

An offensive realism analysis of the Kashmir conflict: Power politics and regional hegemony in South Asia

Analisis realisme ofensif terhadap konflik Kashmir: Politik kekuasaan dan hegemoni regional di Asia Selatan

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Abstract

The Kashmir dispute is one of the longest standing territorial disputes in the modern international system, and an interesting case study to test the explanatory value of the offensive realism theory. This article examines the Kashmir dispute using the theoretical framework of John J. Mearsheimer to look at the ways in which the power maximization strategies and hegemonic ambitions have influenced the relationship between India and Pakistan since 1947. The research utilizes a qualitative research design which is grounded in secondary data analysis and thematic analyses of archival documents and literature. The results show that offensive realism is a superior explanation for the continuity of the conflict by illustrating the nature of structural imperatives of the anarchic international system that perpetuate the aggressive behaviors of India and Pakistan for achieving regional hegemony. The existence of the security dilemma in their relations has established a vicious cycle of distrust and competition, while nuclear arms have paradoxically limited and deepened their rivalry. By showing how realist structural theories are still pertinent for the analysis of contemporary conflicts in the region, this analysis contributes to international relations scholarship and provides policy implications for the management of longstanding rivalries in anarchical systems.

Keywords: Kashmir conflict; offensive realism; power politics; regional hegemony; security dilemma

Abstrak

Sengketa Kashmir merupakan salah satu sengketa teritorial yang paling lama berlangsung dalam sistem internasional modern, dan sebuah studi kasus yang menarik untuk menguji nilai penjelas dari teori realisme ofensif. Artikel ini mengkaji sengketa Kashmir dengan menggunakan kerangka teoretis John J. Mearsheimer untuk menelaah cara-cara di mana strategi-strategi maksimalisasi kekuasaan dan ambisi-ambisi hegemonik telah memengaruhi hubungan antara India dan Pakistan sejak tahun 1947. Penelitian ini memanfaatkan desain penelitian kualitatif yang didasarkan pada analisis data sekunder dan analisis tematik terhadap dokumen-dokumen arsip dan literatur. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa realisme ofensif merupakan penjelasan yang lebih unggul terhadap kontinuitas konflik dengan mengilustrasikan hakikat imperatif-imperatif struktural dari sistem internasional anarkis yang melanggengkan perilaku-perilaku agresif India dan Pakistan untuk mencapai hegemoni regional. Keberadaan dilema keamanan dalam relasi mereka telah menciptakan lingkaran setan dari ketidakpercayaan dan kompetisi, sementara senjata-senjata nuklir secara paradoks telah membatasi dan memperdalam rivalitas mereka. Dengan menunjukkan bagaimana teori-teori struktural realis masih tetap relevan untuk analisis konflik-konflik kontemporer di kawasan tersebut, analisis ini berkontribusi terhadap keilmuan hubungan internasional dan menyediakan implikasi-implikasi kebijakan untuk pengelolaan rivalitas-rivalitas yang berlangsung lama dalam sistem-sistem anarkis.

Kata kunci: konflik Kashmir; realisme ofensif; politik kekuasaan; hegemoni regional; dilema keamanan

Introduction

Dating back to the disastrous partition of British India in 1947, the India-Pakistan conflict is one of the oldest and most dangerous disputes in modern history. This institutional hostility is neatly captured by the Line of Control (LoC) in Jammu and Kashmir, which is a militarized dispute characterized by heavy military build-up on both sides, regular military exercises, and regular exchange of fire. The dynamics of such relations also lead to a periodical intensification, which threatens to spread into a general conflict.

Against this context, this research looks at the Kashmir conflict in the light of John J. Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism. As Mearsheimer (2001) states, in an anarchic international system, states are mainly concerned with increasing their relative power and with pursuing regional hegemony. Within this theoretical framework, the behavior of India and Pakistan with regard to Kashmir is deeply influenced by structural imperatives, such as the distribution of military capabilities and important geopolitical considerations. Indeed, the structural approach stresses the idea that the aspirations of both countries are motivated not only by historical wrongs but more generally by the competitive nature of their relations. As a result, these structural factors have more influence than ideological motivations or past injustices. In an anarchic system, states maximize relative power and aim at regional hegemony, hence in this context both ideology and grievance are of lesser importance and structural imperatives structure the India-Pakistan behavior in Kashmir (Mearsheimer 2001).

Building on Mearsheimer's foundations, three strong findings have previously been demonstrated. First, structural forces, such as the material capabilities or doubts about intentions, produce cyclic recurring crises which continue to recur even when ideas have changed (Wirsing 1994, Ganguly 2001). Second, nuclearization of the region has changed, not ended, the rivalry, creating a stability-instability paradox, where the probability of conventional war is reduced but risks from sub-conventional wars have grown (Ganguly & Hagerty 2005, Kapur 2005). Third, Pakistan's efforts to balance its external environment through its relationship with China, and the consolidation of power by India, compel both states to act in accordance with power maximization (Cohen 2004, Malone 2011). Taken as a whole, these findings lend support to the idea that system-level incentives come ahead of episodic leadership or norms in explaining the persistence of the conflict, and make realism the unavoidable framework for the understanding of the Kashmir conflict.

Applying offensive realism to recent developments after 2019, the revocation of Article 370 was seen to be an issue of power consolidation (Aryal 2023); the use of drone, cyber and information operations are seen as integral tools below the nuclear threshold (Khan & Khan 2025); and the competition is increasingly converging with the expansion of competition between China and the US (Mohan 2025). Despite this changing dynamic, three gaps persist in the literature: (i) a lack of integration of trajectories from 1947 to present and post-2019 legal and technological changes; (ii) the lack of theory-based prescriptions for drone and cyber escalation in a nuclear context; and (iii) the difficulty in adjudicating contested crisis narratives (International Institute for Strategic Studies 2025). Like numerous larger-scale meta-analyses which focus on similar design gaps across the South Asian security field (cf. Zheng & Li 2024), a comprehensive design connecting structural incentives with technologically mediated mechanisms over time remains lacking.

