interest of India. Currently, his foreign policy is a blend of India's global standing along with economic pragmatism. Similarly, to become an influential stakeholder, he is leading India on the road to international institutions. The core of his diplomatic strategy revolves around the "Strategic Autonomy," which focuses on prioritized but balanced relations. For example, PM Modi is equally engaged with the Russians and Americans at the same time. Although India is a US super-ally to counter the Chinese rise, the trade volume between India and China reached 127.7 \$ B (Aziz, 2024). This shows the economic commitments of PM Modi that he wants to carry out in his third term as well. Furthermore, John J. Mearsheimer propagates that a state must be a regional power before it becomes a global power (Mearsheimer, 2001). For this, India also portrays itself as a regional policeman, specifically in Afghanistan and the Indo-Pacific. Likewise, Pakistan has been observed nefariously as the ally of China, which is altogether unacceptable for the Indian community. This compels PM Modi to go against Pakistan to show his strong geo-strategic position in the region.

## **3. Pakistan as a National security threat**

By keeping in view the afore-mentioned factors, Modi has marked the footprint of animosity against Pakistan so deeply that the coming generations and the successive governments will have to succumb to this. In this respect, the BJP government has normalized enmity towards Pakistan via the anti-Pakistan practices in Indian domestic politics (Pandya, 2019). Consequently, the post-Modi era will also adhere to this hardened stance against Pakistan, which makes regional peace and bilateral trade very difficult. For a decade, PM Modi has continuously emphasized Pakistan as a national security threat. The persistent tensions on the borders and the militant infiltration have caused PM Modi to directly blame Pakistan. His government always adopted a hard-line

posture as the FM Jaishankar proclaims that “If talks and terror can’t go together, neither can trade and terror” (Sareen, 2024). India accuses Pakistan of breeding terrorist cadres like Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) to counter the Indian hold in Kashmir (Beaumont, 2025). This shows that the Indian foreign policy towards Pakistan is being shaped by security reasons, that is, the greatest threat to India.

Hence, it is starkly clear that the Indian political, social, and strategic posture under the leadership of PM Modi has turned against Pakistan. Indeed, going against Pakistan is a huge triumph for PM Modi, regardless of what the national interest claims.

### **The Possible Prospects of Trade after Modi’s Re-installment in 2024**

The systemic slogan of PM Modi in his election campaign of 2024 (Ab ki Baar, 400 Paar) has been brutally vanished in the Lok Sabha election of this year (Wyatt, 2024). Although he has still made his way to the prime ministership of India, this time with a weak coalition. Across the border, it was crystal clear that the Modi government would adopt a hardline approach against Pakistan this time as well. For this, there was no or little indication of resumption of trade talks by the new Indian government as well. To assess the post-election scenario of mutual trade between Pakistan and India and the hard-line approach of Modi's policies, the following trends are on the board:

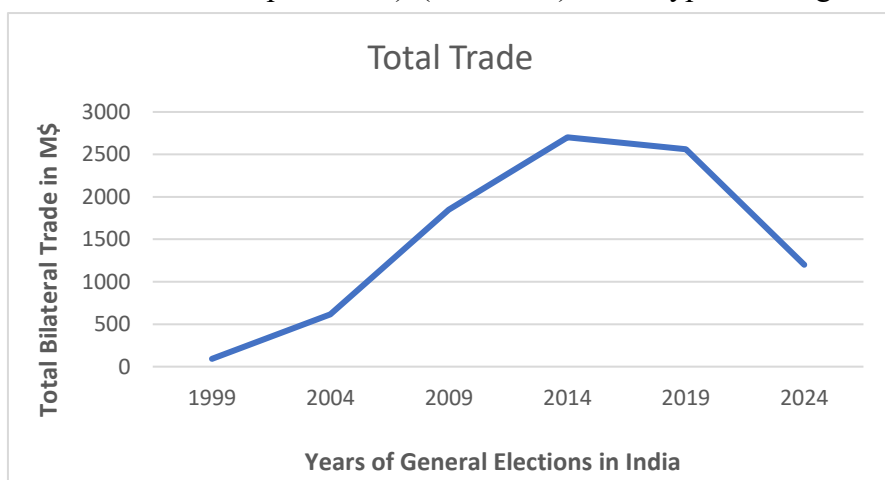
#### **1. BJP manifesto**

The policy formulation of the BJP after the elections in 2024 is evident in their manifestos. In its carefully drafted manifestation, a large emphasis was put on “Combating Terrorism”, referring to Pakistan. It proclaims, “We are committed to taking concrete steps on International forums against countries and organizations supporting terrorism and will take all the necessary measures to isolate such countries.” (BJP Manifesto, 2024). Indeed, this terrorism rhetoric is aimed at Pakistan and has been part and parcel of the BJP government. It used the terrorism mantra against Pakistan several times to gain sympathy and efficacy for its popular cause.

It is also an interesting fact in the BJP’s manifesto that it does not mention bilateral trade, specifically with Pakistan, directly, despite the inclusion of comprehensive sections on economics as well. BJP is willing to implement the Citizen Amendment Bill and desires to combat terrorism and left-wing extremism efficiently. Therefore, it seems hard for the BJP government to initiate serious trade talks with Pakistan on the economic front, as it garnered votes in opposition to this.

#### **2. PM Modi’s speeches**

In addition to the BJP manifesto, Modi has always been geared up to cash his anti-Pakistan narrative. During his speech, he discloses Pakistan as an “Exporter of Aatank, Struggling for Aata” (Times of India, 2024). It means that on one hand, Pakistan is the harbinger of terrorism, while on the other hand, its people are not even able to get wheat at cheap prices. In another speech during the election campaign, Mr. Modi resembled Pakistan and Indian Muslims to terrorists and threatened them as “Ghar me ghus kr maarna” (Attacking inside their homes) (Times of India, 2019). Similarly, he also constructed a nexus of Pakistan with the opposition party Congress as “Congress marr rhi he, Pakistan ro rha he” (Congress is dying, Pakistan is crying) as well as “Pak ke attank ka tire puncture ho gya he” (The tire of Pakistan’s terrorism has been punctured) (Jha, 2024). This type of dangerous



sloganeering by Modi has dashed the prospect of bilateral trade between Pakistan and India.

This eternal hate of the Hindutva-led BJP towards Pakistan is also a core hindrance to peaceful relations. However, by chance, if Modi still wants to uplift the bilateral trade talks with Pakistan, this time he would face strong resistance from within his party. In short, Modi perpetuates an antagonistic policy environment that deters diplomatic or commercial interaction by associating Pakistan's economy with insecurity and making fun of its economic struggles. Such divisive rhetoric politicizes trade relations and increases mistrust between parties, making economic collaboration a victim of electoral populism (Zaidi, 2024).

### 3. The previous post general-election trends in India

The post-election trends of mutual trade garner specific importance in analyzing the prospects of the current Pakistan-India bilateral trade.

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When Modi won the election in 2014 and formed a government, trade with Pakistan spiraled downward. In 2012-2013, the trade volume was 2600 \$ M, which decreased by -12.83 % after Modi's premiership. The trade in 2014-2015 was only 2300 \$ M. However, the bilateral trade strengthened in the upcoming years. In 2017-2018, the trade volume between both nations was around \$2400 M.

(Source: Data compiled by the author)

However, the 2019 stand-off between Pakistan and India once again impacted the trade negatively. The suspension of trade ties after the Kashmir issue plummeted the trade to 2280 \$ M (High Commission of India, 2020).

Therefore, the data shows that after every GE in India every time, bilateral trade went upward in the last three decades. However, after 2014, coinciding with PM Modi's rise in 2014, trade volume began to decline gradually. The sharp dip after 2019 underscores how political hostility and unresolved disputes directly undermine economic engagement. As described by neo-classical realism, the domestic political structure shapes the economic policy of the state. The domestic politics, until it was in favour of Pakistan, were good for the bilateral trade, while the political manipulation of the domestic politics on both sides led the trade to derail gradually.

### **Pahalgam Attack - Trade Prospects Fade Amid Escalating Nuclear Tensions**

On April 22, 2025, a lethal terrorist attack once again occurred in Pahalgam in the Indian Administered Jammu and Kashmir. The attack claimed the lives of 26 tourists, with The Resistance Front (TRF), a Kashmiri freedom movement, taking responsibility for this lethal attack. According to their claim, the attack was the answer to the Modi regime for its abolition of the special status of Kashmir. Within a few minutes of the attack, Indian media started blaming Pakistan for this heinous act of terrorism. Contrarily, Pakistan asked India to come with proper and credible pieces of evidence. However, in the next few days, both states started the violent skirmishes across the Line of Control (LoC) (Rawnsley, 2025). The rivalry between the two countries was further strained by the drone attacks from each side over the major cities of the other. Amidst this, Pakistan claims that it shot down the Rafale jet, the most prominent air combat tool of India.

This episode of war shattered the remaining India-Pakistan trade prospects, plunging bilateral relations into a vortex of nuclear tensions. India's retaliatory measures, halting \$1.2B bilateral trade, closing the Attari-Wagah border, and suspending the Indus Waters Treaty, devastated Pakistan's fragile

economy, with a 7.4% fiscal deficit and 16 \$ B reserves (Vivek, 2025). Pakistan's reciprocal trade ban and airspace closures, coupled with nuclear saber-rattling, including threats of "full-spectrum" retaliation, further entrenched economic isolation. Non-tariff barriers and logistical disruptions, already costing 15% annually (Sarda, 2025), worsened trade stagnation. As both nations exchanged missile strikes under India's Operation Sindoor, global calls for de-escalation failed to revive trade, dimming prospects for South Asia's economic integration and amplifying risks of a nuclear-fueled regional crisis. The blame game of the Indian government in the aftermath of the Phalgam attack is a sign that bilateral trade is now a doomsday dream, and its possibility seems zilch in the near future.

