



CISS MONTHLY PERSPECTIVE



CISS Monthly Perspective: March 2026

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Contents

EU-India Trade Deal: A Politico-Economic Quagmire	5
<i>Dr Rahat Iqbal</i>	5
NRC Reform & the American Nuclear Diplomacy in the Middle East.....	8
<i>Anam Murad Khan</i>	8
Use of AI in Military Targeting by United States and Israel Against Iran.....	11
<i>Abdul Moiz Khan</i>	11
US Strategic Posture from NSS to NDS: The Future of US Allies in the Asia-Pacific Region.....	14
<i>Murad Ali</i>	14
Can US-Israeli Strikes on Iran Be Justified Under the UN Charter?.....	17
<i>Mobeen Jafar Mir</i>	17
How US-Israel war on Iran rocks foundations of the Abraham Accords	20
<i>Amna Saqib</i>	20
How Washington Undermined Nuclear Talks with Iran	21
<i>Nawal Nawaz</i>	21
After New START: Must the World Face Disaster Before Restraint.....	24
<i>Maryyum Masood</i>	24
Will States Be Able to Regulate Autonomous Weapons? An Assessment of CCW Debates on LAWS.....	28
<i>Muhammad Ali Baig</i>	28
Pakistan's Quiet Diplomacy: A Push for Peace Beyond the Frontlines.....	31
<i>Shahwana Sohail</i>	31
Multi-Domain Operations and the Evolution of Pakistan's Conventional Deterrence.....	34
<i>Syed Ali Abbas</i>	34

EU-India Trade Deal: A Politico-Economic Quagmire

Dr Rahat Iqbal

A Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the European Union (EU) and India was concluded on January 27 this year. The agreement aims to bolster economic and political engagement between the two sides. On this occasion, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stated: “The EU and India make history today, deepening the partnership between the world’s biggest democracies. We have created a free trade zone of 2 billion people, with both sides set to gain economically. We have sent a signal to the world that rules-based cooperation still delivers great outcomes. And, best of all, this is only the start – we will build on this success, and grow our relationship to be even stronger.” To facilitate trade flow, the agreement is expected to lower tariffs on a wide range of commodities, expand access to various services, and enhance regulatory cooperation between the EU and India. This trade deal demonstrates a decline in the United States (US) influence in European countries, which were once regarded as its most reliable allies and often followed similar policy patterns. Moreover, the agreement may simultaneously pose adverse economic implications for Pakistan.

The deal can be viewed as an outcome of the US’s tariff policies toward both the EU and India. According to a senior fellow for South Asia at the Atlantic Council, Michael Kugelman, “one could argue that the Trump factor provided a very strong impetus to the deal because both India and the EU are facing shock US tariffs that they never expected”. More recently, amid the United States’ stance regarding access to Greenland, Washington imposed tariffs on several allies that resisted this move. Moreover, tariffs reportedly exceeding 50% were imposed on India following the May 2025 crisis between India and Pakistan. In addition, a 25% tariff was levied in response to India’s continued purchase of crude oil from Russia.

India’s annual exports to the US are valued at approximately USD80-90 billion, whereas US exports to India amount to around USD40-50 billion. This trade balance is clearly tilted in India’s favor. Consequently, the increase in tariffs on Indian products appears to be a deliberate attempt to exert economic pressure on India. The underlying objective of this strategy was to compel India to reduce its imports of Russian hydrocarbons.

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the US and its Western allies imposed a series of sanctions, urging partners to curtail economic engagement with Moscow. Despite this pressure, India maintained its trade relations with Russia and continued purchasing Russian oil at discounted prices. As a result, the purchase of cheaper Russian oil has fueled India's industrial sector by enabling the production of goods at lower costs.

Surprisingly, by concluding the trade deal, both the EU and India have turned the tables on US tariffs. The conclusion of multiple trade deals has the potential to surpass US intentions of pressuring countries through trade restrictions. The EU's attempt to secure a trade deal with India has effectively undermined the US strategy of pressuring both states with high tariffs. Instead, it has created an opportunity for the EU and India to establish a strong foothold in each other's markets, thereby sidelining the United States.

Notably, in the context of South Asia, this deal may pose certain challenges to Pakistan's exports to the EU. Under the EU's Generalized Scheme of Preferences (GSP), Pakistan is one of the most significant beneficiaries of trade concessions. At the same time, the EU remains Pakistan's second-largest trading partner, accounting for 12.4% of its total trade in 2024. Moreover, Pakistan's exports to the EU are heavily concentrated in textiles and clothing, which together account for approximately 75.8% of its total exports to the EU. Hence, the EU-India trade deal will directly affect Pakistan's exports to EU countries.

EU textile imports from India amounted to around \$9 billion, while imports from Pakistan stood at approximately \$9.7 billion in 2024. As a result of the EU-India trade deal, European companies are likely to shift their focus increasingly towards India rather than Pakistan in order to benefit from reduced tariffs. Moreover, the EU and Pakistan have maintained trade linkages in the agricultural sector as well. Consequently, tariff concessions granted under the EU-India deal may erode Pakistan's competitive edge in agricultural exports within the European market. Given the potential of the European market, Pakistan must strengthen its collaboration with existing companies in Europe and beyond to secure its presence in the market. Moreover, it needs to raise the standards and quality of its products to gain a competitive edge. Simultaneously, Islamabad should focus on maximizing production to meet the demands of European markets. Additionally, Pakistan should explore new markets for its products and invest in the production of substitute goods to diversify its export portfolio. Strategic mapping of the aforementioned opportunities can help the country reduce its reliance on traditional

markets and assist in meeting global demand, eventually strengthening its position in the international trading systems.

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Link: <https://stratheia.com/eu-india-trade-deal-a-politico-economic-quagmire/>

NRC Reform & the American Nuclear Diplomacy in the Middle East

Anam Murad Khan

Today, nuclear energy is highly politicized issue in the Middle Eastern region. All the three great power the US China and Russia, see Middle East as a region with great economic potential and a growing need to diversify energy portfolio. A recent massive overhaul of the American Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) demonstrates that the US is cognizant of this reality. It marks a significant development in American nuclear corporate diplomacy. The changes of the NRC are less focused on regulation and more on development and promotion of nuclear energy. Where it promises American strategic export competitiveness, it also risks undermining the regulatory credibility that had made the US stand out among the partners and had assured its geopolitical influence.

Nuclear corporate diplomacy encompasses a strategic partnership. During the 60-80 years of operation of a nuclear power plant, and the recipient state relies upon the host for technical knowledge, as well as components including fuel supply and administrative experience to the recipient state. For instance, Article 123 of the American Atomic Energy Act (AAEA) applies the nonproliferation norms in the US nuclear energy partnerships, such as the limitation of uranium enrichment. Through this symbiotic relation, the latter state becomes tied to the host for six to eight decades. Depending upon the nature of the partnership, it also involves key macroeconomic decisions, such as the regulation of energy prices in the recipient state. A cursory look at the global nuclear energy landscape reveals that the US leads with 94 active nuclear power plants contributing 97 GW, followed by Russia's 36 with 27 GW of input and China and France giving 55 GW and 63 GW, each with the same number of 57 power plants.