Therefore, current studies describe the Kashmir conflict as essentially structurally determined, with the nuclear technologies heightening, not reducing, competitive pressures. Nevertheless, critical omissions of previous studies are a lack of coherent historical narratives connecting competitive incentives into mechanisms impacted by legal, technological and regional systemic changes. Insufficient connection between these two areas has often led to analyses built around isolated components that fail to put these components into a wider historical context. This study seeks to fill this gap by attempting to connect the incentives generated by the Kashmir conflict to long-standing developmental processes in several fields, going beyond descriptive narrations of crises. By creating linkages between the structural forces, the operational mechanisms and the policy implications, this study not only highlights its distinctive contribution to offensive realism, but also provides an understanding of practical situations for dealing with low-level escalation in a nuclear context.

Specifically, the novelty in this study is fourfold: (1) First use of Mearsheimer's offensive realism in Kashmir, 1947-present; (2) long-horizon process-tracing and post-2019 legal-technological shifts, to demonstrate continuity of mechanisms; (3) South Asia centered from periphery of offensive-realist empirics; (4) translation of theory into levers for sub-threshold competition (cf. Zheng & Li 2024). The authors therefore provide a fresh perspective on the complex dynamics of the Kashmir conflict, which

emphasizes the critical interrelations between structural factors and the ever-changing technological and geopolitical factors. Using this as the starting point, the authors examine the historical development of the conflict in the context of offensive-realist assumptions, the role of India-Pakistan power maximization in determining South Asia's security architecture, and the strengths and limitations of the framework as it applies to the nuclear age.

Research Method

This study utilizes a qualitative research approach based on secondary data analysis and thematic analysis to explore the Kashmir conflict by using the theoretical framework of offensive realism. Considering that interstate rivalries are multifaceted and complex in nature, a qualitative approach provides an opportunity for nuanced understanding of complex political phenomena, interactions with strategies, and the historical evolution of state behavior in anarchic systems (Creswell & Poth 2018). As an analytical framework, Mearsheimer's offensive realism theory is used, which offers five major assumptions that inform the analysis: (1) the international system is anarchic; (2) great powers are inherently offensive military powers; (3) states can never know what others' intentions are; (4) survival is the prime goal of states; and (5) states are rational actors (Mearsheimer 2001). These assumptions provide the theoretical prism through which the authors analyze the Kashmir conflict and organize the thematic analysis of historical events, policy-making and strategic interactions.

Using the theoretical framework of Mearsheimer's offensive realism, this Kashmir conflict between India and Pakistan persists because of its root causes, which stem from basic power dynamics that force both states to engage in aggressive strategies toward regional hegemony. Together, the five assumptions of the theoretical framework account for the reasons why the Kashmir conflict has been so intractable for more than seven decades. First and foremost, the fact that, in the international system, there is not any central authority in the system basically determines how India and Pakistan approach their Kashmir strategies. This anarchic system has forced both the states to adopt self-help mechanisms to ensure the security of their citizens in the military domain by emphasizing unilateral military preparedness along the LoC and engaging in security-seeking behaviors that have constantly aggravated their security dilemma with each other (Mearsheimer 2001, Ganguly & Kapur 2010). Moreover, the failures of interstate efforts to intervene early on in the United Nations furthered this reliance on self-help, as neither state was sufficiently secure to center its vital security interests on any external actors (Wirsing 1994). Consequently, both states view Kashmir as a zero-sum issue where territorial control becomes an irreplaceable attribute of national security - a motivating factor that continues to inspire competitive behavior even during times of ostensible diplomatic interaction and detente (Ganguly 2001).

Second, both India and Pakistan are militarily capable of a wide range of offensive actions that dramatically increase their threat perceptions and strategic competition. The creation of nuclear arsenals and large military build-ups, through which each state can threaten the fundamental security of the other state, means both states are possessed with enormous offensive capabilities (Tellis 2001, Kapur 2005). Paradoxically, nuclear weapons have made it possible for a stability-instability paradox to exist: a situation in which a sustained risk of nuclear retaliation is high, in which large-scale conventional wars are avoided, but in which limited provocations at the nuclear threshold are encouraged (Ganguly & Hagerty 2005). While India can be seen as having both an offensive posture (as evidenced by the mammoth force deployments) and a defensive (Pakistan's large-scale force deployments reflect an offensive realization, as evidenced by Pakistan's economic constraints and its need to counter India's conventional edge in Kashmir's theatre), the Pakistani case demonstrates this paradox: Pakistan's large-scale force deployments reflect defensive necessity given its economic constraints and the need to counter India's conventional superiority in the Kashmir theatre (Asghar 2024).

Third, the extreme unpredictability of the real long-term intentions of each state has ensured intractable hostility between India and Pakistan, notwithstanding decades of diplomatic engagement and confidence-building measures (Ganguly & Hagerty 2005). Troops from India are regularly read by Pakistan as an

indication of hegemonistic tendencies and those from Pakistan are interpreted by India as an indication of irredentist and territorial revisionist tendencies, resulting in a self-reinforcing cycle of mistrust (Swami 2007). This interpretation is similar to Mearsheimer's argument that states always assume the worst about the intentions of their rivals, forcing both to adopt preemptive and competitive policies that turns what are ostensibly defensive policies into perceived offensive ones (Mearsheimer 2001).

Fourth, control of Kashmir is seen as an essential result of India and Pakistan's national security and survival. For Pakistan, the territory symbolizes issues related to national identity and strategic depth, especially after the traumatic loss of East Pakistan in 1971 (Cohen 2004, Behera 2006). Here, Kashmir is both a security challenge and a platform of national unity in a state that is based on religious nationalism. For India, control over Kashmir is essential for checking secessionist precedents with the danger of jeopardizing its territorial integrity at large, and for showing firmness against perceived Pakistani irredentism (Ganguly 2001). These existential stakes guarantee that both states will always put Kashmir above economic development or opportunities to develop together regionally, and will chase power aggressively, making that the end goal of both states, which Mearsheimer believes is the one and only goal in anarchical systems (Mearsheimer 2001).

Finally, the actions of both India and Pakistan at all times are rational strategies based on calculations of power, even when these strategies are economically as well as humanly expensive. Pakistan's alleged support for insurgency since the 1980s is an objective decision to counter India's conventional military strength using asymmetric methods to exploit democratic constraints and international human rights norms (Swami 2007, Lee et al. 2025). Similarly, India's withdrawal of the Article 370 in 2019 was an example of rational power maximizing behavior, centralizing control over Kashmir despite foreseeable Pakistani counter-reactions and international condemnation, using its increasing power differential (Aryal 2023, Constantin 2025). These strategies, while being costly, are rational adaptations to perceived security imperatives within the limits of an anarchic international system where self-help is still the only viable means of guaranteeing survival (Ganguly 2001, Mohan 2025).