### **Key Challenges of Bilateral Trade between Pakistan and India**

There is no escaping the fact that a huge untapped economic potential exists between Pakistan and India. The mutual trade between the nations could have a very positive impact on the economies of these nations. Unfortunately, the trade relations fail to underlie the desired outcomes because of the key rivalries between the states. These crises have been spearheaded during Modi's regime, too. Following is the list of critical factors that helped the high level of mutual trade between both nations:

#### **1. Ultra-nationalism of the economy**

The ultranationalism of the BJP and Sangh Parivar has found Narendra Modi a very suitable candidate to boost the saffron fascism. The fascist policies of Modi hindered the economic relations with Pakistan, mainly because of Indian national pride (Jaffrelot, 2019). The neo-realists argue it too that the leadership plays a critical role in perceiving their narrative to consolidate their interests. Surprisingly, he amalgamated ultranationalism with the neo-liberal economic policies. On one hand, Modi is hindering trade with the notion of Indian Pride, while maintaining the Free Markets strategy, on the other hand. In this regard, the saffron fascism of the BJP hinders the economic trade with Pakistan based on national superiority, religious courtesy, and its arch-rivalry with Pakistan.

Apart from this, nationalism has been in demand from the Pakistani side too. For instance, when Pakistan granted India MFN status, a large score of hullabaloo was created in Pakistan by the ultranationalists. Even in the minds of common people, the trade with India is diametrically opposite to the two-nation theory propagated during the inception of Pakistan (Singh, 2023). Hence, the recent emergence of ultranationalism on both sides impedes the fruitful bilateral trade between Pakistan and India.

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## 2. Cross-border terrorism mantra

The term terrorism has been deeply entrenched in the politics of Pakistan and India. The Kashmir issue has not only fueled tensions between the states but also has broader implications, including the proliferation of terrorism. Various militant groups have been operating in the region, with some receiving support or antipathy from the official elements of both states. The Pathankot, Uri, Mumbai, and Pahalgam attacks in India were blamed on Pakistan. On the other hand, the rise of Indian spy politics has been evident in Pakistan too. Pakistani forces captured an Indian spy (Kalboshan Jadev) from the sensitive area of Balochistan province. Similarly, it is also on board that India had allegations of up to 20 assassinations on foreign soil, significantly in Pakistan (Waqas et al., 2024). This shows that variables of domestic politics, like terrorism and extremism, also play an important role in the geopolitics of these two nations, which is a basic tenet of Neo-classical Realism. Resultantly, the environment of fear and distrust evolves across the border. The public also demands to shut off all the trade systems of the country that promote terrorism on their soil. Hence, this cross-border blame game, crystallized by the advent of Modi politics, hampers the effectiveness of mutual trade between both nations.

## 3. Major trade barriers

The trade between Pakistan and India has always been mired in the middle of major trade barriers. Apart from the aforementioned political and strategic crises, the following trade barriers hinder trade liberalization between the states:

### a. Lack of land/rail route

A recent study shows that 80 % of Indians and 90 % of Pakistanis prefer the road route for bilateral trade. There is no escaping the fact that freight trains are more convenient, yet they are insufficient to get the desired results for high-class trade. In fact, in the 1994 pact, India identified 13 land routes for trade with Pakistan, but presently, Pakistan India trade is permitted on only one land route, i.e., Attari-Wahgah Cross Border (Dar et al., 2023).

### b. Illicit drug trafficking

The undocumented economy or drug trafficking between both states has been done by the hawala/hundi business. The study shows that 60 % of people in Pakistan and 72 % of people in India desire the Hawala/Irregular payment in bilateral trade. Recently, the wave of drug-carrying drones flying into India has been captured by the Pakistani authorities. Additionally, for a drug worth 600 crore, 14

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Pakistani men were caught in massive operations on the Gujrat Coast. This informal trade causes great damage to the state's control on both sides (Kulkarni, 2024).

**c. Non-tariff barriers**

Nonetheless, the lack of banking facilities and the expansion of informal trade via third countries are also part and parcel of informal business on both sides. The dissimilar customs procedures and visa restrictions directly impact the efficiency of mutual trade. Furthermore, (Gill & Maadan, 2015) propose that mutual trade is being hindered across the border because of the dismal labeling and packaging requirements as well. The under- or over-invoicing of goods is a primary factor of non-tariff barriers. The mishandling of goods and infrastructure constrains the social trust of people in their government. The lack of modern-day single window operation makes the traders less interested, and they prefer trading with other countries where they could get much easier.

**Opportunities at Hand for Pakistan**

Undoubtedly, there is a strong desire for bilateral economic cooperation from the Pakistani side. The foreign minister and Deputy PM of Pakistan, Mr. Ishaq Dar, desires to revamp the trade relations with India. In his press conference in London, he highlighted the eagerness of Pakistan's intentions to reconsider the trade relations with its neighboring nation. He was starkly clear about this and said, "We will seriously look into the matter of trade with India" (The Express Tribune, 2025). In another move, the top business community in Pakistan, in its meeting with PM Shahbaz Sharif, asserted the stabilization of relations with India. They complained that it is getting very hard to do business in Pakistan for many reasons. So, the Indian trade option must be open for Pakistan (Umair, 2024).

Despite all the odds, Pakistan also has much to gain indirectly from its Indian neighbor, specifically in the IT market. For instance, India ranks on 33 in the Global Innovation Index while its IT-BPM industry is estimated to have generated \$253.9 billion in revenue, with 11 % per annum growth. Recently, the job sector of India in the IT market has grown by 15-20 % across various industries (India IT Services Market Size & Outlook, 2030, 2024). For this, Narendra Modi aspires to make India a modern nation-state, specifically in the technological field. This invites Pakistan as a huge opportunity to gain access to the Indian IT market. Although the IT market of Pakistan itself is tapped at 3.2 \$ B (Umid, 2024), the Indian IT market is a viable option for Pakistan to maximize the technological interest. Consequently, this will have an overlapping effect on the other segments of the bilateral relations as well. The

gigantic Indian economic market is also an opportunity to lead the bilateral trade between Pakistan and India for the better utilization of their peaceful relations.

One of the chief contenders for Pakistan is the PM Modi's outreach programme to Afghanistan and the Central Asian republics. There is no denying the fact that the government of PM Modi has been exploring the regional markets to expand its economic output. For this, Central Asian Republics are being considered as a worthwhile market value for India. However, without the support of Pakistan, it seems difficult for India to reach out there. Similarly, PM Modi is actively seeking diplomatic and economic support in Afghanistan. Largely, the Indian projects like TAPI and CASA are the backbone of the economic stability in this region (Barari and Falarti, 2023). Comparatively, Pakistan possesses a strong hold in this region. It can facilitate the Indian market through Afghanistan and Central Asian states that will not only boost the economy of Pakistan but also open multifaceted doors of opportunities for bilateral trade between both states.

### **Pakistan-India Bilateral Trade and Its Impacts on South Asia**

Pakistan and India are the two major states in the South Asian region. Despite the huge potential of collaboration in South Asia, it remains the least integrated region due to the continuous tussle between the nations. It has also hindered the economic development in the region. According to recent stats, the inter-regional trade in South Asia is less than circa 3 %. The major impacts of the weak bilateral trade pattern in South Asia are under-mentioned:

#### **1. Political instability of the region**

The less preferential trade in the region spikes the political instability in the region. The countries like Pakistan and Afghanistan delve deep into the myriad of political uncertainty. Nonetheless, the recent spike in ultra-nationalist rhetoric against each other also makes these states less important in the region. Recently, the elected PM of the Maldives, Muizzu, led an anti-India campaign that further deteriorated the situation (Paul, 2018). The Pakistan-Afghanistan relations have also worsened, while the India-Pakistan tussle is most prominent. This political tussle among the countries is due to the absence of bilateral trade in South Asia. If these states were entangled in mutual trade, they would become more interdependent. As a result, the political sanity will prevail and the region will become stabilized.

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## **2. The influence of major powers**

The weak regional trade pattern in South Asia incentivizes the major powers to play their proxy politics in the region. The majority of the states are under the influence of the superpowers. Even due to less consensus, the states become part of the camp politics. The deleterious repercussion is that Pakistan and India are against each other. China has developed a mature economic link with small South Asian states. Although Nepal is somewhat closer to India in many sectors, China has promised 8.36 \$ B for infrastructure development and the Kathmandu-Lhasa rail link. The lease of Hambantota port to the Chinese company for 99 years also pushed Sri Lanka into the Chinese camp. In Bangladesh, China has initiated a 24.45 \$ B bilateral agreement for some 34 projects. The BCMEC is also a major factor that Bangladesh is siding with the Chinese economic camp. Furthermore, Pakistan is a key strategic partner for China. It encompasses the flagship project of CPEC (China Pakistan Economic Corridor), which includes major infrastructure projects like Highways, link roads, energy projects, etc (Baruah, 2018). In essence, South Asia has been divided into two regions because there is no collective economic consensus on one agenda among the states.

## **3. Lackadaisical infrastructure development**

The equation of direct relationship occurs between infrastructure development and economic growth. Due to the weak inter-regional trade, South Asia has seen poor and undeveloped infrastructure development across the region. It has a limited number of physical infrastructures of energy usage, paved roads, telephone lines, rail density, and air transport. No proper one-window operation is organized, while only one route of bilateral trade between Pakistan and India is used. The major checkpoints are outdated. Technological revelations are seen nowhere. Online trade bookings and goods records are absent in South Asia (Khan & et al., 2020). Although Pakistan and India have developed a hypothesis approach for infrastructure development across the region, the political rivalry doesn't let this happen. The rampant corruption and institutional failure also hinder infrastructural development. This is why trade potential has not been capped yet, and regions remain less integrated.