The Middle East sees similar competition among great powers in nuclear energy, leading to three models of influence. First, the US nuclear partnerships are guided by Section 123 of the American Atomic Energy Act and feature private-sector vendors, all overseen by the NRC's strict regulations. The US has partnered with the UAE at the Barakah Nuclear Energy Plant since 2009. In contrast, Russia's state-owned agency Rosatom uses a 'build-own-operate' (BOO) model. Rosatom provides sovereign-backed loans that pay for over half the cost of nuclear power plants. Its flagship project is the El Dabaa Nuclear Power Plant in Egypt. China also forms strategic partnerships focused on infrastructure. The China National Nuclear

Corporation (CNNC) has several MoUs with Middle Eastern countries and runs the China-GCC Forum on peaceful nuclear technology use.

The Middle East attracts global nuclear energy players, owing to its ever-growing energy demand, capital capacity, and geopolitical relevance. With the energy demand increase of about 1,000 terawatt per hours (TWh) in last two decades, the region has become the third largest contributor to electricity demand. Nuclear energy aligns with the long-term energy diversification strategies of the broader economic transformation aimed at by the Gulf countries. It not only provides sustainable energy essential for energy-intensive sectors but also meets the global carbon neutrality commitments. The affluent sovereign funds of six GCC states, amounting to \$4.9 trillion, also make them distinct in bearing the enormous cost of a nuclear power plant. Similarly, the crucial intersection of the region along the maritime security routes, excessive global oil and gas reserves, and defense cooperation with the great powers make the region more geopolitically relevant.

The recent NRC reform in the US aims to alleviate the US nuclear energy export-competitiveness, due to long timelines and incompatibility with modern technologies. Through the passage of EO 14300, Trump announced the revision of all the rules and set deadlines for their implementation. The ordinance aims at accommodating the regulation of modern nuclear technologies and next-generation reactor variants. The EO underscores the need to buttress the export competitiveness and reestablish the US as a global leader in nuclear energy, which was earlier hindered by regulatory bottlenecks. NRC, earlier, was focused on the gigantic light-water reactors, taking multiple years in their authorization of licenses and inducing high upfront costs; whereas the Gulf states are considering next-generation reactor designs. The lag in US nuclear energy competitiveness resulted in the ageing of its nuclear fleet, with no active nuclear power plant construction as of yet. Approximately 11.7 GW of its energy share will be reduced due to the reactor closures by the near-closure reactors. Being a great player, the retirement of US reactors has a negative impact on American strategic dominance. Shrinking nuclear capability at home will erode the technological momentum needed for sustained leadership in the global nuclear energy landscape. Studies report 110 GW of nuclear energy shortfall expected to grow up to 256 GW in the future due to the decommissioning of various nuclear power plants across the globe.

Being a core component of its soft power, the regulatory credibility also makes the US a distinctive player in the growing competition in the Middle Eastern nuclear energy market. Experts argue that the possible enhancement of the Department of Energy (DOE) and American political administration in the NRC might undermine the independence of the NRC. Novel complications in the draft rulemaking can confuse the roles of promoter and regulator, which do not align with the global nuclear best practices. The reported resignations of around 10 per cent of the NRC force since trump administration has taken charge are likely to challenge American technical capacity that was already going to face a shortfall. The rapidly changing scenario in the nuclear energy landscape of the Middle East represents a unique intersection of technical capabilities and nonproliferation norms. Amidst them, the revision of NRC conforms to the US nuclear energy vision, transcending its domestic sphere and becoming a part of foreign policy. It is yet to be seen if the NRC reset helps the US reclaim dominance in the nuclear energy landscape, where strategic partnerships determine the course of geopolitical alignments.

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Link: <https://manaramagazine.org/2026/03/nrc-reform-and-nuclear-diplomacy/>

Use of AI in Military Targeting by United States and Israel Against Iran

Abdul Moiz Khan

There have been increasing reports on the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) by the United States and Israel in their ongoing attacks on Iran. Several reports have suggested that to strike around 1000 targets in the first 24 hours of the attack on Iran, the United States military used Anthropic AI's tool Claude. The AI tool helped in war-planning by optimizing target selection, analyzing intelligence data and issuing precise location coordinates by assessing satellite images. The use of Claude AI is part of the Pentagon's Project Military Maven Smart System. The Maven system, built by a company called Palantir, is generating insights using classified data from satellites, surveillance and other intelligence sources to provide real-time targeting options for the ongoing war against Iran. The increasing use of AI "shortens the kill chain" – reducing the time between identifying the target and neutralizing it. This leads to decision compression in which human actors increasingly rely on algorithmic recommendations rather than independent judgment. In the absence of any kind of binding agreements on the responsible use of military AI, the risks are incrementally increasing.

While AI is increasingly being utilized as a tool for improving precision and operational effectiveness, its use raises serious concerns about accountability and the protection of civilians. Target-identification systems are only as reliable as the data they are trained on, and errors in classification can have catastrophic consequences. For example, there is a probability that the bombing of an Iranian school on the first day of attack – which resulted in the death of almost 150 children – can be a case of mistaken AI targeting.

Apart from the United States, Israel's military has also deployed AI system 'Lavender' in its attacks on Gaza. The AI-powered database was used to identify as many as 37,000 potential targets for attacks. Despite Lavender having an error rate of 10 percent, it was utilized to fast-track the identification and targeting of low-level Hamas operatives risking the lives of thousands of civilians. The increasing use of AI for military purposes rekindles the ethical and moral concerns regarding the use of technology.

There is an ongoing debate regarding the responsible use of military AI. However, states are yet to undertake any concrete steps to reduce the risks attached with it. The rapid integration

of AI into real-world military operations showcases that governance efforts are struggling to keep pace with technological adoption. The example of Project Maven of Pentagon shows how military strategists increasingly view AI as essential for maintaining operational superiority.

International Humanitarian Law (IHL) requires that military operations adhere to the principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution. Commanders have to distinguish between civilians and combatants, to ensure that military advantage outweighs potential civilian harm. When AI systems are embedded deeply in the targeting cycle, it becomes increasingly difficult to determine whether these obligations are being fulfilled or not. If a strike based on algorithmic recommendations leads to civilian casualties, assigning responsibility becomes complicated. The chain of accountability becomes diffused between commanders, programmers, private technology firms and opaque machine-learning systems.

Another major concern lies in the opacity of AI decision-making. Many AI models function as black boxes – even developers cannot fully explain how the system arrived at a particular output. When such systems are used to generate targeting recommendations, military personnel may find it difficult to challenge or verify the algorithm's conclusions. This raises the risk that human oversight becomes procedural rather than substantive. In highly compressed decision environments, commanders may simply approve algorithmically generated target lists rather than conduct rigorous independent verification.