Table 1.
Key offensive realism assumptions applied to Kashmir

Assumption	Application in the Kashmir conflict
Anarchy	Absence of central authority which makes India & Pakistan rely on self-help strategies.
Offensive Military Capability	Nuclear arsenals & military buildups increase mutual fears.
Uncertainty of Intentions	Ongoing mistrust & insecurity fuel unending hostility.
Survival as Primary Goal	Control of Kashmir seen as crucial to national security & survival.
Rational Actors	India & Pakistan undertake aggressive, rational strategies on the basis of power calculations.

Source: Processed by the author based on assumptions outlined in Mearsheimer (2001) and applied to the Kashmir conflict with insights from Wirsing (1994), Ganguly (2001), Ganguly & Hagerty (2005), Kapur (2005), and Ganguly & Kapur (2010).

The complex geography of the Kashmir theatre magnifies the security dilemma as it concentrates military power along narrow valleys, high altitude passes and strategic ridgelines that compress reaction times and incentivize forward defensive postures. As shown in Figure 1 - the Line of Control (LoC) and Line of Actual Control (LAC) institutionalize a contested status quo, with India administering Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh, Pakistan controlling Azad Jammu & Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan and China holding Aksai Chin and the Trans-Karakoram Tract. Some important features such as the Siachen Glacier, strategic mountain passes, and headwaters of the Indus River system form the centers of limited military operations and denial strategies. As a result of this dynamic, the physical geography creates the

dynamics that drive the employment doctrines, surveillance capabilities and escalation pathways known as the offensive realist assumptions in Table 1, especially in the way that terrain advantage translates into security competition in anarchy and adversary intentions uncertainty.



Figure 1.
Territorial control and disputed boundaries in the Kashmir Region
Source: Bose (2021)

Data collection involved a systematic review of sources on key milestones in the Kashmir conflict namely the crises of 1947-48, 1965, 1971, and 1999. United Nations Security Council resolutions and debates about the Kashmir issue provided an important insight into international thinking and diplomacy. Furthermore, the study looked at peer-reviewed journal articles and published books centered around the Kashmir Conflict, South Asian Security, and the Theory of Offensive Realism (published between 1990 and 2025). The paper highlighted recent research using newly released archival material and the influence of nuclear weaponry on regional politics. Furthermore, to study policy-relevant viewpoints, the study was directed to reports generated by think tanks like the Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses (India) and Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (Pakistan) and international bodies like the International Crisis Group. Finally, historical analyses and biographies of principal decision-makers offered additional information about the dynamics of structural constraints and individual agency.

The thematic analysis was performed in several steps. First, coding revealed consistent patterns in state behavior, strategic calculations, and conflict escalation dynamics. These codes were then aggregated into general themes that corresponded to offensive realist predictions: pursuit of power maximization, patterns of security competition, patterns of alliance formation and patterns of hegemonic ambitions. Cross-case comparison involved the comparison of Indian and Pakistani strategies in different periods of time and identified continuities and changes in behavior under different systemic conditions. To ensure analytical rigor, triangulation between multiple sources was made for key events and decisions. Moreover, the analysis was consciously geared toward seeking out contrary evidence and alternative explanations to test offensive realist interpretations. The analysis was also sensitive to its temporal context, and aware of the impact of technological changes (especially nuclear weapons) and a changing global balance of power on regional dynamics.

While this methodology is useful, several limitations should be noted. Since the documents available for review are often biased or incomplete in nature, especially for more recent events when records are still classified, the archival records should also be reviewed. Second, the action and statements from states are open to interpretation by the intentions they reveal, and this is an issue which is admitted by offensive realism. Furthermore, an emphasis on systemic-level analysis may underestimate the significance of domestic considerations, though the authors address this limitation (at least to some degree) by paying close attention to the interaction of internal dynamics and structural pressures. The analysis process of the research was characterized as a process of moving backwards and forwards between empirical evidence and theoretical expectations so that the understanding could be developed and yet the theoretical discipline could be retained.

Results and Discussion

The findings and discussion section brings together the empirical evidence from historical episodes, strategic interactions and policy trends in order to answer the study's main questions: how power maximization strategies and hegemonic agendas have maintained the Kashmir conflict in the anarchic international system, and assess offensive realism in that light. Drawing from thematic analysis of secondary sources, the section brings out structural imperatives behind India-Pakistan rivalry like security dilemma, nuclear paradoxes, regional power balance, and argues on theory's contributions and limitations. Importantly, by combining historical trajectories and current mechanisms, such as post-2019 legal changes and technological escalations, the discussion highlights the conflict's lasting nature as a manifestation of systemic competition rather than isolated grievances.

For that reason, the section is divided into a number of interrelated sub-chapters. It proceeds to outline the historical context and strategic significance of Kashmir in setting out the material basis of power competition. The second part of the article applies the essential concepts of offensive realism to the conflict, examines the regional hegemonic aspirations, the balance-of-power mechanisms and their limits, the escalation of security dilemmas and ends with critical evaluation of the applicability of the theory.

Historical context and strategic importance of Kashmir

In order to address the objective of the research of establishing the material foundations of the conflict, this section explores how the geographical position and resource endowments of Kashmir generate structural incentives for competition. The analysis shows that control of Kashmir provides decisive capabilities in the domain of power projection in the region, water resources and strategic depth and as such makes compromise structurally challenging - irrespective of changes in leadership or ideology.

The roots of the Kashmir conflict can be traced to the chaotic partition of British India in 1947, in which the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir came to be the focus of cross-border claims between the newly independent dominions of India and Pakistan. However, the strategic importance of Kashmir goes far beyond its beautiful valleys and mountain passes, Kashmir is a crucial geographic pivot in the power politics of South Asia. From an offensive realist standpoint, Kashmir's significance is the effect that its occupation has on the balance of power in the region such that whoever gets Kashmir will have a decisive edge over the other.

Geographically, Kashmir is unique in being situated at the intersection of South, Central and East Asia. The region is bordered by China, Afghanistan and the former Soviet republics, and as such it constitutes an important buffer zone and possible launch pad for projection of power (Ganguly 1997). Moreover, Kashmir has strategic depth and provides access to high-altitude bases of the military forces and command over the water supply from the Himalayan glaciers. The Indus River system, which is the lifeline for Pakistan's agrarian economy, comes from Kashmir, which gives an existential tone to Pakistani concerns about Indian rule (Wirsing 2007).