## **4. Dependence on global markets**

As the South Asian states do regional trade on a minimal level, their markets are largely captured by global financiers. China, the EU, the US, and Southeast Asian nations are the major proponents of trade in the region. As a result, trade with powerful global states often bears

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maximum expense. The transaction and transportation costs while trading with outside states increase to an incredible level. According to a recent analysis, the trade potential among South Asian states is very high. If they trade inter-regionally, it would increase their mutual trade up to millions of dollars. This will also lessen the competitive and comparative advantage game of the states. Hence, the burden of trade in South Asia has been shouldered by the foreign powers, who are using cheap labor and minimum profit. It also exposes South Asia to the vulnerabilities of global economic fluctuations and disruptions due to the over-reliance on external markets (Nawaz, 2020).

##### **5. Weak economic growth**

According to the World Bank report, South Asia is expected to grow strongly by 6 % in Fiscal Year 2024. However, this growth rate seems to be more deceptive. The major economic contributions in South Asia come from India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. But the structural challenges threaten to undermine sustained growth, hindering the region's ability to create jobs and respond to climate shocks. Unfortunately, for most of the states in the region, growth is still below the pre-pandemic level and is reliant on public spending. Public growth also has slowed sharply in all South Asian countries, and the region is not yet creating enough jobs to keep up with its rapidly growing working-age population (World Bank, 2024). A major reason for this is that the trade among the countries is very negligible. This lack of mutual trade consensus delays the growth rate of the whole of South Asia.

Therefore, improving trade between SAARC countries necessitates a multipronged strategy that tackles political and economic obstacles. Reducing tariffs, eliminating non-tariff trade obstacles, enhancing trade facilitation, making infrastructure investments, and assisting with trade finance, especially for SMEs (Small and Medium Enterprises), are important steps. Increasing trade capacity, encouraging investment, and fortifying customs cooperation can all help to improve regional trade efficiency. Long-term economic cooperation also depends on maintaining political stability, which includes settling territorial conflicts like Kashmir and promoting greater economic integration through programs like SAFTA. South Asian countries can realize their full trade potential and promote regional prosperity by putting these practical measures into practice.

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## Conclusion

Pakistan and India share a long border and cultural and historical ties. However, both states have long indulged in rivalry against each other. The trade relations between both states were managed at the maximum level throughout history, despite all the odds at the political level. The bilateral trade at the start was at a high level. However, the trade relations between both states remained fluctuating during Minister Modi's tenure. It has been profoundly shaped by the domestic politics and geostrategic proximities of Modi's India. Therefore, the Modi's economic nationalism and Pakistan's security-driven economics have derailed trade from 2600 \$ M in 2016 to the meagre 300 \$ M in 2021. Mainly, there is no possibility of bilateral trade on the ground by the PM Modi side, though Pakistan continuously emphasized it. The Kashmir politics, terrorism incidents, societal narratives, and non-organised economic barriers stifled the economic potential of both states. This also has an overlapping impact on the regional political economy of South Asia. The region is being considered as the Least-Integrated, with intra-regional trade only hinges to 3% (22 \$ B). This reflects the interstate rivalry, superpower influence, and weak infrastructure plans. For this, Pakistan still has multifaceted opportunities like leveraging CPEC, IT markets, and Silk trade routes. However, the need of the hour is to carry out holistic economic policies, reducing state-level barriers, and fostering economic-cum-political integration. These far-reaching steps are imperative for the regional prosperity, converging a shift from the political hostility to the economic interdependence.

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## Regional Cooperation and SCO: Analyzing China's Role in Regional Integration

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### ABSTRACT

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The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a transcontinental intergovernmental alliance, serves as a critical regional body across Eurasia. It was originally established to address border disputes among China, Central Asian states, and Russia. China's active engagement in the SCO reflects a broader shift in its foreign policy toward fostering regional integration, emphasizing political dialogue, security, and economic interdependence under the principles of the "Shanghai Spirit." Although the SCO has strengthened regional security and expanded its membership, various challenges persist, including conflicting national interests and rivalries among member states—particularly between India and Pakistan, and between China and India. Despite these challenges, the SCO remains a cornerstone of China's strategy to promote a multipolar world order, counter Western dominance, and reinvigorate its regional and global influence through peaceful multilateral engagement. This research aims to examine China's evolving role within the SCO, highlighting its transition from a cautious participant to a leading force driving counterterrorism efforts, economic cooperation through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and regional stability.

**Keywords:** shanghai cooperation organization (sco), eurasia, regional cooperation, economic security, china

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## **Introduction**

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is a coalition of states of Central Asia, Far East Asia, and Western European nations. Founded in 1996, the SCO's primary aim is to counter any external hostility (Albert, 2015). The states of China, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan collaborated to deter danger and enhance their presence globally. Initially formed as the Shanghai Five, comprising China, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan, this organization aims to resolve boundary disputes between China and Russia.

In 2001, Uzbekistan joined this group and changed its name to the SCO, which worked collectively to dissuade terrorism, radicalism, and separatism (Tolipov, 2015). Indeed, nearly 60% of the total territory of Eurasia is covered by the member states of the SCO (Answers to the Questions of the Video Conference "SCO – Shaping Eurasia," 2020). The member states share one-fourth of the world's population and, most importantly, comprise Russia and China, two key players in the international order. Most of the time, the SCO was not considered important in the field study of international relations, as this organization was comparatively new among other regional organizations. However, the importance and dynamism of regional institutions in the international order later increased the SCO's visibility.

China is an ardent advocate of peaceful coexistence, and following its open-door policy in the 1970s, it adopted measures that are strategically important for its coexistence with other states. China was initially reluctant to join any international or regional organization, as they were considered extensions of imperialism. However, after adopting its open-up policy, China developed influential and result-oriented foreign policy objectives in dealing with other states. China's fundamental foreign policy goal in the 1970s was to maintain its cordial relations with various states through active support in regional organizations.

Analysts from around the world have consistently observed China's strategy towards its relations with other states, as its economic growth and political development have positioned it among the emerging regional powers (Roland, 2021). By participating in regional organizations, China sought to secure its position in the international political arena and engage in regional issues crucial to its survival and security. As a developing state, China has shifted its stance from a reluctant participant to an active participant in regional and international organizations, and has improved its stance on ideology and interdependence among states. The SCO has concentrated chiefly on issues of regional security issues, ethnic separatism, the fight against regional terrorism, and religious extremism.

Nonetheless, the SCO holds the potential to both bolster and amplify China's ascent, primarily due to its regionalization and the allied nature of its member states. The collaborative approach of these states toward global affairs and politics is crucial in facilitating a peaceful rise for China. Despite recognized divergences and shortcomings in other regional entities, the SCO stands out as a promising success story, particularly in South and Southeast Asia, encompassing socio-economic, political, and security realms.

Figure 1: Shanghai Cooperation Organization



Source: Xinhua

### Analyzing Chinese Integration through Regional Integration Theory

China's regional integration policy is firmly rooted in a strategic vision to cultivate and strengthen regional economic interdependence and cooperation. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), an ambitious and expansive framework that aims to catalyze infrastructure development, reinforce trade relations, and facilitate people-to-people exchanges among countries across Asia, Europe, and Africa, is central to this policy (Bharti & Kumari, 2024). The BRI embodies a multifaceted and comprehensive approach, encompassing diverse sectors such as transportation, energy, and communications, with the overarching objective of fostering regional connectivity and mutually beneficial interactions.

Centered on the BRI, China's regional integration policy epitomizes a visionary and holistic approach to fostering economic interdependence, promoting connectivity, and nurturing collaborative partnerships within the

region and worldwide. By leveraging the BRI's multifaceted framework, which spans economic, cultural, and developmental dimensions, China endeavors to create a more interconnected and prosperous regional community that benefits all participating nations. The BRI is a testament to China's commitment to an inclusive, sustainable, and mutually beneficial path to regional integration and global cooperation.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) provides a compelling example of regional integration within the context of China's involvement. China actively participates in economic collaboration, trade agreements, and infrastructure projects within the SCO, contributing to regional economic integration (Alimov, 2018). Additionally, the SCO serves as a platform for political dialogue and joint efforts on global issues, fostering political integration. Initially formed to address security challenges, the SCO involves China in collective security mechanisms, joint military exercises, and intelligence sharing. Beyond security and economic aspects, China's engagement in the SCO promotes cultural and social integration through people-to-people exchanges and cultural events. China's active role in SCO institutions, such as the SCO Secretariat and the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), contributes to institutional integration (Khan et al., 2023). The functional spillover effect is evident in the SCO's broadening areas of cooperation, encompassing economic initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and collaboration in health and technology. China's participation in the SCO reflects a multifaceted approach to regional integration across economic, political, security, and social dimensions.

### **Evolution of the SCO**

Following the disintegration of the USSR, border disputes arose between these countries, prompting them to resolve the issue of the former Soviet-Chinese state borders. For this purpose, China initiated bilateral negotiations with the former Soviet Republics to reduce the burden of border troops and prevent any problems on its western borders. On the contrary, Russia and the Central Asian states sought to avoid a power vacuum with China following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Central Asian states also wanted to avoid any territorial claims in Central Asia by the economic giant China.

The negotiations spanned five years, culminating in 1996, when the leaders of these nations convened in Shanghai, China, to formally sign the "Treaty on Strengthening Trust in Military Affairs in the Border Regions." This treaty marked a significant milestone in the evolution of what was then known as the "Shanghai Five," the precursor to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) (Küçük, 2009).

One year later, in April 1997, leaders from these states gathered in Moscow to sign “The Treaty on Mutual Reduction of Military Forces on the Borders.” This agreement stipulated the deployment of 130,400 military personnel and the establishment of a demilitarized zone extending 100 kilometers along the Chinese border with the other four participating states(Çayan, 2019). The third summit of the member states took place in Almaty, Kazakhstan, in July 1998. During this summit, the leaders signed a joint agreement aimed at countering various transnational threats, including ethnic separatism, terrorism, religious fundamentalism, drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and cross-border crimes. The subsequent summit, held in Bishkek in August 1999, saw the leaders of the five nations sign the “Bishkek Declaration.” This declaration underscored their commitment to combat separatist, terrorist, and religious fundamentalist forces in the region(Chung, 2012).