There are several global initiatives for increasing responsible use of AI in the military. However, these are largely voluntary and lack enforcement mechanisms. In the absence of binding regulations, major powers continue to integrate AI into military operations at an accelerating pace. The ongoing war in the Middle East, therefore represent an early glimpse into the future of warfare. AI is no longer limited to logistics or intelligence support; it is increasingly shaping targeting decisions and operational planning. As military competition intensifies among major powers, the incentive to adopt AI-enabled capabilities will only grow stronger. States fear that restricting their use of AI could place them at a strategic disadvantage relative to rivals. Nevertheless, technological superiority should not come at the expense of ethical responsibility and legal accountability. Mechanisms should be developed to recognize that the states and individuals (rather than machines and algorithms) bear legal and ethical responsibility for the attacks undertaken. This can help in avoiding the creation of accountability gaps in the use of AI in the military domain. Moreover, governments must work

toward establishing clear standards for transparency, accountability and human control in the use of AI in warfare. This includes ensuring that humans remain meaningfully involved in decisions regarding the use of lethal force, developing auditing mechanisms for military AI systems, and strengthening international legal frameworks governing emerging military technologies.

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Link: <https://www.scmp.com/opinion/world-opinion/article/3345878/iran-strikes-are-wake-call-regulate-military-ai>

US Strategic Posture from NSS to NDS: The Future of US Allies in the Asia-Pacific Region

Murad Ali

In December 2025 the Trump administration releases the National Security Strategy (NSS) 2025. A fundamental component of the report sets the US national security priorities, especially the great power competition with China. Trump 2.0 security arrangements are visibly departing from Trump 1.0 in the context of the U.S. posturing toward China. Trump 1.0 had declared China a strategic threat, but Trump 2.0 marked China as an economic competitor.

Nonetheless, the document reiterated China as the second-largest military and economic power after the United States, and would remain a challenge to U.S. strategic and economic interests. Moreover, it also highlights that the economic engagement rather than confrontation would be the pathway for the U.S. to deal with China in the Asia-Pacific region. The question is how the US allies interpret this new strategic trajectory of the United States, as their interpretation will determine the security environment of the Asia-Pacific region in the future.

In the same vein, the Pentagon's 2026 National Defense Strategy no longer views China as a top security concern. Instead, it shifts focus to the Western Hemisphere, marking a departure from decades of U.S. foreign policy that treated China as the primary threat to its security and economic interests. The document emphasizes that US allies in the Asia-Pacific region, such as South Korea and Japan should bear their fair share of the collective defense. The document holds that the Pentagon would be influenced by four major concerns, namely defending the homeland, giving up the leading role in security matters in Europe and Asia-Pacific region, strengthening the industrial base and establishing strong deterrence, and dealing with China with strength, not confrontation. Under Biden, the Pentagon declared China and Russia as revisionist powers which pose central challenge to the security of the United States.

The Trump administration would seek security cooperation with allies and partners based on their contributions in terms of resources and money. It shows that the US allies in the Asia-Pacific region such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, Taiwan, and Indonesia would construct their security architecture themselves rather than relying on Washington, though the presence of the US would still be there, not as a leading player but as supporting power.

It now seems likely that the US allies such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, and Australia could veer closer to China. Beijing's policies accentuate economic interdependence and cooperation, in contradiction to Washington's long-standing focus on strategic dominance and exclusive security arrangements. Instead of pursuing confrontation, the document stresses deterrence through strength not force. Through upholding a "strong denial defense" along the First Island Chain to deter China's threat, the NSS proposed to ensure a decent peace in the Asia-Pacific region. The concept of deterrence in the document is cyclical. Military deterrence complements strategic stability, which enables smooth economic activity, and supports the military industrial base. A strong industrial base then produces the wherewithal for strong military power, reinforcing deterrence and once again ensuring strategic stability.

There are two critical questions. First, would US allies in the Asia-Pacific be willing to substantially increase their military strength against China if the credible and reliable US security assurance becomes uncertain and conditional? For instance, Japan has already hiked up its military build-up, allocating a 58-billion-dollar defense budget for the year 2026, which is 9.4% increase over the previous year. Likewise, Australia is increasing its defense investment, with nuclear-powered submarine related spending projected to rise sharply. Similarly, South Korea enhances its defense spending amid threats from North Korea. These actions reflect real progress, but they have largely occurred with the expectation of US backing. Without reliable and unconditional security assistance, as the US NSD illustrates on burden sharing and burden shifting, the political will to go further with US remains uncertain.

Second, as the document holds that the US would retrench from direct involvement in regional issues of allies, would the allies continue to feel China as a rational threat? China remains a major trading partner for most of the US allies in the Asia-Pacific region, establishing a rational choice for practical engagement with China. The trade volume between China and Japan amounts to 322 billion dollars, while between South Korea and China it stands at 331 billion dollars, with Taiwan 314 billion dollars, 296 billion dollars with Vietnam, and 206 billion dollars with Australia. It seems more probable that the allies would reach out to China, leveraging economic interdependence over prolonged confrontation, while US security commitment weakens, and China is no longer considered as an existential threat due to reduced US interference.

Most importantly, the grey zones such as the South China Sea, Taiwan, and East China Sea are no longer considered as primary security concerns of the United States. This might gravely recalibrate the strategic trajectory of Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Australia. At the beginning of 2026, China has hosted South Korean President Lee Jae Myung, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney, Finnish Prime Minister Petteri Orpo and Irish leader Micheal Marin, who are all traditional allies of the United States, and are disenchanted by President Donald Trump's policies. In conclusion, the strategic direction of U.S. allies in the region is likely to be affected by the shift in U.S. strategy toward the region. This shift may create strategic space that China would like to fill, particularly given its strong trade relations with U.S. allies. China can effectively leverage this opportunity to advance its strategic interests. However, the future remains uncertain and is likely to unfold in unpredictable ways.

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Link: <https://stratheia.com/us-strategic-posture-from-nss-to-nds-the-future-of-us-allies-in-the-asia-pacific-region/>

Can US-Israeli Strikes on Iran Be Justified Under the UN Charter?

Mobeen Jafar Mir

On February 28, unprovoked joint United States-Israeli strikes on Iran left a rattled Middle East, killing Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and other senior government and military officials. The war campaign, known as Operation Shield of Judah and Operation Epic Fury in Israel and the US respectively, has sparked retaliatory strikes from Tehran, heightening fears of a broader regional conflict. As the conflict rages on, the debate over the legality of the joint US-Israeli actions under the United Nations (UN) Charter has become the talk of the town.

Israeli President Issac Herzog claimed that the rationale for bombing Iran was that Tehran was building a nuclear bomb. Israeli Defence Minister Israel Katz termed the strikes ‘preemptive’ aimed at curbing any future threat to the State of Israel from Iran. The US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth defended the military campaign, while the US Ambassador to the UN Mike Waltz said the US actions were lawful and necessary to ensure ‘global security’.

The legality of preemptive strikes, however, remains a controversial and highly debated issue under international law. Preemptive strikes mean that a nation resorts to military action on the belief that an attack is imminent and all other diplomatic means have failed to reach a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Under the UN Charter’s Article 2(4), member states are prohibited from using or threatening force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any other member state.

There are, however, exceptions to this rule. The use of force becomes legal only if either the UN Security Council authorizes it or it is exercised in self-defense under Article 51 of the UN Charter. The latter right is only activated when an armed attack occurs against a UN member state. The Caroline Doctrine, an important principle in international law, sets parameters for a state using self-defense before an attack actually happens. It states self-defense can only be justified if there is (1) Necessity, (2) Immediacy, and (3) Proportionality. In modern international law, this doctrine has influenced interpretations of Article 51 of the UN Charter.