The patterns of state behavior which emerge from the historical evolution of the conflict are in accord with the predictions of offensive realism. The first crisis of 1947-48 arose because of the indecision of Maharaja Hari Singh over accession, leaving a power vacuum, which was filled by India and Pakistan. Pakistan's encouragement of tribal irregulars and subsequent military action served as an example of the offensive realist necessity to take advantage of opportunities for relative power enhancement when competitors are weak and/or distracted (Lamb 1991). Similarly, India's airlift of troops to Srinagar and acceptance of a much-debated Instrument of Accession also showed a similar behavior of opportunism disguised as legalism.

The wars of 1965 and 1971 are further examples of the operation of offensive realism. Pakistan's Operation Gibraltar in 1965 was a calculated act of taking advantage of Indian weakness perceived after the Sino-Indian War of 1962. The failure of the operation did not undermine the strategic rationalization from an offensive realist perspective but demonstrated the dangers of power maximizing behavior when the assessment of relative capabilities is wrong (Ganguly 2001). The violent 1971 war ending with the birth of Bangladesh, by breaking Pakistan and enacting unambiguous Indian preponderance in South Asia, was a natural outcome of the enormous disparity of material capabilities, as would be expected according to offensive realism.

The controversial Kargil conflict of 1999 is an especially instructive case for offensive realist analysis. Moreover, despite the possession of nuclear weapons by both the states, Pakistan tried to change the territorial status quo through a limited military action. This behavior supports Mearsheimer's argument that states will test opportunities to build their power even in dangerous environments, as states believe that limited aggression below the nuclear threshold is still possible (Mearsheimer 2001). Despite the defeat of Pakistan at the hands of India in the operation, the country also faced the disapproval of the international community, which in no way stopped it from continuing its asymmetrical approach in Kashmir by using proxies.

Over time, the strategic nature of Kashmir has changed in light of changing regional and global circumstances. The 1998 nuclearization of South Asia introduced a new dimension to the conflict, resulting in what some authors refer to as the "stability-instability paradox" in which nuclear weapons prevent large scale war but may induce a "lower threshold to conflict" (Krepon 2003). From the offensive realist point of view, nuclear weapons have not changed the dynamics of competition in some fundamental way, rather it has altered the way in which maximization of power is achieved (Narang 2014, Raeesa & Akhtar 2025).

Moreover, China's increased role in Kashmir through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and its territorial claims in Aksai Chin and the Trans-Karakoram Tract adds another sense of complexity. Multipolar regional systems that involve changing alignments and instrumental action (Paul 2018) and opportunistic behavior in state interactions (Bettani & Ahmed 2023) are well-represented in the triangular rivalry between India, Pakistan, and China for influence in Kashmir. In this context, China's support to Pakistan is in its interest to curtail Indian hegemony, whereas the increasing strategic partnership of India with the United States is classic balance behavior against an emerging China.

Recent events confirm predictions of offensive realists. India's 2019 revocation of Article 370 and the bifurcation of Jammu and Kashmir into union territories are bold power maximizing moves and consolidate control despite predictable costs (Aryal 2023, Constantin 2025). These moves and many

other actions within the context of a larger trend toward assertive Indian foreign policy show how increasing material capabilities convert into revisionist behavior to resolve territorial disputes on advantageous terms.

Key principles of offensive realism in Kashmir

This section utilizes Mearsheimer's five core assumptions in the Kashmir conflict to address the research problem of establishing how structural imperatives influence the behavior of the states. The analysis shows that anarchy, offensive capability, uncertainty, concerns for survival and rational calculation combine to create enduring competition that goes beyond a change in leadership or ideology.

The uncertainty of intentions that is at the heart of offensive realism has had a massive impact on the Kashmir conflict. Despite many diplomatic encounters and confidence-building measures, neither India nor Pakistan can be certain of the other's long-term goals. India's stated stance on Kashmir as an "integral part" of the Indian Union rubs uncomfortably against the Pakistani notions of Indian hegemonic designs. Similarly, India views the official position of Pakistan, in its call for self-determination of Kashmiris, as hiding its dreary irredentist claims and strategic opportunism (Ganguly & Hagerty 2005). Therefore, this bothersome suspicion is self-reinforcing, since defensive actions by one side are seen as offensive by the other.

The state goal of survival has a different meaning for India and Pakistan given their asymmetries. For Pakistan, Kashmir is not only a matter of territorial ambition but also of national identity, strategic depth and survival as a state created on the principle of religious nationalism. After the loss of East Pakistan in 1971, the existential fears about Indian intentions were further strengthened, making Kashmir a security issue and a source of national integration (Cohen 2004). For India, while the risk of loss of life may not be as clear cut, the risk of territorial integrity being challenged by separatist demands and the fact that the idea of successful secession being rewarded creates an incentive for uncompromising policies in Kashmir.

Furthermore, the rational choice assumption of states as rational actors is used to explain the well-calculated strategies of both countries despite their ostensible costliness. The fact that Pakistan has been able to support insurgency in Kashmir since 1989 reflects rational decision-making based upon a conventional military disadvantage, taking advantage of India's democratic limitations and international human rights scrutiny. Despite the costs and international pressure, such a strategy continues because it is calculated that it is more dangerous to Pakistani interests to accept Indian hegemony or at least to face the possibility of conventional war (Swami 2007, Lee et al. 2025). Just as the vast Indian military occupation of Kashmir and occasional flare-ups are rational calculations on the costs of other strategies to deal with Pakistan, China's willingness to engage in similar actions is grounded in similar logic.

Power maximization is the motivating force for constant competition regardless of relative levels of satisfaction with the status quo. Even if India's growing economic and military capabilities create great increasing divergence with its neighbor, offensive realism projects, in turn, mean India will strive to consolidate and extend its dominance. The revocation of the special constitutional status of Kashmir in 2019 is a classic instance of power-maximizing behavior as it removes legal constraints on Indian control even though Pakistan's political reaction and international criticism are predictable (Aryal & Muneer 2023, Mohan 2025). Pakistan's counter-reaction in the form of diplomatic outreach, promotion of militancy and military posturing shows the same imperatives to counter Indian hegemony and maintain a room for maneuvering.