In July 2000, the annual summit of the Shanghai Five convened in Dushanbe, Tajikistan. During this summit, the fight against the “three evils” – separatism, terrorism, and religious fundamentalism – took center stage(Lynch & Helms, 2024). As a result, the organization evolved from the “Shanghai Five” to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Notably, Uzbekistan participated as an observer member for the first time during this summit. The “Dushanbe Declaration” was signed, emphasizing increased cooperation among member states to combat the “three evils” and the establishment of an anti-terrorism center. At this juncture, Chinese leader Jiang Zemin proposed the transformation of the annual summits into a permanent institutional organization, marking the conclusion of the “Shanghai Five” era at the Dushanbe summit in 2000. The subsequent summit took place in Shanghai on June 14-15, 2001, marking a historic moment as it formally established the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), with Uzbekistan becoming a new permanent member. During this pivotal summit, the original Shanghai Five member states, now joined by Uzbekistan, signed the “Declaration on the Establishment of the SCO.” This landmark agreement reaffirmed the collective commitment to combat the “three evils,” thereby fortifying the principles initially articulated in the “Bishkek Declaration” of 1999.

The Declaration highlights the importance of the “Shanghai Spirit,” a concept succinctly encapsulated by five core principles, often referred to as the five “C’s”: confidence, communication, cooperation, coexistence, and common interest. It is crucial to emphasize that the “Shanghai Spirit” does not entail the formation of a traditional alliance; instead, it signifies an open framework for cooperation and partnership among participating states within the realm of politics(Yang, 2012). A pivotal moment in the evolution of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) occurred during the landmark

Summit 2002, hosted in St. Petersburg. This summit catalyzed the signing of two seminal agreements: “The Charter of the SCO” and the “Agreement on the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure. “The Charter of the SCO” comprises 26 articles that elucidate the organization’s fundamental principles. These articles outline essential aspects, including administrative structures, financial mechanisms, organizational objectives, membership criteria, interactions with other member states, and the decision-making processes within the SCO. This charter serves as a comprehensive framework guiding the operational aspects and governance of the SCO, laying a solid foundation for its continued development and cooperation among member states(Ali et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the Charter emphasizes the importance of fostering cooperation across various areas, including trade, energy, economics, science and technology, environmental conservation, and cultural exchange. These aspects collectively embody the essence of the five “C’s” encapsulated in the “Shanghai Spirit”: mutual benefit, respect for sovereignty and the territorial integrity of other states, a commitment to non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign nations, the pursuit of equitable relations, the peaceful resolution of disputes, and the fostering of cooperation among member states within the purview of the organization.

It is also significant that the only non-administrative body of RATS (Agreement on the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure) was established to combat the “three evils.” The RATS provides information on any terrorist activities to other member states and creates a database of terrorist organizations linked with any terrorist activities. The RATS also accumulates information on the dynamics, status, and trends that contribute to the spread of terrorism. Several agreements have been signed within the SCO to regulate various aspects of combating international terrorism.

It should be noted that the Convention of the SCO addresses the desires of its member states more cooperatively. It not only defines the definition of terrorism but also helps to indicate the principles of jurisdiction regarding terrorism, with the establishment of national laws to criminalize terrorist activities and offenses considered a crime by universal counterterrorism conventions. The Convention also provides an environment of international peace and security within the framework of the SCO. The cooperation includes the fight against the illegal trafficking of narcotic drugs, explosives, ammunition, and weapons. Joint exercises, sharing valuable information, and training of officials are also a part of the cooperation. In this respect, joint anti-terrorist exercises were held as “Peace mission 2012” in Tajikistan with troops from China, Russia, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan(Jingxi & Yinan, 2013).

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The organization's member states also foster cooperation in all spheres, including the economy, agriculture, law, trade, finance, energy, transportation, aviation, telecommunications, space technology, culture, art, innovation, healthcare, sports, and tourism. At the same time, treaties are signed between the member states in cooperation outside the military-political sphere within the framework of the SCO.

### **Regionalism and Chinese Foreign Policy:**

The relations between China and other states have been traditionally dealt with under the principle of "LI," officially named the "Confusion Rule of Propriety" under the dynasty of Zhou(Qin, 2008). These principles governed social and domestic relations within the peripheries of China. The relations between China and its peripheral states compelled its neighbors to acknowledge the superiority of China's traditional legacy by paying tribute to the emperor.

The emperor of China adopted peaceful measures of persuasion in the peripheries by bringing non-Chinese entities into his empire without taking control over their territories. China sought to establish a legacy with the only known civilization of its own, which was termed 'Sino-centric.' They planned no formal expansion, as stated earlier in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when the Ming's policy on foreign affairs was one of isolationism. During the Ming dynasty, when China expanded under Admiral Zheng to the western oceans, it did not develop overseas colonies. However, Chinese interest in the Xinjiang region continued till the 16<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

After the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, China faced problems of colonization and foreign influence. Following the Opium War of 1842, China's territories were divided among the Western powers. This event evoked a sense of nationalism, accompanied by simultaneous feelings of pride and shame, which led to China's steps towards adopting a national rhetoric that emphasized the use of force to resolve the Taiwan issue if necessary. The Anti-Secession Law of 2005, passed by 'The National People's Congress,' compelled China to invade Taiwan under a legislative umbrella(Mendenhall, n.d.).

The Chinese leaders have acclaimed their growing role on the international level. A struggle for domination describes the philosophy of Realpolitik on the international level and China's interest in pitting its adversaries against each other, such as the United States. The free trade agreements between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and China, as well as the development of the SCO as a regional forum of cooperation, define China's influence in its peripheral region. Militarily, China has also developed its policies by elevating its traditional philosophy of isolation and seeking to develop relations outside its boundaries. Currently, China has

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emerged as a regional political and economic power with aspirations to expand its interests globally. If it continues to progress at this level, its aspirations will likely be realized as a world power soon.

China's foreign policy has significantly influenced the principles and philosophy underlying the SCO's cooperation, which aims to promote the inclusiveness of this organization. Its preamble from the 2002 Charter of SCO signifies the "Shanghai Spirit" as a mutual advantage, equality, mutual trust, respect for culture, mutual consultations, and joint development.

Moreover, the SCO, as a basis of international law, broadly reflects China's traditional foreign policy principle, also known as the "Five Principles of Coexistence," which dates back to the 1950s and 1960s and was incorporated into China's New Diplomacy in the region. The basic principles of SCO form an essential part of China's vision for a multipolar world, combating a world order shaped by hegemonic US influence and unilateralism. China and Russia have often asserted the uniqueness of the SCO as a new model of cooperation in international relations and a strategic partnership, rather than a traditional alliance (Vuori, 2024).

This 'New Regionalism' model of China with allies of new types is defined as functional and interest-based cooperation among member states, primarily based on respect for mutual state sovereignty. The SCO has huge symbolic significance for China, as it marks the first time in its history that China has demonstrated its capacity to contribute its norms and values through its soft power diplomacy in a multilateral strategic partnership with Russia. The objectives of SCO are rooted in an absolute sense of security, which defines China's concept of 'New Security.' Practically, during the initial phase, the SCO's engagements were focused on cooperation in security, as evidenced by the creation of a joint anti-terror specialized structure and a substantial legal framework for combating crime in other territories.

In contrast, the development of SCO was prolonged. The energy and infrastructure cooperation program for multilateral development needs significant improvement in the future. The Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) was the only permanent working body of the SCO; consequently, three non-governmental institutions—the Interbank Consortium, the Business Council, and the SCO Forum—were established to enhance this cooperation. China supports the creation of the SCO Development Bank to provide funding for various projects. China is the largest sponsor, contributing approximately US\$8-10 billion, which will enhance its economic and political development within the SCO (Grieger, 2015). On the other hand, Russia has opposed this move, as it would put China in a stronger position. However, it is suggested that a multilateral strategic development of these projects among permanent

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and observer members of the SCO will be financed by the Development Bank of the SCO.

The Chinese new concept of ‘regionalism’ is based on the desire to uphold a multi-polar system with the least military intervention from the other states. Chinese regionalism promotes ‘globalism,’ which is against any political affiliation, military alliance, or specific grouping. New regionalism, a product of globalization that reduces the world’s interference in individual issues, has become the common practice of powerful states. As the victim of the foreign invasion, China discourages any other power’s interference in any country’s domestic issues. A multi-polar world would provide a secure atmosphere where every state is equally important and distances itself from the complexities.

### **China’s Strategic Engagement with the SCO: Interests, Integration, and Regional Influence**

China’s new diplomacy dates back to the 1970s with its open-up policies toward the West. Since then, its enormous economic development has stunned the world. For developing states, China stands out as a victorious state; for the West, China was perceived as a potential threat to the existing status quo. However, the primary focus of China was to emerge as a peaceful state by engaging in certain activities that added to China’s peaceful rise. One such instrument is the engagement in regional and international organizations.

China’s comprehensive involvement in the world, politics, and multilateral engagements with the rest of the world portrayed that China is in favor of a multi-polar world and that is, however, considered as a threat to Western hegemony, whether in an international forum such as the United Nations or regional level, such as the SCO is considered a divergence for the world against Western power. Additionally, China noted that becoming a part of regional and international organizations could bring recognition to the People’s Republic of China. That is why China wanted to join the United Nations Organization. China’s participation extended to more than 50 international organizations (IOs) and involved engagement with over 1,275 international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) by 2021 (Kent, 2001). China has also participated in numerous ad-hoc negotiations on topics ranging from public health to arms control and climate change.