In the case of Iran, none of these prerequisites for the lawful use of force were met. The attacks came at a time when the US and Iranian officials were engaged in talks, with the US President

Donald Trump indicating that he would give more time to bilateral negotiations. The US Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard testified in March last year that Iran was not pursuing nuclear weapons. In June last year, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Rafael Grossi said that evidence gathered on Iran's nuclear program by the IAEA could not make a 'basis of any military action.' Moreover, President Trump claimed during the 12-day war with Iran last year that he had 'obliterated' the nuclear capabilities of Iran, making any such claim of an imminent threat untenable. As the latest round of US-Iran talks were underway, meaning all diplomatic means had not been satisfied before the attack, the use of force cannot be justified under international law.

The UN Secretary-General António Guterres told the UN Security Council that the strikes violated international law, including the UN Charter. In Washington, many Democrats have declared the strikes illegal, arguing that only Congress has the power to declare war. Washington's major allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have also questioned the legal grounds for US-Israeli strikes on Iran. French President Emmanuel Macron said the strikes were conducted 'outside international law' and his country 'cannot approve of them'. Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez publicly declared the war illegal and unjustified, barring US military planes from using Spanish airbases to attack Iran. British Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer initially refused to join the joint US-Israeli strikes on Iran, questioning their legality and stating that diplomacy was the best way forward, but the United Kingdom (UK) later allowed the US to use British bases for 'defensive' strikes. Now this decision is also controversial under international law. Philippe Sands, a law professor at the University College London, says that if the UK provides defensive support in relation to a force which is explicitly illegal, alluding to the joint US-Israeli strikes on Iran, it would make it difficult to distinguish between an offensive and defensive use of force.

As the US and Israel explicitly declare a forceful 'regime change' as their endgame in Iran, a sovereign state and member of the UN, the implications could reverberate across the world. On the one hand, it sets a dangerous precedent that undermines the role of international law in future conflicts; on the other, it has serious humanitarian as well as economic repercussions, particularly for global energy security. The latest reports indicate that even the Trump administration has begun to 'panic over' oil price hikes resulting from the closure of the Strait of Hormuz by Iran. David Crane, an eminent American expert on international law, warns these actions normalize 'unilateral force as a tool of foreign policy.' To materialize this agenda,

the strikes killed senior Iranian civilian and military officials, including their Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Marko Milanovic, a law professor at the University of Reading, says assassinating the head of any state clearly violates international law. Marieke de Hoon, an associate professor of international criminal law at the University of Amsterdam, says any regime change operation clearly violates the sovereignty of another state and the joint US-Israeli strikes on Iran amount to a ‘crime of aggression.’

The timing of the strikes is particularly significant. The attack took place against the backdrop of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu facing a serious corruption trial at home, with his opponents calling him an ‘enemy of the state’. In fact, President Trump has repeatedly urged the Israeli president to pardon Netanyahu. Professor Harold Hongju Koh, who served as a legal advisor to the State Department during the Obama administration, stated that President Trump violated both US law and the UN Charter through these strikes, making an attempt to distract media attention from the Epstein files and a recent Supreme Court ruling invalidating many of the tariffs imposed by President Trump.

The US, however, appears to lack a coherent so-called post-regime-change strategy should Iran’s current Islamic government collapse, a prospect that multiple analyses consider unlikely. If past US interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya are any guide, prolonged wars tend to result in greater destruction, chaos, and strategic miscalculation in the region. The only way to end the Middle East crisis is a return to international law and diplomacy. Though the US Senate has recently blocked a resolution to curb President Trump’s unprovoked military campaign against Iran, other global powers and regional players, however, should continue to push for an immediate ceasefire and protection of the civilian population and infrastructure. Unfortunately, the global condemnation of the aggression has been ineffective, therefore, as Professor Samuel Moyn has suggested, a broader antiwar movement is needed to set in motion a process that ultimately leads to the end of the conflict.

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Link: <https://ipi.org.pk/can-us-israeli-strikes-on-iran-be-justified-under-the-un-charter/>

How US-Israel war on Iran rocks foundations of the Abraham Accords

Amna Saqib

The 2020 Abraham Accords were heralded as a transformative diplomatic breakthrough in the Middle East. The US-brokered agreements normalised relations between Israel and Arab states including the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain. They established full diplomatic relations, opening embassies, initiating direct commercial flights, expanding trade ties and encouraging people-to-people exchanges. The accords were notable because the participating Arab states agreed to normalise relations with Israel without requiring prior resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – departing from a long-standing Arab League position.

The Arab states were expected to gain economic opportunities, technological cooperation and enhanced security coordination by aligning more closely with Israel and the United States against the perceived regional threat posed by Iran. The agreements were therefore not simply a means of reconciliation but elements of an emerging regional security architecture built around shared concerns about Iran’s expanding influence.

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Link: <https://www.scmp.com/opinion/world-opinion/article/3346247/how-us-israel-war-iran-rocks-foundations-abraham-accords>

How Washington Undermined Nuclear Talks with Iran

Nawal Nawaz

In the early hours of Saturday, 28 February 2026, the United States (US) and Israeli militaries launched a war against Iran, targeting leadership headquarters, intelligence nodes, air defence sites, command-and-control networks, and internal security organs. The Trump administration says it launched strikes against Iran to protect the US from imminent threats emanating from the Iranian regime. Despite President Trump's call for the largest US military build-up in the Middle East since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the Iranian government did not launch a pre-emptive strike against the US. The deployment by the US in the Middle East included two aircraft carriers, accompanying warships, fighter jets, and aerial refuelling aircraft. The Trump administration had been telegraphing such threats from Iran since mid-January; however, there was no indication of a coming Iranian attack on the US, its allies, or its bases in the region, making these attacks by the US preventive in nature rather than pre-emptive strikes aimed at deterring Iran. Even the Pentagon told Congress that no intelligence showed Iran was preparing to strike before the US attack. Therefore, US–Iran nuclear talks failed not because of imminent threats from Iran's nuclear programme, but due to Washington's unsubstantiated threat claims and maximalist demands. Despite Tehran's readiness to negotiate under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards, the Trump administration insisted on zero enrichment, missile rollbacks, and regime change, ultimately derailing nuclear diplomacy.

Contrary to President Trump's fears regarding the development of Iran's nuclear programme, his own intelligence defence agency proclaimed last year that it would take Iran a decade to get past the technological and production hurdles to produce a significant arsenal. Still, President Trump struck Iran because he sensed a moment of weakness for the Iranian government and an opportunity for the US to topple the Iranian regime, assassinating its Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. President Trump neither spent months building his case for war nor did he seek authorisation from the US Congress to initiate this war of choice. He even abstained from answering why Iran's nuclear programme, which he claimed to have obliterated eight months before, had all of a sudden become a threat.

Surprisingly, the recently released US National Security Strategy (NSS) and US National Defense Strategy (NDS) paid little attention to Iran as the primary theatre of a major military action. The documents largely focused on the issue of dominance in the Western Hemisphere

and deterrence in the Indo-Pacific, referring to Iran in the context of regional instability and proxy threats, not as a focal point for regime change. This disconnect between strategy papers and actions of the Trump administration presents the US attack on Iran as President Trump's personal choice for war, especially at times when both the US and Tehran were negotiating in nuclear talks.