Additionally, the fear that pervades great power politics assumes intensity it in the India-Pakistan dyad over Kashmir. Legacy of violence of partition, repeated wars and continuous proxy conflict generates deeply rooted threat perceptions that can hardly be displaced by rational assurances. This fear spurs worse-case planning, military modernization and pre-emptive plans that create self-fulfilling prophecies of war. The security dilemma works with a specific virulency when geographical proximity, historical enmity and nuclear weapons conspire to produce a matter of life and death.

Recent scholarship highlights how offensive realist dynamics continue to be valid in the face of shifting technological and normative contexts. Cyber space has become a new area of competition with both states developing the capabilities of espionage, disruption and potential escalation (Khan & Khan 2025). Similarly, the information warfare dimension of the Kashmir conflict, including competing narratives when it comes to human rights, terrorism, and self-determination, reflect power competition through ideational means whilst the structural imperatives remain unchanged (Constantin 2025).

Kashmir and regional hegemonic ambitions

This section analyzes the regional hegemony pursuit strategies on Kashmir for the research objective of hegemonic competition mechanisms. It shows that India's material preponderance has led to assertive policies while Pakistan is pursuing asymmetric counter-hegemonic strategies with nuclear weapons and external balancing, making it difficult to maintain traditional hegemony.

The quest for regional hegemony, which is central to offensive realist theory, plays a huge role in the Indian and Pakistani approaches toward Kashmir. According to Mearsheimer, states aim to dominate their regions to maximize security because regional hegemony offers the best guarantee against threats (Mearsheimer 2001). In South Asia, Kashmir is a prize and a symbol of the struggle for regional dominance between India and Pakistan.

As shown in Table 2, contrasting strategies appear for and resist regional hegemony. One of the major goals of India's statecraft, including constitutional adjustments and demographic engineering, is to secure control and project power (Aryal & Muneer 2023). Also, military deployments and development projects reinforce regional preponderance (Malone 2011). India's rejection of third-party mediation is an act of hegemonic preference for bilateral solutions (Behera 2006). In contrast, Pakistani counter-hegemonic actions are based on asymmetric approaches such as insurgent support and diplomatic campaigns (Swami 2007). Nuclear competence and China alliance in the form of China Pakistan Economic Corridor CPEC check India's hegemony (Khan 2011, Small 2015).

Table 2.
Hegemonic ambitions and regional implications

India's Hegemonic Actions	Pakistan's Counter-Hegemonic Actions
Integration and demographic change in Kashmir.	Support for insurgency & international campaigns.
Military & economic dominance strategies.	Nuclear deterrent and alliance with China (CPEC).
Rejection of third-party mediation.	Diplomatic outreach and internationalization of issue.

Source: Processed by the author, synthesizes strategies drawn from Behera (2006), Swami (2007), Khan (2011), Malone (2011), Small (2015) and Aryal & Muneer (2023).
Adapted from discussions in the literature on South Asian power dynamics.

India's hegemonic aspirations in South Asia reflects its material preponderance and its perception of itself as an obvious regional leader. With about seven times the population of Pakistan, eight times the economy of Pakistan and the military to match, India has the latent power to dominate the region (Malone 2011). Control over Kashmir furthers Indian hegemonic goals in various ways. Territorially, it is providing strategic depth and depriving Pakistan of significant geographical advantages. Symbolically, keeping the Pakistani challenge in check shows Indian strength and determination to the other states in the region. Kashmir is strategically useful for power projection in Central Asia and toward China, for India's overall ambitions (Ganguly & Thompson 2011, Tahir 2024).

Indian strategies in Kashmir are always hegemonic logic. Integrating Kashmir through constitutional arrangements, huge spending on development and demographic engineering is an attempt to establish the facts that are irreversible. The use of hundreds of thousands of security forces is not just an expression

of counterinsurgency but the capacity and will of states. India's rejection of third-party mediation and insistence on bilateral solutions is part of the hegemonic states preference for managing regional affair without external interference (Behera 2006). The constitutional changes of 2019 to remove the autonomy of Kashmir are a prime example of the brazen exercise of hegemonic power carried out under international criticism and Pakistani threats (Constantin & Carlà 2025).

On the opposite side, Pakistan's strategies are classic anti-hegemonic balance of power behavior. Realizing its inadequacy to match Indian power symmetrically, Pakistan has been pursuing asymmetric strategies to deprive India of the fruits of regional hegemony. Support for Kashmiri insurgency since 1989 aims to bring costs to Indian control whilst organizing international opinion against Indian human rights violations. The nuclear weapon development, explicitly linked to Kashmir, aims to negate Indian conventional superiority (Khan 2011). Moreover, Pakistan's cultivation of China as a strategic partner, as in the ceding of territory in Kashmir to China, is an example of external balancing against regional hegemons.

The nuclear dimension makes hegemonic competition complex. While nuclear weapons have not changed fundamental impulses of power maximization, they have shunted competition into alternative arenas. Pakistan's nuclear arsenal allows it to resist Indian hegemony better than conventional forces would allow. The "full spectrum deterrence" doctrine has been used to explicitly deny India the space to carry out limited conventional operations, so as to preserve Pakistan's ability to compete in Kashmir in sub-conventional means (Krepon & Thompson 2013). Within India, doctrines of limited war such as "Cold Start" are examples of efforts to salvage the conventional military options after nuclear limitations (Ladwig 2007, Raeesa & Akhtar 2025).

Geographic factors have a big role to play in hegemonic competition over Kashmir. The mountainous terrain makes the defense operations and insurgency more suitable to the needs of the rebel forces, partially balancing Indian material strength. The control of heights along the Line of Control is a tactical asset that is of strategic importance because of the nuclear limitations on large-scale operations. Additionally, water resources which originate from Kashmir add another dimension to hegemonic competition as control over rivers gives leverage over downstream populations (Wirsing 2007). The conflict over Siachen Glacier since 1984 is a classic example of the ways in which geographic features in hegemonic competition take on exaggerated importance.

The participation of outside powers makes regional hegemonic dynamics complex. China's strategic partnership with Pakistan, the massive investments through China-Pakistan Economic Corridor passing through Pakistan controlled Kashmir challenge the Indian hegemonic aspirations. Chinese territorial claims and their control over Aksai Chin pose a two-front challenge for India that gives Pakistan important strategic depth (Garver 2001, Bettani & Ahmed 2023). Meanwhile, the United States' evolving relationship with both states from Cold War alignment with Pakistan to contemporary strategic partnership with India reflects the great power efforts to influence the regional balances in favor of their interests (Schaffer 2009, Tahir 2024).