In the 1990s, China emerged as a significant economic power, and its sustained growth sparked unease in the West. At the same time, scholars believe that China is a revisionist state that wants to change the world’s existing status quo; thus, China’s emergence is perceived as a threat, and its comprehensive involvement in regional and international organizations is considered an act of hegemony(Ambassador Chas W. Freeman, Jr., USFS

(Ret.), 2010). As Napoleon had predicted, “*When China woke from its slumbers, it would astonish the world.*”

China envisioned new security, economic, and political arrangements through its new diplomacy in the post-Cold War era, when the United States emerged as a dominant economic, political, and military power following the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Under this arrangement, China ensured its security through dialogues, mutual confidence-building measures, and equality of rights. The new arrangement pushed China to adopt those concrete measures crucial for its development. One such step is the formation of the SCO.

This desire led China to create the SCO to resolve existing disputes with the newly emerged Central Asian States, and the consequent Russian desire to maintain friendly relations with China and the CARs was another important factor. China’s ‘new security idea’ prompted efforts to unite these states and Russia to foster confidence-building and address common dangers and concerns. SCO established itself as an influential organization in the Central Asia region. That is why SCO was conceived by two major powers that play a significant role in international politics. China has numerous interests related to the formation and progress of the SCO.

#### **i. Security Interests**

China’s active involvement in the SCO is chiefly driven by its commitment to fostering security cooperation. Given its proximity and shared borders with several SCO member states, China places considerable importance on regional stability to safeguard its national interests. Particularly, China is deeply concerned about countering the “Three Evils” - terrorism, separatism, and extremism. China collaborates with fellow member states within the SCO framework to address these security challenges, enhance intelligence sharing, and conduct joint military exercises.

The Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) plays a pivotal role in coordinating counterterrorism efforts among its member countries. China’s active participation in security cooperation through the SCO is geared towards averting the spillover of instability from neighboring regions and safeguarding its territorial integrity. By actively engaging in security initiatives, China seeks to foster a secure environment and contribute to regional peace and stability within the SCO’s purview.

Following the creation of Central Asian countries, it was feared that numerous boundary conflicts would heighten the region’s security and threat perception. Through SCO, China and Russia have attempted to mitigate those threats through mutual dialogues and security

parameters. What is important for Central Asian states is that the SCO, unlike NATO, is not a military alliance. Besides that, the presence of China as a member would create a relaxing environment for CARs, in which Russia would not intervene in its former territories.

The ‘Great Western Development Plan’ of 2000 in China has been ineffective due to instability in the resource-rich but economically backward Xinjiang province, a window for Central Asia to China (Kong, 2021). The concept of ‘Marching West’ in China aims to enhance connectivity between Central Asia and the Xinjiang Province, thereby securing and opening up energy supplies to Chinese manufacturers’ markets (Zhu et al., 2022).

The SCO has been established to promote China’s interests in its domestic security and counter external threats through joint anti-terror policies among SCO members. This policy is supported by every member state of the SCO, which has been facing problems of religious extremism, regional terrorism, and ethnic separatism in their countries. The members of the SCO have agreed to cooperate in fighting against the three evils mentioned above, which are addressed in the 2000 and 2009 Conventions against Terrorism.

Development and a legal framework for workable national laws over inter-regional crime are the prime dynamics of the SCO. China has gained support against region-wide religious extremism, terrorism, and separatism through the creation of an anti-terror unit of RATS in Tashkent. After its creation in 2004, the mechanism of RATS has prevented around 1000 terrorist attacks and has successfully arrested around 650 terrorists (Alimov, 2017).

The greatest achievement of the SCO in terms of security cooperation is the arrangement of joint military exercises in various member states, which have been conducted in bilateral or multilateral formats since 2002. In August 2014, the SCO Peace Mission 2014 brought together around 7,000 troops to arrange anti-terror exercises on Chinese territory in the Mongolia province. These exercises were primarily arranged as a tool of deterrence because the Charter of the SCO does not provide for collective intervention in another member state’s territory (Wang Xu, 2014).

The “Peace Mission 2021”, an intergovernmental military exercise focused on counter-terrorism, was officially inaugurated in Orenburg, Russia, on Monday under the auspices of the SCO (Bin, 2022). It represented the collective commitment of SCO member states, including China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, India, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan; the exercise involved approximately

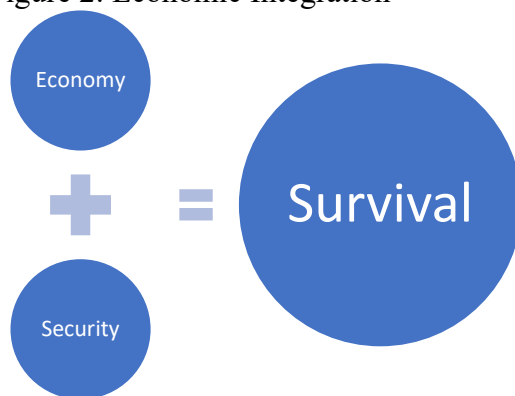
4,000 military personnel. Notably, China contributes a contingent of 558 troops to the multinational undertaking.

**ii. Economic Integration**

China's involvement in the SCO is closely tied to its regional economic interests. As the world's second-largest economy, China seeks to promote its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) through the SCO framework. The SCO enables China to enhance trade and connectivity with Central Asian states, thereby facilitating greater regional economic integration.

Economy, following security, is among the most important foreign policy objectives that China has adopted. Economy and security are considered crucial for its survival in the international system.

Figure 2: Economic Integration



*(Made by the Authors)*

The Chinese economy is largely dependent on energy imports and raw materials, which are abundant in Central Asia. The SCO forum has enabled China to foster its strategic relationships with Central Asian nations through bilateral and multilateral channels. China aims to connect Xinjiang to its peripheral economic giants through large-scale projects, aiming to boost the province's economic development and energy resources. China has strengthened its ties with Central Asian states and signed significant agreements with these states under the framework of the SCO. China has also developed a mixture of trade, investment, and loans as a trade partnership in Central Asia. It has achieved significant bilateral trade gains among SCO members and China, increasing from US\$12.1 billion in 2001 to US\$130 billion in 2013. This Central Asian trade accounts for only a marginal portion of China's comprehensive trade (Grieger, 2015).

Through the platform of the SCO, China has successfully achieved its two major goals; firstly, through cooperation and mutual

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dialogue, China has successfully secured its border of Xinjiang sector from the Muslim fundamentalists and gained Central Asian support in crushing the Uighurs' revolt. Secondly, by promoting cooperation, China has successfully maintained its economic relations with the Central Asian states and the USSR. Through this, China maintained its economic prosperity and contributed to the economic growth of other member states.

**iii. Political Interests**

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 reshaped the geopolitical landscape of Central Asia. China seized this opportunity and utilized the SCO platform to transform its economic and political interests into a geopolitical space, competing with countries like Russia, Europe, and the USA in the 'New Great Game.' China's interest is to build a stable peripheral territory in the region through soft power based on mutual economic and security interests.

China and Russia emerged as the major powers in Central Asia following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. SCO became a forum to maintain a balance of power between the two traditional rivals of Central Asia. This balance resulted in mutual support for political assistance at the global level, as seen in the United Nations. China refrains from criticizing Russia, such as regarding the annexation of Crimea, and Russia abstains from discussing China's growing assertiveness in the South and East China Sea, while supporting it against US containment.

China has provided an alternative to Russia for Central Asian states through its regional forum. It has successfully dominated Russia and has notably expanded its investment and trade in Central Asian states, while developing strategic and diplomatic footholds, allowing it to decrease Western influence in the region. China has significantly achieved its regional security interests, but does not want to enter any competition or rivalry with Russia. China and Russia have complementary interests in energy matters, as Russia's economy is largely dependent on energy exports, while China relies on external energy resources and supplies. One of the best examples of this complementarity is the recent Sino-Russian gas deal, projected to be worth US\$400 billion (Anishchuk, 2014).

**China's Achievements in the SCO:**

As a regional organization, the SCO has developed gradually over the past few years. It has developed significantly from six to nineteen members, including observer states and dialogue partners. The SCO's most significant

achievement is that it has mitigated emerging tensions between member states and fostered a self-sustaining mechanism for cooperation in both the political and economic spheres. China is associated with its members through different means of cooperation. For example, Russia and China have a strategic partnership. Kazakhstan and China also have a strategic partnership. Uzbekistan and China have a cooperative and friendly partnership. Most recently, tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia have cooled down over the SCO forum. Moreover, the SCO influences the policies of its member states, neighboring countries, and other regional and international organizations through its collaborative approach.

The concept of China's New Diplomacy is realized in the development of regional cooperation (Medeiros & Fravel, 2003). Under the New Security Concept, China and the SCO member states have resolved traditional border disputes, cooperated on anti-terrorism policies, and fostered mutual trust and confidence. It has promoted cooperation in energy and trade under the New Development Approach, and has fostered culture and social institutions in line with the concept of a Harmonious World and a New Civilization. China has made significant progress by resolving border disputes and fostering economic and cultural cooperation. Moreover, with the development of the SCO, China has shifted its position from an international challenger to a more responsible world power, establishing bilateral and multilateral relations with other states and transforming its communist nation into an effective, economically and culturally enriched country (Abbasi & Liaqat, 2024).

### **Challenges for China and Member States within the SCO:**

Several problems impede regional cooperation among its member states within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Some of them are explained below:

#### **National interest over regional cooperation:**

The SCO members lack a common set of targets in the region. The diverse and wide-ranging agendas of the organization weaken its potential for success. The member states have their agendas to meet based on their national interest. China seeks a potential market for its products, a growing economy, and energy resources to sustain and expand, while Russia wants to regain its status as a regional power within the CIS and on the international forum. The Central Asian states seek China's support for their survival, while India and Pakistan look towards the West, demonstrating that they are following their own course. The newly upgraded permanent status of Iran poses a stance of anti-Americanism. This mixture of divergent aspirations signifies that not all member states of the SCO share many common interests (Hasnat & Awan, 2016).