On 2 February 2026, negotiations between Iran and the US were held in Geneva, which mediators described as the most constructive round of talks in years. Rather than repeating entrenched positions, both sides were involved in exploring creative formulations, expecting a principal agreement within days, with a detailed verification mechanism to follow within months. Several US presidents had prioritised negotiations to discuss issues with Iran, including its ballistic missile programme and enrichment of uranium. Democrats supported negotiations as the best alternative to avert a dangerous war, while Republicans considered negotiations a foolish strategy to appease Tehran. Earlier in 2015, President Obama negotiated an agreement, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), with Iran to impose restrictions on its nuclear programme and to keep it one year from being able to make a bomb, in return for relief from the US sanctions.

Iran vowed to refrain from developing weapons as mentioned in the preamble that "Iran reaffirms that under no circumstances will Iran ever seek, develop or acquire any nuclear weapons." However, President Trump abandoned the Iran nuclear deal in 2018, citing the terms and conditions as inadequate. In recent years, Iran was ready to accept much stricter limits on its uranium processing, with a level far from bomb-grade combustibility. Even Iran showed its willingness to engage on the issue of its ballistic missile programme. But, before Tehran could make such concessions, Israeli strikes on Iran in June sabotaged nuclear talks, which were subsequently supported by the attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities by the US in Fordow, Isfahan, and Natanz on 21 June.

The Trump administration's maximalist demands and mafioso-like threats tied to unilateral deadlines once again undermined the recent Geneva talks. Tehran had already shown its willingness to make necessary concessions on nuclear enrichment, including shipping out its 60% enriched uranium in response to the Trump administration's zero enrichment demand, citing a "right to enrich" for civilian nuclear activities under the IAEA safeguards. The Trump administration could have achieved a breakthrough, but the administration's insistence on

regime changes in Iran and rolling back the country's ballistic missile programme derailed efforts for nuclear diplomacy. Iran considered its ballistic missile programme as the last credible pillar of deterrence, urging the US to confine the scope of nuclear talks to the nuclear agreement and sanctions relief.

The sudden US-Israel strikes on Iran showed Trump's duplicity, pretending to negotiate with Tehran while preparing for a surprise decapitating strike. In fact, the US-Israeli surprise attacks are impromptu military aggression at a time when diplomatic efforts were underway to reach a peaceful and negotiated solution. Iran is also a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) system. IAEA Director General, Rafael Mariano Grossi, has also confirmed that no evidence has been found that Iran is building a nuclear weapon. Therefore, such unilateral strikes against a member state of the NPT would not only weaken diplomatic mechanisms but also erode trust and credibility in these institutions. Nuclear diplomacy hinges on mutual trust and predictability. A joint US-Israeli high-profile strike that took out Iran's senior leadership breaches the very trust that negotiations depend on. Iran would see future negotiations as a trap rather than a genuine effort for peace. Additionally, these strikes reinforce the fact that military force is a legitimate alternative to diplomacy, undermining the premise that non-proliferation disputes are resolvable within legal and diplomatic frameworks. As a result of joint US-Israel aggression, Tehran will not re-engage in nuclear talks, increasing Tehran's incentive to pursue a nuclear deterrent. In conclusion, the coercive and unilateral actions by the US, grounded in unsubstantiated threat claims and maximalist demands, destroyed negotiating momentum with Iran while diminishing prospects for a nuclear deal in the future.

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Link: <https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/defense-security/how-washington-undermined-nuclear-talks-with-iran/>

After New START: Must the World Face Disaster Before Restraint

Maryyum Masood

Do nuclear treaties only come after near-catastrophe? The question, often explored by researchers and scholars worldwide, is more relevant in the aftermath of the expiration of New Strategic Arms Reduction treaty (New START) in February 2026. The treaty's expiration come at a time when global arms control architecture is already in a state of flux and fears surrounding the growing global nuclear arsenals intensified. New START's expiration marks more than the termination of a US-Russia bilateral agreement. Rather, it represents the dissolution of the only remaining pillar of the Cold War era arms control framework. In the last five decades, Russia-US rivalry was managed through bilateral arms control agreements however, this is the first time that world's two largest nuclear powers are operating outside legally binding limits on their deployed strategic arsenals and in the absence of a functioning verification regime. This trend poses a fundamental question to modern nuclear governance: do significant arms control arrangements arise only when the international system faces the edge of a nuclear disaster, and is the modern system able to endure a similar shock again?

New START was not a mere numerical limit on deployed warheads and delivery systems. Its greater contribution was to maintain predictability, transparency and mutual confidence among nuclear rivals. It institutionalized a common operational image of the strategic forces through on-site inspections, data exchanges and notifications, thus diminishing incentives for worst-case planning and crisis instability. These mechanisms maintained a low level of trust even in times of geopolitical confrontation.

Its expiration thus eliminates three stabilizing functions concurrently. To begin with, the lack of legally binding restrictions allows unrestrained force-posture adjustments. Second, the ending of verification abolishes regular understanding of adversary capabilities and deployments. Third, the symbolic erosion of the last bilateral arms control treaty weakens the normative expectation that nuclear competition should be regulated. The loss is thus structural as well as numerical – a shift from managed competition toward opaque rivalry.

The Nuclear Arms Control Pattern

Scholars of nuclear strategy have long argued that major arms control breakthroughs followed periods of acute instability. As John Lewis Gaddies noted in his book *The Cold War: A New*

History, that periods of intense nuclear tension often precede strategic accommodation. Nuclear weapons history has shown a pattern that significant agreements have been preceded by periods when leaders had decided that nuclear confrontation had gotten too close. The closest example is the Cuban Missile Crisis, which precipitated the Hotline Agreement and the negotiation of the Partial Test Ban Treaty (PTBT) by Washington and Moscow to minimize the risk of accidental war and nuclear proliferation.

This was a crisis-based thinking that continued during the Cold War. The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of nuclear weapons (NPT) was influenced by escalation fears surrounding the Berlin Crisis and increasing worries of nuclear proliferation. The Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) I and the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty are the results of strategic anxiety that unregulated offensive and defensive missile competition would threaten deterrence stability. High nuclear tensions in the Euromissile Crisis in Europe culminated in the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which abolished an entire category of destabilizing missiles.

This pattern is further reinforced by Late Cold War misperception. The nuclear panic surrounding Able Archer 83 exercise added to the political impetus for strategic arms reductions reflected in START I. Fears of unsecured nuclear arsenals and proliferation threats motivated cooperative dismantlement actions and later agreements like the START II even after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Lastly, the deterioration of previous structures and the fresh strategic competition during the 2000s created the desire to reestablish predictability in the form of the New START Treaty. In all these instances, arms control was not a result of stable deterrence but a result of a time when leaders felt that deterrence itself was becoming too unreliable. The historical trend is thus quite obvious; nuclear restraint has been pursued most frequently after experienced danger as opposed to the anticipated risk.