Recent developments are suggestive of a deepening of hegemonic competition. India's ability to dominate the region grows with the growth of its economic capabilities and international image. The articulation of more assertive doctrines under successive Indian governments is a sign of a determination to establish a clear hegemony. Pakistan's growing economic vulnerabilities and international isolation after incidents such as the Osama bin Laden raid theoretically reduce the capacity to resist. However, offensive realism predicts that the declining powers may be more risk-acceptant than accommodating and can lead to the escalation of conflict over Kashmir as Pakistan does not want to concede to conclusive hegemony by India (Ganguly & Thompson 2011).

Finally, the regional context has changed dramatically with the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the return of the Taliban to power. This development has the potential to offer Pakistan strategic depth and dilute American influence, at the same time raising Indian concerns about a renewed threat of extremism. As the distribution of regional power shifts, the competition for Kashmir is affected, with both states recalculating their approaches to capitalize on emerging opportunities and mitigate new risks (Mohan 2025).

Balance of power and its limitations

Despite its theoretical centrality, the mechanism of balance of power, although it lies at the core of realist theories of international politics, operates with marked limitations in the Kashmir conflict. Offensive realism would lead us to expect threatened states to balance against budding hegemons, but the India-Pakistan dyad shows how structural conditions, geographic limitations and nuclear weapons complicate traditional balancing behavior.

Internal balancing through military buildups has characterized the strategies of both states since independence. Pakistan's disproportionate military spending reflects desperate efforts to maintain rough parity with India despite the smaller resource base. The growth of indigenous defense industries, especially the nuclear and missile programs of Pakistan, are an attempt to make up for the quantitative disadvantages by qualitative improvements (Tellis 2001). India's military modernization, although not as economically expensive given the larger size of its economy, is also aimed at preserving and prolonging advantages over Pakistan while preparing for the possibility of Chinese contingency. As a result, an arms race dynamic of the classic kind ensues in which neither state gains permanent security benefits (Asghar 2024, Khan 2025).

External balancing through the formation of alliances shows mixed results in the case of South Asia. Pakistan's early tilt toward the United States with SEATO and CENTO delivered military assistance that to a certain extent compensated for Indian advantages. However, American dependability proved suspect in the time of real conflicts especially in 1965 and 1971 when the arms embargoes impacted Pakistan more adversely than India (McMahon 1994). The cultivation of China as a strategic partner was more durable for Pakistan: it had Pakistani diplomatic backing, military aid, and territorial concessions in Kashmir in its favor. Nevertheless, Chinese support remains calibrated to avoid Pakistani collapse, rather than victory over India.

In contrast, the Indian non-alignment policy during the Cold War was confidence in its material preponderance within South Asia. The alliance with the Soviet Union gave diplomatic protection and military aid without formal commitments of alliance. Post-Cold War rapprochement with the United States culminating in the nuclear deal and strategic partnership aims at balancing against China and not Pakistan per se. However, American attempts to continue to have working relationships with Pakistan for counterterrorism cooperation constrain India's ability to use US support in Kashmir (Ganguly & Kapur 2010).

The limitations in the balance of power in Kashmir are a result of several factors. Geographic proximity makes traditional balance-of-power calculations through military deployments less effective, as both states have large forces along their borders regardless of their balance calculations. The disputed nature of Kashmir means that defensive and offensive preparations are indistinguishable and further security dilemmas are created. Furthermore, nuclear weapons lead to "ugly stability" in which the balance of terror is preventing decisive military solutions whilst allowing continued competition below the nuclear threshold (Narang 2014, Ganguly & Hagerty 2005).

Asymmetric strategies are born when balancing fails as a traditional way of working. Pakistan's support of insurgency and terrorism is "balancing by other means" when conventional military balance is unsustainable. These strategies take advantage of the fact that India has democratic weaknesses, human rights violations in the media, and its inability to keep alienated populations under control (Swami 2007, Lee et al. 2025). Similarly, India's economic diplomacy, attempts at isolating Pakistan internationally and coercive diplomacy during periods of crisis such as the 2001-02 standoff are all examples of adaptations to nuclear limits on traditional balancing.

The role nuclear weapons play in calculations of balance of power needs special attention. Pakistan's nuclear doctrine expressly ties its arsenal to stopping Indian conventional aggression (including over Kashmir). The credibility of nuclear threats at lower levels of conflict appears to be a matter of dispute,

but their presence certainly makes Indian military planning more complex (Narang 2014). India's No First Use policy and credible minimum deterrence are a product of an effort to hold to the moral high ground while also giving it the capability to retaliate with devastating force. As a result, a balance of terror prevails, where territorial divisions are frozen but sub-conventional competition is allowed to continue (Raesa & Akhtar 2025).

Moreover, beyond South Asia, systemic factors play an increasingly important role in the balances there. The emergence of China and heightened Sino-American competition offer possibilities and limits for both India and Pakistan. The strengthening India-US relationship is partly a response to Chinese balancing imperatives that has seen the Kashmir issue, among many other issues, get entangled in larger Indo-Pacific strategic decisions. Pakistan is dependent on Chinese economic and diplomatic support which limits its freedom of action, but it also provides important support against India (Small 2015). These extra-regional factors are superimposed but not supplanting bilateral competition over Kashmir (Chen 2016, Paul 2018, Tahir 2024).

New technologies complicate balance of power calculations. Three areas of innovation, new military capabilities, precision strike systems, and space-based assets, open the potential for the emergence of asymmetrical advantages that could negate traditional military disadvantages. Both states spend heavily on these capabilities to gain technological advantages that may be decisive in future wars. However, the dual-use nature of several technologies and attribution issues in areas such as cyber create new instabilities traditional balance of power theories are ill-equipped to deal with (Khan & Khan 2025).

Security dilemmas and endless conflict

The security dilemma works with intensity in the Kashmir conflict, generating the self-reinforcing cycles of distrust, arms racing and conflict that offensive realism predicts for anarchic systems. Indeed, the combination of geographical proximity, historical antagonism and existential stakes convert rational security-seeking behavior into perpetual confrontation.