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## **Cooperation versus Divergence**

The annual summits of the SCO mark its expansion through cooperation. The deliberation of agencies and ministers shows strategic partnerships between the states. It is also observed that not every decision is made at these summits, but rather is taken up in other forums. For example, the Bishkek Summit in 2007 demonstrated a mutual agreement on the foundation of an 'Energy Club' in the region, which the Moscow administration announced on August 1 in the capital city of China. It is a good example of SCO cooperation as a growing regional organization, which emphasizes a more developed infrastructure than the respective Heads of State can pursue in their annually held meetings (Afzal-ur-Rahman, 2008).

## **Conflicting Stances**

The possible areas of difference in objectives are not limited to the traditional Sino-Soviet relationships, but are also present in other areas within the SCO. The relationship between China and Kazakhstan appears strained due to conflicting issues related to the 2007 Peace Mission. Despite having permanent membership and exercising the SCO, the Kazakh government severely failed due to its reluctance to pass legislation allowing foreign troops to cross its borders. The most suitable route for troops in central Russia to cross from Xinjiang to Chelyabinsk is through Kazakhstan. When it was not allowed to enter its territory, the PLA troops were forced to choose an alternative route to Russian training fields, which was more than 10,000 km (Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2024). However, after failing to repel Chinese troops from its territory, Kazakhstan made several agreements with China, including cooperation in the energy sector, to lower the tension between the countries. It decided to maintain better trade relations with the West, which was totally against Russia's interests in the region.

Another problem lies between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which have rivalries in the region. Moreover, relationships between India and Pakistan have been antagonistic for a very long period. Due to these opposing interests among member states, cooperation under the SCO's umbrella might again transform into an arms confrontation. The consequences of this conflict could be dangerous and counter to the central idea of unity within the SCO. Furthermore, if Iran supports radical Islamist groups within these countries, then the national security of one or more states would be challenged.

Recently, several issues have also exacerbated tensions between China and India. One significant challenge is the Doklam standoff in 2017, where both countries faced off over a disputed border area near Bhutan (Saran & Dong, 2017). This confrontation highlighted the complexities of border

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demarcations and territorial claims, leading to military brinkmanship and heightened concerns about regional stability.

Another contentious issue is China's close alliance with Pakistan, India's arch-rival, particularly evident in the context of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The CPEC, a major component of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), passes through Azad Kashmir, a territory that India has long claimed as its own. This development has further strained bilateral relations and heightened geopolitical rivalries.

Moreover, China's assertive territorial claims in the South China Sea affect India's strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region. India has expressed concerns over China's expanding maritime influence, which affects the freedom of navigation and regional stability.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) serves as a platform for Central Asian States, China, and Russia to peacefully resolve territorial disputes and collectively combat the "three evils": terrorism, separatism, and extremism. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) operates across key domains, particularly on security, political development, and economic integration, which are considered pivotal components. Member states are committed to regional advancement, demonstrating a collective pledge to refrain from employing force against one another while actively considering mutual interests. Initially conceived as a confidence-building mechanism to address territorial disputes, the SCO underwent a notable transformation, particularly in its military and economic dimensions, following the events of September 11, 2001. In response to evolving geopolitical challenges, member states are increasingly focused on enhancing security cooperation to bolster the effectiveness of counterterrorism, counter-separatism, and counter-extremism efforts, thereby safeguarding shared interests.

As a multilateral institution, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) offers a platform for member states to express their concerns on a range of issues. Conversely, China has emerged as one of the world's most influential and powerful nations, garnering global attention through its remarkable economic progress and political development. Notably, China's foreign policy is distinguished by a longstanding commitment to non-expansionist principles, reflecting a historical pattern of peaceful coexistence. Nonetheless, SCO plays a pivotal role in China's regional engagement, providing a unique platform for member states to interact politically and collaboratively in pursuit of common goals.

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## China's Ascendancy in the Digital Economy: An Appraisal

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### ABSTRACT

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This article investigates the rapid growth of China's digital economy over a past decade, highlighting its strategic alignment with global economic competition and technological advancements. To foster its digital economy, China has focused on two core development paths i.e., Digital Industrialization, which modernizes the telecommunications, IT sector and Industrial Digitalization, which upgrades traditional industries through technology like IoT, cloud computing, and AI. This study examines how digital infrastructure development, leading in 5-G technology, and fiber optic network has contributed to significant growth in China's digital economy. By 2021, China has surpassed its digital economy by \$7 Trillion, ranking it at the second position, just behind the US. (Breifing 2023). Under President Xi's "Digital China" initiative and preferential policies and regulatory reforms, China has successfully enhanced its digital infrastructure while confronting the challenges of cyber security and governance through a state-led model. This article provides a comprehensive analysis of China's digital strategies, the impact on Industrial upgrading, and the critical role of cybersecurity, thus offering the valuable insights into future trajectories for International digital economic competition, technological progress and cyber governance.

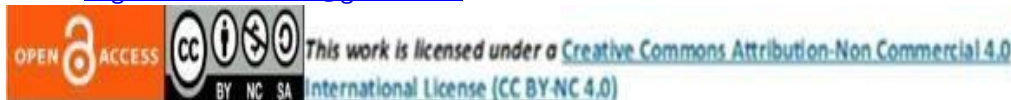
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This article employs a qualitative content analysis, relying on policy documents, strategic reports, and scholarly literature. In the midst of an increasingly competitive global economic order, China faces mounting cybersecurity challenges that not only test the resilience of its growth model but also shape its capacity to sustain influence as a leading actor on the world stage. Being the future of the global economic outlook, the digital economy will remain one of the key factors to propel the economic prosperity of China.

**Keywords**

digital economy, infrastructure, innovation, preferential policies, challenges, cyber security

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**Introduction:**

The information age has ushered in unprecedented connectivity and a wide range of economic activities, making business processes more accessible while reshaping the ways people access and use goods and services. Digital technological proliferation has brought numerous benefits, from the convenience of online purchasing to the rapid accessibility of goods at the doorstep. The globalization and digitization of economic architecture have also compressed spatial and temporal dimensions of interactions and engagements. The digital economy, built upon modern information networks that use data as the primary means of connectivity, has become a principal determinant of global economic growth (Zhang and Ran, 2023). Beyond scale, the digital economy enhances efficiency, high-quality production, and structural improvements across various economic sectors (Daud & Ahmad, 2023). Furthermore, digital economic practices have also shaped traditionally low-performing sectors, driving marked growth and profitability. Recognizing this transformative potential, China has embarked on an accelerated path of digital transformation to keep pace with developed global economies. While the global economic order largely favors neoliberal practices and free-market principles, China has selectively integrated these within a state-driven model, aligning its economic policies with the emerging global digital architecture to maximize both strategic and economic gains.

Despite these advances, China faces critical challenges that threaten the resilience and sustainability of its digital growth trajectory. Rapid technological innovation, coupled with escalating cybersecurity threats and governance complexities, poses significant risks to economic stability and national security. The ever-growing geopolitical competition, particularly with the United States, adds further complexity to China's efforts to secure its

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position as a leading digital economy. This confluence of challenges creates an urgent need for China to develop innovative strategies that balance technological advancement, economic development, and robust cybersecurity governance.

This paper argues that China's distinct model of digital development characterized by state-led digital industrialization and industrial digitalization effectively addresses these multifaceted challenges. By fostering indigenous innovation, constructing vibrant digital infrastructure such as 5G and data centers, and implementing comprehensive cybersecurity measures under the "Digital China" agenda, China aims to strengthen its economic sovereignty while securing a competitive edge in the global digital economy. Through this integrated approach, China not only sustains rapid growth but also shapes emerging digital markets and standards in ways that are aligned with its long-term strategic interests.

Innovative technologies such as cloud computing, artificial intelligence, and 5G have become principal drivers of the digital economy, transforming industries including manufacturing, medical, energy, and agriculture. In 2021, China's digital economy reached a valuation of \$7.01 trillion, ranking second only to the United States (Breifing, 2023). Yet, the exponential growth of the digital economy also exposes China to significant cybersecurity risks ranging from sophisticated cyberattacks to system vulnerabilities that could undermine trust and economic stability. To mitigate these threats, China has adopted preferential policies, targeted funding, and regulatory reforms aimed not only at upgrading industry and securing infrastructures but also at fostering a culture of cybersecurity across government, industry, and civil society.

Cybersecurity is crucial for protecting digital assets and ensuring the reliability and integrity of digital systems, with far-reaching implications for economic trust and social sustainability (Kaspersky, 2019; Kala, 2023). The growing integration of digital behaviors and technologies, which supports sustainable digitalization, requires coordinated efforts to manage evolving cyber risks effectively (Mondejar et al., 2021). Moreover, the advent of 5G technology has heightened cybersecurity challenges and intensified digital competition globally, notably between China and the US (Wheeler and Simpson, 2019).

This study examines multiple dimensions of China's rapidly growing digital economy, highlighting its transformative impact on Chinese society and industry. It confirms that China's development, supported by state initiatives such as the "Digital China" strategy, preferential policies, and regulatory frameworks, has underpinned the sustainable growth and governance of the digital economy. By analyzing China's digital model and

its response to cybersecurity and governance challenges, this paper provides valuable insights into how China seeks to outpace global digital competitors and secure economic influence in an increasingly contested digital landscape. The study contributes to broader discussions on international cybersecurity challenges, policy responses, and strategic digital competition, and holds particular importance given the limited existing scholarship on China's digital economic governance.

## **Cybersecurity and the Digital Economy**

The digital economy thrives on secure digital infrastructures, making cybersecurity a foundational pillar of its growth and sustainability. Defined broadly as the economic activities enabled by digital technologies and data-driven networks, the digital economy encompasses online trade, financial services, cloud platforms, and information and communication technologies (ICTs). As these activities expand, they generate vast quantities of valuable data, including financial records, intellectual property, and personal information. Protecting these assets from cyberattacks such as hacking, phishing, and malware has become indispensable, as breaches not only threaten individuals and firms but also destabilize entire markets (Vermesan & Friess, 2022).