This repeated pattern can be attributed to a number of structural and psychological factors. Nuclear weapons remain embedded in national security doctrines as ultimate guarantors of sovereignty, making limitations politically costly unless threat perceptions are acute. Deterrence stability is often presumed, not actually tested; the policy makers often believe that mutual vulnerability is self-enforcing until it is proven otherwise. Reciprocal concessions are also necessary in arms control in the presence of mistrust, and crises temporarily harmonize threat perceptions, making cooperation politically possible. The bureaucratic and technological

momentum further encourages modernization and competition and restraint demands unique political impetus.

Near-catastrophe has therefore served as a historical focusing event that surpasses inertia and makes risk-reduction a greater priority than competitive advantage. The risk is in the presumption that such crises may be survived again and converted into cooperation.

Why Today's System May Not Survive Another Near-Catastrophe

The modern nuclear landscape is quite different compared to the previous times when the arms-control had been driven by crisis. There are three salient features. Multipolarity; nuclear competition is no longer principally bilateral. The growth of arsenals and capabilities of more nuclear-armed states establishes overlapping deterrence relations, which diminish the clarity that allowed Cold War management of crisis. Technological acceleration; hypersonic delivery systems, cyber operations affecting nuclear command-and-control networks, dual-capable conventional weapons, and artificial intelligence–assisted decision tools compress decision timelines and blur escalation thresholds. The evolution of crisis might be faster than the political discussion. Erosion of guardrails; as the New START reaches its expiry, there will be no legally binding transparency or verification regime between the key nuclear powers. Crisis management would take place in a state of increased uncertainty and decreased institutionalized communication in comparison to previous times.

A combination of these reasons suggests that a nuclear crisis may occur more rapidly, unpredictably, and uncontrollably in the future than those that have historically spawned arms-control breakthroughs. This premise that states can once again move towards catastrophe and then bargain restraint is thus becoming less tenable. A system, which used to be able to survive shocks in order to learn about them, may now be so complex and opaque that it can no longer safely absorb similar shocks.

History has shown that nuclear treaties have been made after leaders realized that deterrence was almost failing. However, the expiry of New START demonstrates that stabilizing structures may weaken even in the absence of such a catalytic shock. It is a dangerous gamble therefore to wait another near-catastrophe to revive arms control. The proactive stabilization process in a multipolar and technologically accelerated nuclear environment, either in the form of formal agreements or interim transparency and risk-reduction arrangements, is necessary. Nuclear history should not teach us that disaster is the only thing that can lead to cooperation, but that dependence on crisis as a restraint method is increasingly becoming hazardous as the system

becomes more complicated. If the world again requires a moment of nuclear terror to rediscover arms control, it may find that the next crisis is not survivable enough to produce it.

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Link: <https://pircenter.org/en/editions/pir-post-%E2%84%96-4-18-2026-after-new-start-must-the-world-face-disaster-before-restraint/>

Will States Be Able to Regulate Autonomous Weapons? An Assessment of CCW Debates on LAWS

Muhammad Ali Baig

The question of a regulatory framework for Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems (LAWS) has been under discussion for a long time. The Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) were gathered in Geneva in March 2026 under Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW). This gathering of GGE on Emerging Technologies (ET) in the Area of LAWS under the CCW is the main multilateral forum i.e. international negotiating platform, for discussing LAWS also known as the “killer robots.” These are sophisticated weapon systems that can independently select and engage targets including human beings with little or no meaningful human control over critical decisions. This year is important because 2026 is the final timeline to conclude a meaningful and comprehensive regulatory framework for LAWS.

In Geneva, the first session was scheduled for March 2026 during which the UN High Representative Izumi Nakamitsu delivered a video message on 2 March urging states to accelerate progress. The second session is expected to take place between August and September 2026. The goal of these two sessions is to finalize a consensus report and submit it to the Seventh CCW Review Conference for comprehensive regulatory framework on LAWS.

The CCW is a treaty formed in 1980 under United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA). Currently, it includes more than 126 states known as High Contracting Parties (HCPs) i.e. states legally bound by a treaty. CCW aims to ban or restrict conventional weapons that cause unnecessary suffering or indiscriminate effects. The effects came for weapons which cannot distinguish between combatants and civilians. For example, CCW introduced protocols which include regulating blinding lasers, cluster munitions protocols etc., within this framework. LAWS are AI-driven systems where machines make life or death decisions with critical functions such as target selection, and engagement by itself. Therefore, because of these implications, GGE has been holding meetings for the last seven years to debate construction of a comprehensive regulatory framework for LAWS. The central debate concerns whether humans must always retain meaningful and have human control or judgment over the operation of LAWS. Other debates consist of its inherent risks.

These killer robots raise several risks that include loss of accountability, conflict escalation, proliferation to non-state actors, bias in algorithms for AI decision making, and erosion of International Humanitarian Law (IHL). Within the paradigm of IHL, these risks relate to the principle of distinction (between civilian and combatants), proportionality (of use of force to advantage), and precaution (minimizing damages). For these concerns, during 2018-2019 sessions, the CCW has come up with eleven Guiding Principles. It affirms that IHL fully applies to autonomous weapon systems. It also confirms that human operators and states remain legally responsible for its development and deployment during military missions.

The CCW discussions on autonomous weapons started with expert meetings between 2013 and 2015. Subsequently, the formal GGE meetings started in 2017. However, progress has been slow. Largely because decision making requires consensus i.e. all states must agree. Due to consensus, any state can block the whole process resulting in delay of the regulated frameworks. Nevertheless, some developments have taken place between 2017 and 2025. For instance, states have gradually reached incremental agreements on guiding principles. One important step was the creation of a ‘rolling text.’

Rolling text is a continuously updated draft negotiation document. This document outlines potential elements for a future possible legal protocols or regulatory instrument on LAWS. During 2023 CCW mandate, there was a formulation of a set of elements for an instrument and other possible risk mitigation measures by HCPs. By late 2025, a rolling text had been further developed and updated. This updated document includes proposed definition of LAWS, IHL compliance, human judgement and human control in weapon operations.

Despite these developments, other political and normative challenges continue to slow the process. Many states and Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) such as Stop Killer Robots, ICRC, and Humans Right Watch etc. advocate a two-tier approach. This approach proposes, firstly, an outright prohibition on fully autonomous anti-personnel systems and secondly, strict regulations for other type of autonomous systems. This two-tier approach will prevent the most dangerous forms of autonomy while allowing limited regulation of other military AI systems. However, some strong military states prefer voluntary measures or reliance strictly on existing IHL inside CCW. Other states support a new legally binding treaty as a significant comprehensive regulatory framework against the emerging autonomous weapons risks. These diverging positions between major military powers and regulatory advocates remain one of the main obstacles preventing consensus within the CCW negotiations.