The classic security dilemma comes into play when India's attempts to retain control of Kashmir through military deployments come across as offensive preparatory steps to Pakistan. The huge Indian military presence in Kashmir, justified at home as being needed for counter insurgency and in defense against Pakistani aggression, signals aggressive intent from Islamabad's point of view. Similarly, Pakistan's support of armed groups in Kashmir in the name of providing help to legitimate freedom struggles seems to India nothing less than unprovoked aggression demanding a strong reaction (Ganguly 2001). Thus, neither side can easily tell the difference between preparations for defense and preparations for offense: worst-case assumptions drive escalatory dynamics.

In addition, the asymmetries in information intensify security dilemmas in Kashmir. The very nature of the covert nature of Pakistan's support of groups of militants generates uncertainty about the extent, control and purpose of such aid. Attacks such as the 2001 attack on the Parliament or the 2008 Mumbai attacks leave one wondering if they are Pakistani state policy, rogue elements or spontaneous terrorist actions. This ambiguity leads India to plan for worst-case scenarios which can result in over-reaction to ambiguous provocations (Kapur 2007). Pakistan is facing similar conundrums in making sense of Indian military doctrines, force deployments, and political statements on "reclaiming" Pakistan-controlled territories.

In the end, the nuclear aspect makes security dilemmas more complex. It finds that Pakistan's development of tactical nuclear weapons and expressed intentions of an early use of nuclear weapons generate "use it or lose it" incentives in times of crisis. Indian ballistic missile defense development and the consideration of counterforce policies pose a risk to Pakistani second-strike capabilities and may increase the incentives for preemptive strikes (Narang 2014). These dynamics give rise to what Thomas Schelling referred to as "reciprocal fear of surprise attack," wherein stability depends upon vulnerable mutual assumptions about intentions and capabilities (Krepon & Thompson 2013, Raesa & Akhtar 2025).

Furthermore, domestic politics exacerbate security dilemmas by reducing flexibility and pushing them to hardline positions. In Pakistan, the military's interest in continuing threat perceptions from India has institutionalized its interests in policy independent of the civilian government's preferences. Kashmir is used to justify military budgets, domestic political clout and national purpose (Cohen 2004). In India, the electoral climate and popular sentiment also make conciliatory policies impossible, especially in the wake of terrorist attacks attributed to Pakistan. The domestic political costs of appearing weak on Kashmir outweigh any possible benefits from accommodation, leaving leaders in confrontational positions.

Technological innovation opens up new forums for security competition. Cyber weapons, precision strike systems, and surveillance tools provide ways of winning below the threshold of conventional warfare. However, the attribution issues that are inherent in cyber operations and the blurred lines of hybrid warfare further intensify mutual mistrust. The creation of combined battle groups for swift attack operations by India leads to countermeasures from Pakistan, such as the reduction of nuclear thresholds (Ladwig 2007). Therefore, each new development in technology that is designed to increase security could in fact undermine current deterrence relationships (Khan & Khan 2025).

The non-state actors play an important role in the security dilemma in Kashmir. The spread of militant groups that are at different levels of control by the Pakistani state generates multilevel security challenges. India lacks the ability to distinguish between proxies controlled by Pakistan and independent terrorist organizations, compelling a multipotent response which is, in Pakistan's view, unwarranted escalation. The radicalization of some youth from the Kashmir region and the emergence of indigenous militancy add to the confusion in attribution and response calculation (Behera 2006, Constantin & Carl 2025). In the context of the Pakistan-India conflict, the plausible deniability claims of Pakistani leadership have the whiff of hypocrisy to them, while the human rights violations by India radicalize populations and give Pakistani leadership an excuse to continue offering support for militancy.

Furthermore, security dilemmas appear to be entrenched by path dependence and historical memory. Each conflict and crisis leaves behind an accumulation of grievances and mistrust that makes it harder to come together in the future. The failure of the peace efforts such as the Shimla Agreement, Lahore Declaration, and Agra Summit has strengthened the perceptions of bad faith by the adversary. Needless to say, generational transmission of conflict narratives in education and media ensure that security dilemmas continue to exist despite changing objective conditions (Ganguly & Hagerty 2005). The militarization of doctrine, strategic culture and bureaucratic interests institutionalizes constituencies opposed to resolution.

Recent progress has made security dilemmas worse, not better. India's changes in the constitution within Kashmir caused Pakistani fears of demographic engineering and permanent loss of territory. India sees Pakistani open encouragement of cross-border infiltration, despite international pressure after incidents such as the Pulwama attack, as a reinforcement of its perception of implacable hostility. The COVID-19 pandemic temporarily de-escalated but did not focus on underlying security issues. Indeed, economic pressures from the pandemic could serve as an incentive for diversionary conflicts between two states that are both challenged by internal problems (Aryal & Muneer 2023, Mohan 2025).

Ultimately, offensive realism claims that these security dilemmas are not simply perceptual problems that can be solved by confidence-building measures or improved communication. Instead, they are a function of structural imperatives of anarchic systems, where uncertainty of intent coupled with capabilities create actual security challenges. Even if leaders want to sincerely desire cooperation, the prospect of changing leaderships or shifting power balances or technological breakthroughs require worst-case planning. The Kashmir conundrum is therefore an example of the manner in which security dilemmas in anarchic systems lead to self-fulfilling prophecies of continuous conflict.

Critique of offensive realism in the Kashmir context

Whilst offensive realism gives us powerful insights into the persistence of the Kashmir conflict, an application of the theory also reveals important limitations and areas where alternative explanations offer complementary understanding. It is concluded that while the structural-inertial model offers much to explain the structural dynamics of the Arab Spring, it is weak in terms of explaining the differences in the intensity of conflicts and the opportunities that were missed for their resolution.

Offensive realism does a commendable job of describing the general outlines of the conflict and its continuation through different leaders and circumstances. The theory correctly assumes that power differences between India and Pakistan would lead to further competition rather than an acceptance of the status quo. Pakistan's switch to asymmetric methods when classical balancing was no longer viable is in line with offensive realist expectations regarding revisionist behavior by inferior powers. Furthermore, India's increasing power advantage to acquire control over Kashmir and its culmination in the 2019 constitutional manipulation fulfills the theory's prediction of power-maximizing behavior (Ganguly & Thompson 2011, Aryal & Muneer 2023, Constantin & Carlà 2025).