Cybersecurity is equally vital for ensuring the integrity and reliability of digital networks. Disruptions caused by cyberattacks can halt business operations, undermine governmental functions, and erode public trust in digital services. In this sense, cybersecurity is not only a technical safeguard but also a prerequisite for building confidence in digital platforms. Without effective protection, individuals and organizations may resist adopting online services such as e-commerce, remote work, and digital finance, thereby constraining the growth potential of the digital economy (Kala, 2023). Thus, robust cybersecurity governance underpins both the economic and social dimensions of digital transformation, ensuring resilience and inclusivity in an increasingly data-driven world (Kaspersky, 2019; Mondejar et al., 2021). Given this centrality of cybersecurity, effective governance—both national and global—becomes crucial for managing risks that transcend borders. The next section therefore examines the concept of global governance and its relevance in shaping the rules, norms, and institutions of the digital age.

## **2. Global Governance**

### **2.1 Definition of Global Governance:**

Global governance can be defined as the system of institutions, rules, norms, and procedures that enable international cooperation on issues that

cross national borders. These issues include economic development, trade, human rights, peace and security, and environmental protection.

Global governance broadly entails making, monitoring, and enforcing rules. Within global governance, a variety of types of actors not just states exercise power. The concept of global governance began in the mid-19th century. It became particularly prominent in the aftermath of World War I, and more so after the end of World War II. Since World War II, the number of international organizations has increased substantially. The number of actors (whether they be states, non-governmental organizations, firms, and epistemic communities) who are involved in governance relationships has also increased substantially.

In the digital age, global governance is crucial for managing the complex, multi-layered interactions within cyberspace, which spans technological infrastructure, data standards, regulatory oversight, and social-economic usage. As the Internet evolved from a communication tool into a platform for economic exchange, political discourse, and even military strategy, the importance of coordinated governance mechanisms has become indispensable (Wheeler & Simpson, 2019).

## 2.2 Components of Global Governance:

Global governance operates through an intersection of various components that collectively shape its functioning in cyberspace and beyond:

**Technological Infrastructure:** This foundational layer includes the hardware and software systems, communication networks, and data centers that sustain the global digital environment. Organizations like the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) play a pivotal role here by managing technical standards, allocation of internet domains, and interoperability protocols (Chang & Grabosky, 2017).

**Regulatory and Policy Frameworks:** These establish the legal, ethical, and procedural norms governing digital activities across jurisdictions. Different governance models coexist, notably the multi-stakeholder approach favored by the United States, which emphasizes inclusivity of governments, industry, and civil society, and the state-led model adopted by China, which prioritizes centralized political control and sovereignty over information spaces (Asie & Visions, 2022). Hybrid systems, such as those in Singapore and Japan, blend state leadership with international cooperation and consultation, balancing national interests with global standards.

**Social and Economic Usage:** This component reflects how societies, economies, and cultures engage with digital spaces. It includes the behaviors of billions of internet users worldwide, digital commerce mechanisms, and the

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socio-political implications of digital content and interactions. The diverse and expanding global user base necessitates flexible and adaptive governance approaches to address issues from digital inclusion to cybersecurity (Kemp, 2024).

### **2.3 Future Trends of Global Governance:**

Emerging trends will shape the future landscape of global governance, particularly related to cyberspace:

The **Diversity of Internet Users** is expanding rapidly, especially in developing countries. This growth increases the complexity of governance, requiring adaptable and inclusive policies that can respond to varied cultural, political, and economic contexts (Kemp, 2024).

**Escalating Cybersecurity Threats** or ‘cyber-anomie’ including cyber fraud, data breaches, and attacks pose growing risks that impact governments, businesses, and individuals. The financial toll from cybercrime is projected to rise sharply, underscoring the urgent need for cooperative international security measures and resilient governance structures (Fox, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2024).

**Technological Innovations** such as artificial intelligence, blockchain, quantum computing, and next-generation network architectures will increasingly influence governance approaches. Countries investing in research, talent development, and innovation ecosystems i.e., the United States, Singapore, and Japan offer important lessons on integrating technological progress with governance (Ma, 2024; Asie & Visions, 2022).

The vision of **A Shared Future in Cyberspace** calls for enhanced multinational cooperation, trust-building initiatives, and the establishment of international consensus on regulatory norms. Effective governance will depend on strong institutions that involve enterprises, civil society, and governments alike, balancing industry responsibility with protection of rights and adaptive policy-making (Asie & Visions, 2022).

In all, successful global governance of cyberspace requires agile and multifaceted frameworks that can anticipate and respond to rapid technological developments, geopolitical shifts, and the evolving needs of diverse digital populations.

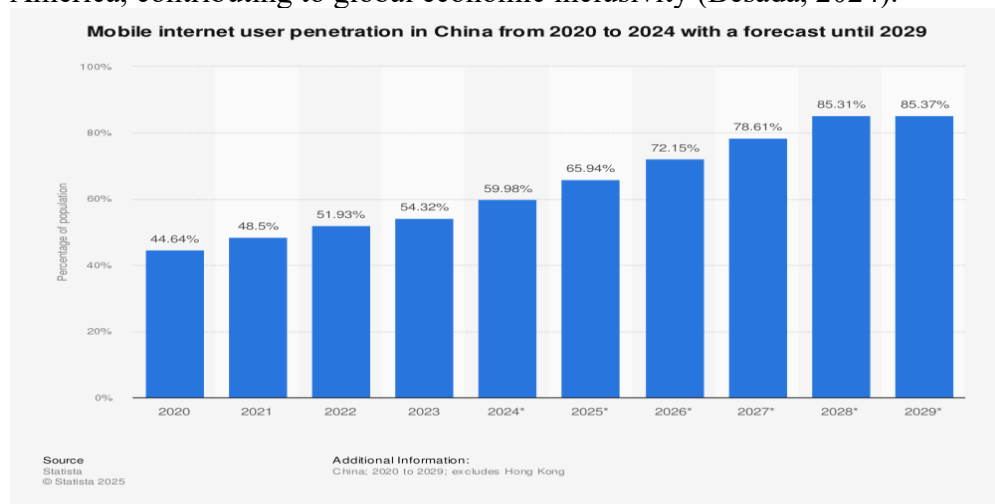
## **3. China’s Digital Economy:**

### **3.1 Historical Development of China’s Digital Economy:**

China's rapid digital transformation reflects the expansion of its vast digital community and an enduring appetite for technological innovation. By mid-2023, there were approximately 1.08 billion internet users in China,

almost double the number recorded in 2012. Over the same period, internet penetration soared from 42.1% to 76.4%, signaling widening digital inclusion across the country. This surge in connectivity supported the growth of internet enterprises from just over 50 at the close of 2012 to over 150 by mid-2023, illustrating an increasing quality and quantity of digital services (Xinhua, 2023).

This growth has had wide cultural effects, as digital technologies have permeated Chinese society. Imbach (2024) describes the evolution of Chinese digital communities under the concept of the Sino-cybersphere; an online environment reflecting China's cultural heritage through digital interaction, live-streaming, AI integration, e-commerce, technological exhibitions, and digital currencies. Moreover, China's digital influence extends internationally through knowledge transfer and training activities in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, contributing to global economic inclusivity (Besada, 2024).



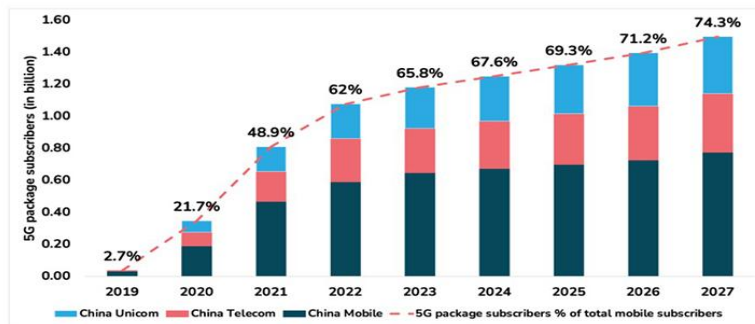
### 3.2 Current Trends, Goals, Initiatives, and Status:

The backbone of China's digital expansion lies in its world-leading digital infrastructure. China boasts the largest digital infrastructure globally, with a qualitative and quantitative edge in 5G technology that fuels connectivity and economic development (Chu, 2023). Compared to the US, which leads in internet penetration, China excels in mobile-first, fiber-concentrated, and wide-reaching digital networks. The rapid commercialization of competent local digital service providers underpins China's dominance in e-commerce and digital payments, driven by a vast population of dynamic digital consumers (Jiang & Murmann, 2022).

China's infrastructure achievements are remarkable: the percentage of optical fiber broadband connections surged from 11.6% in 2012 to 92.9% in 2019, placing China first globally. Over 98% of rural villages had optical fiber

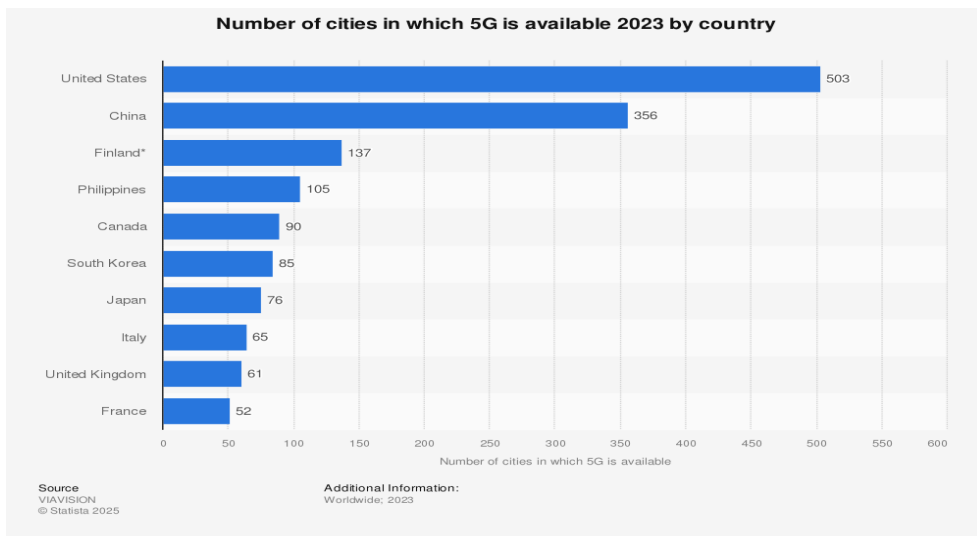
and 4G mobile connectivity by 2020. Internet access costs remain significantly lower in China, fostering broad accessibility (Xinhua, 2022). By April 2024, China had established 3.748 million 5G base stations (approximately 26 stations per 10,000 people) and over 30,000 private 5G networks for industries. The commercialization of 5G over the past five years generated approximately 5.6 trillion yuan (\$772 billion) in direct economic output and indirectly contributed about 14 trillion yuan in output, driving high-quality social and economic development (Liu Yukun, 2024).