These challenges exist alongside parallel political pressures. For instance, in the UN General Assembly one hundred and fifty-six states passed a resolution for supporting 2025 rolling text. Additionally, Secretary General set a deadline for a treaty by the end of 2026 by making this year important for getting results. It is crucial for international community to decide and come to a conclusion for a regulatory framework as reports are indicating increasing number of development and deployment of autonomous systems in ongoing global conflicts. The growing deployment of autonomous and AI-enabled military systems in contemporary conflicts have intensified the demand for clearer international rules. With all these simultaneous challenges and pressures on the CCW in the area of LAWS, 2026 represents the final year for negotiation before the Seventh CCW Review Conference in the November 2026 sessions. Therefore, future regulatory framework of LAWS will likely emerge through a combination of agreements within the CCW, parallel diplomatic initiatives, and evolving interpretations of IHL. The CCW debates on LAWS represent a broader struggle to adapt global governance mechanisms to the realities of AI driven warfare. The CCW process has also demonstrated that international consensus on regulating emerging military technologies is possible, but often gradual and incremental.

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Link: <https://strategicforecast.cissajk.org.pk/?p=23265>

Pakistan's Quiet Diplomacy: A Push for Peace Beyond the Frontlines

Shahwana Sohail

On 28 February, the United States and Israel launched strikes on more than 1000 targets of Iran, resulting in the killing of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Syed Ali Khameni. In response to the attacks of the United States and Israel, Iran retaliated by targeting US installations across the region. The region has plunged into a war since then which has generated instability and disrupted global markets. Pakistan being a neighbor of Iran has been affected by the war as it maintains close ties with both Iran and Gulf countries. Moreover, much of Pakistan's oil and gas supplies come from these countries. So far, Pakistan has maintained a policy of measured engagement, emphasizing dialogue and restraint. This approach reflects a deliberate effort to safeguard national interests and regional stability.

In late February 2026, as the rhetoric involving the United States, Israel, and Iran escalated, Islamabad expressed regret at the breakdown of diplomatic dialogue. It also voiced concern about the wider consequences of the clashes. The Foreign Office statement expressed Pakistan's regret over the collapse of diplomatic negotiations and the eruption of conflict in the region. It condemned assaults on Iran and Gulf Arab countries and underscored the need for restraint and peaceful settlement of disputes.

This approach, both measured and resolute, underscored Pakistan's enduring commitment to international law and regional stability. Rather than taking sides with a military coalition, Islamabad has maintained a consistent call for negotiations and peaceful resolution, adhering to the norms of the United Nations Charter.

Pakistan has played a central role in diplomatic efforts during the crisis. Through multiple phone conversations with regional and international counterparts, the country has consistently emphasized de-escalation and peaceful engagement. During a conversation with Bahrain's Foreign Minister, Pakistan's Foreign Minister emphasized the importance of de-escalation, dialogue, and the promotion of and stability in the region, reaffirming Pakistan's solidarity with Bahrain and its Gulf partners.

Pakistan similarly held detailed discussions with China, underlining a shared view that de-escalation and diplomatic engagement are essential for resolving the crisis. During their discussion, Pakistan's Foreign Minister shared Islamabad's perspective with China's FM Wang Yi. The Chinese side praised Pakistan's constructive efforts to promote stability and de-escalation. These diplomatic efforts reflect a style that is both proactive and measured, aiming to reduce tensions while keeping Pakistan out of direct involvement in the conflict.

The remarkable aspect of Pakistan's engagement lies in the delicate balance it is managing amid complex regional dynamics. Pakistan engages with multiple important partners. It maintains historic and cultural connections with Iran, security and economic alliances with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, and strategic cooperation with the United States. Rather than openly aligning itself with one faction in the Iran crisis, Pakistan has maintained a balanced narrative focused on reducing tensions and promoting talks among all sides.

Pakistan's outreach also included a call with Kuwait's foreign minister, where Islamabad expressed solidarity after attacks and stressed the importance of dialogue to restore peace and stability. Pakistan's Foreign Office emphasised the need for urgent diplomatic action to respond to developments that have raised global concerns.

Domestically, the government has urged citizens and media outlets to exercise caution when discussing Pakistan's foreign policy. It emphasized the need for narratives that align with the state's official stance and support national interests. Islamabad's emphasis on narrative control is part of its wider strategy. The goal is to ensure domestic stability and maintain relations with key partners such as China, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States. This matters because conflicts in the Middle East have led to strong public reactions and protests in Pakistan. Although public expression is normal in a democratic society, the state stresses careful communication so that official diplomacy is not confused with emotional public reactions.

Some critics may argue that Pakistan's quiet diplomacy is not strong enough during a time of serious tension. In a region where tensions can easily turn into larger conflicts, steady and quiet diplomacy has its own importance. By supporting dialogue, Pakistan helps keep diplomatic channels open and prevents tensions from increasing due to strong rhetoric.

Islamabad's approach reflects its broader strategic priorities. It seeks to prevent regional conflicts from destabilising its immediate neighbourhood. It also aims to preserve economic ties, such as energy and trade links with Gulf countries, and to maintain manageable relationships with both Western and regional partners. This balance is crucial because global supply chains, energy markets, and regional alliances are being affected by the growing conflict. Pakistan's measured diplomacy should not be ignored in these uncertain times. It reflects a broader commitment to stability and the belief that dialogue is more effective for long-term security than confrontation. Recent diplomatic engagements highlight this approach. For example, Pakistan's Army Chief Asim Munir held a high-level meeting with Saudi Arabia's Defence Minister Khalid bin Salman in Riyadh, where both sides discussed regional security concerns and emphasized efforts to maintain stability amid escalating tensions in the Middle East.

At the political level, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif also travelled to Saudi Arabia for consultations with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, where the leaders' exchanged views on regional developments and reaffirmed their commitment to cooperation for peace and stability. These engagements reflect Pakistan's efforts to coordinate with key regional partners during a period of heightened geopolitical tension. Diplomatic messaging has also extended beyond bilateral meetings. In a public statement on social media, the President of Iran, Masoud Pezeshkian, acknowledged Pakistan's constructive role and engagement during the crisis, highlighting Islamabad's importance as a regional interlocutor.

At the multilateral level, Pakistan has also been active at the United Nations Security Council, where it has supported calls for restraint and diplomatic engagement to prevent further escalation. By advocating dialogue in international forums while maintaining communication with regional stakeholders, Pakistan has sought to keep diplomatic channels open during a volatile period. Power competition and geopolitical tensions will likely remain in the headlines. But quiet diplomacy through meetings and discussions can help prevent conflicts from escalating. Pakistan's recent actions show the importance of steady dialogue for maintaining regional stability.

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Link: <https://thediomaticinsight.com/pak-quiet-diplomacy-push-for-peace-beyond-frontlines/>

Multi-Domain Operations and the Evolution of Pakistan’s Conventional Deterrence

Syed Ali Abbas

The South Asian security environment is undergoing a fundamental shift in how conventional military effectiveness is defined. Decision speed, cross-domain coordination, and technology-enabled command and control have emerged as primary determinants of operational success, a reality that the May 2025 conflict brought into sharp and irreversible focus. The recent Pakistan-India conflict in May 2025 have reinforced that these are now an active operational reality. Pakistan’s military defines multi-domain operations as the “synchronized application of air, land, cyber, electronic warfare and autonomous systems which converge into a single seamless design” — one where every sensor feeds to every shooter, every strike shapes the next maneuver, and every action pushes the adversary closer to operational collapse.