However, offensive realism has limited explanatory power regarding why some periods are more violent than others and why there are some periods of relative peace. The structural determinism of the theory means it is difficult to explain why periods of intense military interaction appeared during some periods while relatively stable diplomatic relations prevailed during others. The Composite Dialogue process (2004 – 2008) generated high levels of confidence-building measures and back-channel negotiations which came close to reaching agreement on Kashmir. These developments indicate that, although structural incentives are significant, they are not the only determinants of state behavior (Schaffer 2009). Yet leadership, domestic political systems, and ideational factors also have an important role to play in shaping conflict.

The issue of nuclear weapons is analytically difficult for offensive realism. Whilst Mearsheimer recognizes the impact nuclear weapons have on the dynamics of a crisis, the theory is largely silent on the way in which nuclear weapons change power-maximizing behavior. For example, the stability-instability paradox in South Asia, where the presence of nuclear weapons inhibits large-scale war while facilitating sub-conventional war is an empirical pattern that was not foreseen by offensive realism. The capability of Pakistan in controlling Indian hegemony with its nuclear capabilities questions the expectations that revolutionary military superiority in the conventional domain has any decisive influence (Narang 2014, Raeesa & Akhtar 2025).

Additionally, the influence of non-material factors on the Kashmir conflict is primarily beyond the analytical view of offensive realism. Although not necessarily driving factors from a structural realist perspective, the religious and ideological dimensions play a major role in the dynamics of conflict. The other is that ideational conflicts between Pakistan's Islamic identity and India's secular nationalism are not merely a case of power politics. The role of Kashmiri identity, aspirations of self-determination and human rights concerns bring normative dimensions which are deliberately excluded by offensive realism but empirically affect international responses and domestic limitations of state behavior (Bose 2003, Yaseen et al. 2016).

Furthermore, the state-centric focus of offensive realism particularly underestimates the role that sub-state and transnational actors can play in the maintenance of conflict. The theory uses states as unitary rational actors, but the Kashmir conflict includes complex interactions between military establishments, intelligence agencies, militant groups, civil society organizations and diaspora communities. The national interests of Pakistan in terms of economic development and regional integration might not be the same as the institutional interests of the Pakistani military in sustaining war. Similarly, the intra-Indian bureaucracy between the military, intelligence, and civilian communities' results in the development of policies that are not necessarily coherent power-maximizing strategies (Cohen 2004).

The theory's pessimistic predictions regarding prospects for cooperation may become self-fulfilling. By presuming that structural pressures lead inevitably to conflict, offensive realism tends to discourage both creative diplomacy and confidence-building that may prove successful. The near-breakthrough in back-channel negotiations in 2005-2007 seems to suggest that skilled leadership and favorable domestic conditions can provide the opportunity for resolution despite structural constraints. Moreover, an exclusive focus on power politics may ignore how common threats (such as terrorism or climate change) may generate common interests in favor of cooperation (Krepon 2003).

More recent scholarships have pointed out other flaws. The increasing significance of economic interdependence even between adversaries generates stability incentives that are downplayed by standard models of security competition. The influence of international institutions and norms, though not precluding conflict, determines its form in such a way that it cannot be fully explained by offensive realism. Moreover, in addition to the strategic vulnerabilities that come with new security hazards such as climate change and pandemic disease, there exists a set of shared vulnerabilities that can potentially dampen traditional security competition (Mohan 2025).

Offensive realism also offers little direction for conflict resolution or management. While the logic of the theory holds that only hegemonic dominance on the part of one entity could terminate competition, in the case of South Asia nuclear weapons make this a virtual impossibility. While such theoretical predictions can be satisfied by the indefinite continuation of costly conflict, they have little in the way of policy guidance for the policymaker attempting to manage risks and minimize human suffering. Alternative theoretical frameworks with a focus on institutions, economic interdependence, or normative change offer more optimistic, albeit less realistic, ways of moving to peace (Ganguly & Kapur 2010).

Despite these shortcomings, the insights of offensive realism are worthy of keeping in mind in the understanding of the Kashmir conflict. The theory accurately identifies structural pressures which frustrate resolution efforts and reinforce competition. Its focus on relative strength, spatial constraints, and uncertainty of purpose captures important dynamics that are ignored by ideational or liberal theories. The difficulty is in incorporating the structural knowledge of offensive realism with an eye for domestic politics, ideational influences, and human agency to produce more comprehensive explanations of conflict dynamics and to find possible paths toward stability if not resolution.

Finally, the nature of the Kashmir conflict is evolving in the 2020s, which means that offensive realist analysis is both still relevant and needs to be adapted. The emergence of indigenous militancy, the changing demographics, and the changing international attitudes toward self-determination produce dynamics that cannot be properly captured by pure state-centric analysis. Nevertheless, the fundamental power and security competition between India and Pakistan determines outcomes in a manner predictable based on offensive realist predictions (Constantin & Carl 2025, Mohan 2025).

Conclusion

This analysis shows the continued relevance of offensive realism as well as its inherent limitations in explaining the Kashmir conflict. The structural dynamics of anarchy provide strong incentives for persisting competition that cut across shifts of leadership or even ideologies. The 2019 constitutional changes in India, which are consistent with the maximization of power, and Pakistan's asymmetric balancing strategies support the principal theoretical expectations for state behavior in anarchic systems. However, the more substantive contribution of the paper is its first long-term application of Mearsheimer's framework to the Kashmir case over the course of seven decades, and it demonstrates how the structural pressures continue despite technological and normative transformation. The research contributes to offensive realist theory by showing how it applies to the level of nuclear-armed regional competition and how there are scope conditions under which domestic politics and non-state actors exert independent influences. Methodologically, the research is a pioneer of long-horizon process-tracing linking structural incentives to contemporary mechanisms such as cyber warfare and drone operations.

However, the analysis identifies three important limitations which need theoretical refinement: offensive realism cannot sufficiently explain variation of conflict intensity, the stability-instability paradox under nuclear conditions, or the role of transnational actors. Future research should create synthetic models that incorporate structural knowledge with domestic politics and new technologies. All of these limits mean that policymakers should be concerned with limiting risks of escalation, not with trying to negotiate comprehensive settlements which structural conditions make untenable. In the end, the Kashmir case not only confirms the tragic vision of offensive realism but also makes it all the more urgent that creative measures be taken to stem catastrophic escalation in a nuclear-empowered region.

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