5G subscriber forecast China (2019-2027)



Source: twimbit analysis

Number of cities in which 5G is available 2023 by country



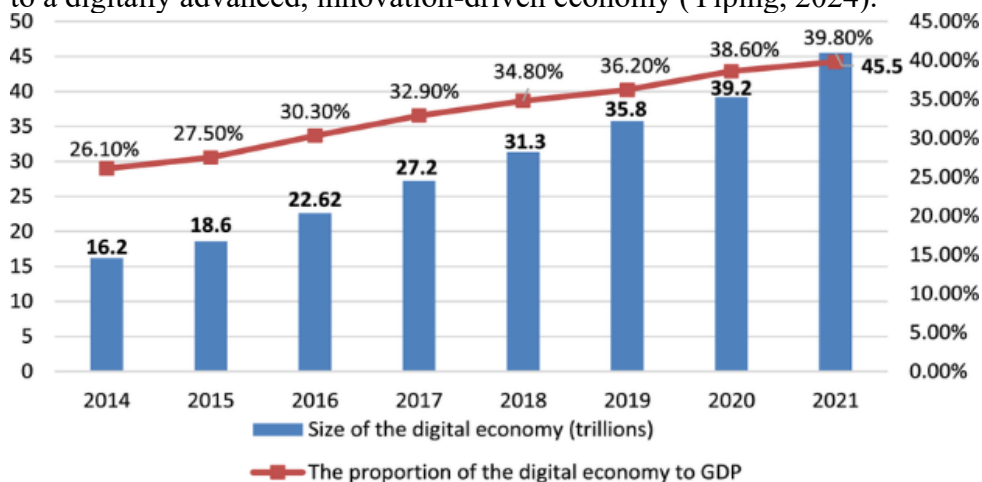
Source: VIAVISION © Statista 2025

Additional information: Worldwide, 2025

Technological innovation is central to China's development strategy. The continuous enhancement of digital infrastructure supports the modernization and upgrading of industries. The 14th Five-Year Plan positions technological modernization and innovation at the core of China's economic digitalization. Homegrown innovations have produced world-class platforms,

providing new channels for international cooperation and investment (CBBC, 2022). Digital tools powered by artificial intelligence have accelerated structural transformation in traditional and modern sectors alike. To address information gaps, traditional industries increasingly adopt cost-effective digital technologies and embrace a freer market economy to boost productivity (Daud & Ahmad, 2023).

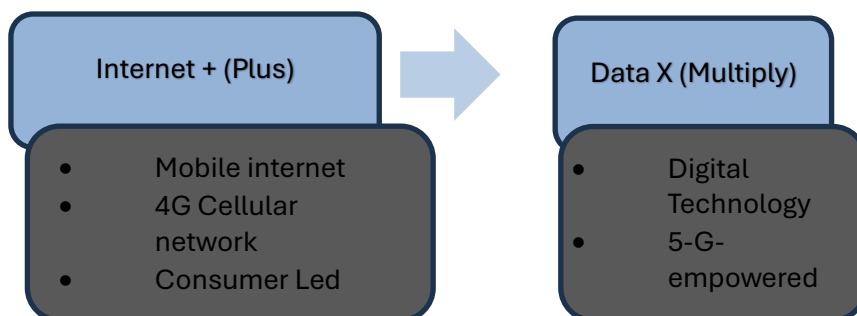
Small and medium enterprises (SMEs), contributing nearly 70% of China's GDP, are pivotal in this technological shift. Integrated cloud computing enables SMEs to invest in R&D without heavy infrastructure costs. Digital marketing tools promote swift innovation, enabling SMEs to compete with tailored goods and services. Cloud platforms also host vast data repositories that facilitate global partnerships, predictive analytics, and technological advances, highlighting SMEs' contribution to China's transition to a digitally advanced, innovation-driven economy (Yiping, 2024).



China's ambitious 'Digital China' strategy, championed by President Xi, aims for major milestones by 2025, including deeper integration of digital infrastructure, sustained digital economy growth, and breakthroughs in technological innovation. The plan specifically targets multi-sector applications, including agriculture, communications, manufacturing, healthcare, and power sectors, with a vision for a connected digital society and robust cybersecurity culture by 2035 (Xinhua, 2023).

After a decade of focusing on the 'Internet Plus' initiative, which leveraged mobile internet and 4G to expand consumer access, China shifted towards the 'Data X' paradigm. This new focus prioritizes extracting multiplied value from data using advanced computing, AI, and enterprise-led innovation supported by 5G and cloud networks. To govern this transformation, the National Data Administration (NDA) was established in late 2023 to oversee digital economic development and market regulation. Its "Data Element X" plan aims to multiply digital industry impacts, with the

ultimate goal of building a fully-fledged Digital China (Ma, 2024).



### **Digital China- Data Element Plan for Industries**

#### **3.3 Future Prospects and Challenges:**

China's cybersecurity framework has evolved significantly since 2014, with strategic commitments to becoming a 'cyber power.' Under the leadership's vision, extensive policies such as the Cybersecurity Law and the 2017 National Cybersecurity Strategy emphasize regime stability and prevention of subversive influences (Iasiello, 2017). A three-year innovation-driven plan aims to enhance standards in emerging technologies including AI, blockchain, quantum computing, and the metaverse, thereby strengthening China's technological leadership and international impact.

However, challenges persist. Rapid technological advancements and growing online activity strain China's legal system, especially concerning cybersecurity, content regulation, and international jurisdiction issues. Revelations about foreign surveillance and technological superiority have exacerbated concerns about system vulnerabilities. Bureaucratic overlaps within institutions like the Central Leading Group for Cybersecurity and Informatization and the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) have complicated effective governance. Furthermore, balancing regulation of online speech, cybercrime prevention, national security, economic growth, and foreign relations remain critical governance challenges.

A dominant principle in China's approach is 'cyber sovereignty,' which asserts China's independent governance over its information space. Nevertheless, China faces difficulties from the rapidly evolving cyberspace environment, the expanding and diversifying internet population, and increasing rates of cyber anomie, including fraud and attacks. Looking ahead, China's digital economy shows strong prospects but must

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manage these evolving cybersecurity, governance, and geopolitical challenges carefully, sustaining technological innovation, digital inclusivity, and secure infrastructures to maintain growth and competitiveness.

### **Conclusion:**

The digital economy of China has made exceptional progress over the past decades due to its ability to absorb advanced digital technologies and innovations. The phenomenal trajectory in the global competitive environment reflects robust digital architecture that allows the real economy to blend well with digital networks. Chinese model supplements both digital industrialization and industrial digitalization to thrive the economic growth. China has successfully overcome cyber security and governance challenges with domestic smart policies and multilateral engagements to safeguard against its adverse effects. While the USA leads the world in the digital economy due to its internet penetration however recent records predict that the narrowing gap between the two global competitors will diminish soon and China will surpass the leader in the next decade.

### **Future Research Directions:**

Since digital technologies are upgraded and modernized at an unprecedented pace, therefore every coming day witnesses a new technological breakthrough in the international market. Therefore, room for improvement persists for future research on the subject.

- Firstly, in terms of emerging digital technologies and their relevance to digital economy policies. Here avenues to be explored need to include the following:

Identify New Technologies: Acknowledge the new generation of digital technologies like artificial intelligence, distributed ledger technology/Blockchain, quantum computing, etc. five five-generation mobile communication technologies.

Evaluate Relevance: Examine how these technologies affect and interact with the current policies towards the digital economy environment. This entails examining the concept of how newer technologies can contribute towards the improvement of economic performance, output, and linkages.

Policy Adaptation: The guidelines for fostering the digital economy should be dynamic and should contain provisions for these advancements in technology. This may involve working in writing/updating regulations, developing of nurturing environment for innovations, and risk mitigation factors around emerging technologies.

- Secondly, being a modern economic project there is a need to develop a theoretical perspective to mature the international digital economic practices in parallel to real economic measures and engagements.

Theoretical Development: The goals that need to be set to develop a clear theoretical model that will describe the processes occurring in the sphere of the digital economy. This also entails knowledge of how innovative digital transactions, innovative digital assets, and innovative digital markets operate and relate to real-world economic activities.

Maturation of Practices: Improving the digital economic activities across the global frontier to make sure that they grow in concert with the conventional measures. This means interconnecting digital economic activity to international trade, financial systems, and investment structures.

Parallel Engagements: Guaranteeing that the specifics of the digital economy's work do not negate real economic activity but rather support it. This involves digitalization where digital solutions are synchronized with physical ones, thus connecting the digital triple with the real economy; balancing between digital and traditional economy; and enhancing international cooperation in the development of the digital economy. Based on these points, the findings of this study can assist future research to develop the most efficient and progressive characteristic of digital economy policies and utilization that would help establishment and growth in the global digital economy world.

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