Pakistan’s articulation of multi-domain operations must be understood within this evolving environment. The important question is whether armed forces are translating multi-domain concepts into usable structures and routines, aligning force design, command arrangements, and training to a battlespace where integration and coordination increasingly decide outcomes. Pakistan’s trajectory reflects a measured, institution-driven evolution: an effort to align existing capabilities with a more networked and time-sensitive operational reality.

Crisis Dynamics and the Logic of Multi-Domain Integration

Crises in South Asia rarely unfold in a linear or predictable manner. They are marked by ambiguity, compressed political timelines, and limited tolerance for decision latency. Under such conditions, assumptions about the capacity for rapid and controlled conventional operations become central to strategic calculation. Confidence in speed and coherence can shape risk-taking behavior as much as formal force balances, and the consequences of misjudgment become correspondingly severe.

Pakistan’s emerging emphasis on multi-domain integration can be read as a measured attempt to operate effectively within this compressed decision environment. Official formulations highlight synchronization across services and domains. The operational idea is to reduce decision latency, limit inter-service friction, and enable coordinated action under time pressure.

Multi-domain operations are framed less as the pursuit of dominance in every domain and more as an effort to preserve operational coherence while disrupting an adversary's coherence early, precisely when crises are most volatile and miscalculation most costly.

At the operational level, the focus is on shaping conditions prior to decisive maneuver. Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance feed directly into targeting and fire-support processes. Air, land, cyber, and electronic effects are treated as mutually reinforcing. The premise is that operational coherence, once degraded, is difficult to restore within the political and temporal constraints that typically define South Asian crises. Maintaining that coherence under pressure, not merely demonstrating it in exercises, is the real test.

From Concept to Practice: Critical Enablers

Two developments illustrate how Pakistan is translating multi-domain integration from concept to practice. The first is the establishment of the Army Rocket Force Command (ARFC). Pakistan has long possessed long-range artillery and rocket systems, but their employment was not consistently embedded within joint planning structures. A dedicated rocket force represents a significant step toward centralizing the targeting, planning, and coordination of long-range conventional fires within a coherent command framework, and signals a deliberate move to strengthen the conventional response ladder.

The strategic significance of this development extends beyond organizational consolidation. By institutionally separating the management of conventional long-range fires from nuclear delivery systems, Pakistan signals an intent to maintain clear distinctions between rungs on the escalation ladder. This clarity serves deterrence: it reduces ambiguity about the nature of a response, lowers the risk of misinterpretation under time pressure, and preserves decision space for both sides during a crisis. Centralized command also improves the alignment of rocket forces with intelligence, surveillance, and electronic warfare assets, enabling earlier, more deliberate employment against command nodes, logistics hubs, and force concentrations across operational depth.

Institutional consolidation, however, demands discipline. Modern long-range fires are as much about precision and coordination as about range. Without integrated targeting systems and rigorous command processes, such capabilities risk operational inefficiency or, more seriously,

unintended escalation. The credibility of the ARFC will ultimately depend on whether its doctrine, training, and command culture develop in step with its hardware. Recent exercises have demonstrated this integration in practice, armor and mechanized infantry advancing under digitized artillery targeting, with engineers maintaining tempo through mine-clearing operations and drone swarms embedded in fire concentration to compound the effects of conventional fires. Alongside centralized long-range fires, Pakistan has also expanded its use of loitering munitions and unmanned strike systems, reflecting a broader shift toward distributed precision engagement. Recent developments in indigenous and jointly produced systems indicate growing emphasis on stand-off targeting, persistence, and flexible employment across operational depth.

The second enabling layer is digital architecture, specifically, the indigenous Link-17 tactical data link. Multi-domain operations are fundamentally dependent on reliable command, control, and communications. Link-17 allows platforms across the air force and, increasingly, naval and ground-based platforms to share sensor data, targeting information, and situational awareness in near real time. This reduces reliance on voice communication, shortens engagement timelines, and lowers the risk of misidentification, advantages that matter most in joint air defense, maritime operations, and coordinated strike scenarios where the margin for error is narrow.

Sovereign control over network architecture carries strategic implications that go beyond technical interoperability. Ownership of source code and encryption keys allows Pakistan to integrate platforms of diverse origins and adapt its data link under contested conditions without dependence on external suppliers. In crisis environments where interoperability constraints can shape operational flexibility, and where adversaries actively seek to exploit communications vulnerabilities, such autonomy strengthens resilience and preserves control over how escalation dynamics are managed. The architecture is designed to be scalable, extending beyond the air domain to encompass naval platforms and ground-based air defense systems, with the longer-term objective of a common operational picture shared across all three services.

From Coordination to System-Level Operations

Taken together, the ARFC and Link-17 point to a gradual but deliberate shift away from service-centric coordination toward system-level employment of force. The emphasis is increasingly on how cross-domain effects are generated rather than which service performs a

given task. Jointness, in this framing, becomes a structural property of the force rather than an episodic outcome of inter-service goodwill.

This trajectory is reinforced by efforts to strengthen tri-service coordination at senior leadership levels, including institutional mechanisms designed to improve joint planning and prioritization. Regular tri-service exercises and cross-service training exposure for officers contribute to reducing organizational friction and building a professional culture in which joint operations become routine rather than exceptional. The objective is to make integration a default condition, not a capability that must be assembled anew at the onset of each crisis.

A fourth and increasingly significant pillar is autonomous systems. Pakistan's indigenously developed AI-enabled drones, operating in surveillance, strike, and swarm configurations, have been formally integrated into MDO exercises as force multipliers, embedding unmanned effects within artillery and armor operations to achieve effect-based destruction rather than attrition alone. The operational logic is precise: sensors detect, networks fuse, decisions accelerate, and the shooter grid executes. The goal is to paralyze adversary decision-making before it can translate intent into action.

Integration, however, demands discipline equal to its ambition. Reliance on digital networks heightens exposure to electronic warfare and cyber disruption. Long-range fires and unmanned systems raise the risk of misinterpretation, particularly in sensitive operational environments where adversary intent may be ambiguous. These constraints underscore that integration does not by itself guarantee stability. Effective multi-domain employment requires clear rules of engagement, robust escalation management mechanisms, and sustained civil-military coordination, especially in a region where decision timelines are short and the political stakes are high.

Conclusion

Pakistan's adoption of multi-domain concepts is proceeding incrementally, with emphasis on institutional adjustment rather than declaratory transformation. The ARFC and Link-17 are architectural elements of a broader effort to make jointness routine, embedded in planning, doctrine, and command culture rather than confined to demonstrations and set-piece exercises. Whether that ambition is fully realized will determine the credibility of Pakistan's conventional

deterrence in a strategic environment that has grown measurably more demanding. The next crisis in South Asia will be decided less by order of battle than by which side's systems hold together under pressure. As regional militaries place growing emphasis on decision speed and cross-domain coordination, deterrence will depend not only on capability but on control, the ability to act with precision, signal with clarity, and manage escalation with discipline. The strategic objective, as Pakistan's military has publicly stated, is to paralyze the adversary, degrade its defenses, and enable advancing forces to achieve objectives with speed and minimal resistance. Whether that vision is matched by durable institutional capacity remains the central question for Pakistan's conventional deterrence going forward.

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Link: <https://defensetalks.com/multi-domain-operations-and-the-evolution-of-pakistans-conventional-deterrence/>

