



Disturbance in South Asian Democracy and Strategic Security in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

South Asia is home to almost a quarter of the world's people. It is also home to some of most fragile democracies of the world. In the last five years, the region has seen a president flee his palace, a prime minister flee her country, an army chief announce an interim government, and two nuclear-armed neighbours fight a four-day war. This paper looks at these events together. It asks a simple question. Is democratic disturbance in South Asia connected to strategic insecurity, or are the two separate problems that just happen to share a map? Using country cases from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and India, along with the 2025 India-Pakistan conflict, the paper argues that weak democratic institutions and strategic insecurity feed each other. It draws on democratic backsliding theory, securitization theory, and hybrid regime theory. This paper uses verifiable public sources, news reporting, think-tank analysis, and government statements. The proposed paper ends with policy suggestions for regional and international actors.

Keywords: South Asia, democratic backsliding, strategic security, civil-military relations, nuclear deterrence, SAARC

1. Introduction

South Asia is home to nearly a quarter of population of the world and includes some of its most consequential democracies alongside a number of hybrid political systems. It is also a region where domestic political instability and strategic insecurity have become increasingly intertwined. Sri Lanka went through a severe economic and political crisis.

Pakistan saw sharpening confrontation between elected political forces and the military establishment. Bangladesh witnessed the collapse of a long dominant government following mass mobilisation. And India, despite retaining competitive elections, has faced growing concerns over institutional autonomy, civil liberties, media freedom, and the concentration of executive power. Meanwhile, terrorism, territorial



disputes, nuclear competition, economic vulnerability, and great power rivalry continue to shape politics right across the region. The 2025 India Pakistan conflict made especially clear how quickly terrorism, domestic political pressure, and interstate rivalry can escalate between two nuclear armed states.

These developments raise a central question. Are democratic disturbance and strategic insecurity two separate problems, or do they actually feed into each other? This paper argues that democratic institutional weakness and strategic insecurity in South Asia are mutually reinforcing. Weak institutions can deepen insecurity by eroding civilian oversight, institutional checks, and accountable decision making around security. At the same time, terrorism, interstate rivalry, economic insecurity, and geopolitical competition can be securitized, in other words used to justify exceptional measures, restrictions on civil liberties, executive concentration, and an expanded role for security institutions. The relationship, then, is not linear or one directional. Democratic weakness can produce insecurity, and insecurity, in turn, can open the door to further democratic erosion. This argument sits within a postcolonial and decolonial reframing of the democracy security relationship. The contemporary political and security institutions of South Asia were not shaped only by choices made after independence, but by administrative, bureaucratic, military, territorial, and coercive structures inherited from colonial rule. Partition, postcolonial state building, nationalism, and the conflicts that followed all transformed these inherited institutions further. This paper looks at how these historically rooted structures continue to shape ideas of sovereignty, territorial integrity, political authority, internal disorder, and national security, without reducing today's crises to colonial legacy alone.

The study draws on the work of Ayesha Jalal and Paul Staniland on Pakistan's civil military relations,

Maya Tudor on democratic durability, Christophe Jaffrelot on democratic erosion and majoritarian politics in India, and Sumit Ganguly on India Pakistan security. It brings these strands together to examine how democratic disturbance and strategic insecurity interact across South Asia's differing trajectories. Its contribution is a historically grounded account of the democracy security relationship, one that treats institutional weakness and insecurity as mutually reinforcing rather than as separate issues to be studied in isolation. The analysis focuses, purposively, on Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and India, chosen for their contrasting institutional and political trajectories. Pakistan illustrates persistent military influence. Bangladesh shows dominant party concentration followed by political rupture. Sri Lanka demonstrates severe economic and political disruption without sustained military rule. And India shows gradual democratic erosion alongside continued electoral competition. Nepal and the Maldives are left out in order to keep the analysis focused, given their distinctive post conflict, federal, and small island trajectories. Myanmar, while important to any discussion of civil military relations after 2021, is treated as a contextual comparator rather than a core case, given its very different military state relationship and prolonged armed conflict. The case selection, in other words, is theoretically purposive rather than statistically representative.

The paper asks three questions. How does democratic institutional weakness affect strategic security? How can strategic insecurity reinforce democratic erosion? And under what conditions can severe political disturbance occur without tipping into sustained authoritarian rule? Methodologically, it combines within case process tracing with structured comparison across cases, looking at shared dimensions of institutional weakness, civil military relations, securitization, political mobilisation, economic fragility, and interstate rivalry. Section 2



sets out the theoretical, civil military, and postcolonial decolonial framework and reviews the relevant literature. Section 3 examines the four cases. Section 4 analyses strategic security dynamics. Section 5 compares the democracy security relationship across cases. Section 6 turns to SAARC and regional cooperation. Section 7 sets out policy recommendations. And Section 8 concludes.

2. Theoretical Framework

Three bodies of theory guide this paper.

Democratic backsliding theory: Nancy Bermeo defines backsliding as the slow, legal weakening of the checks that make an election meaningful (Bermeo, 2016). Unlike a coup, backsliding does not announce itself. It happens through court packing, executive aggrandizement, and the strategic harassment of the opposition. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt make a related point in their well-known account of how democracies die: modern democracies rarely die in one dramatic night. They die from the inside, one rule bent at a time (as cited in Atlantic Council, 2025). This framework fits India and Bangladesh well, where elections still happen, but their fairness is increasingly in doubt.

Hybrid regime theory: Larry Diamond and others have argued that many states are neither fully democratic nor fully authoritarian. They are hybrids, holding elections while limiting real competition. Analysts today describe Pakistan under military-backed civilian rule, and even India under a dominant party with weakened courts and media, in similar language: competitive authoritarianism or electoral autocracy (East Asia Forum, 2025a). This label matters because it explains why elections keep happening in South Asia even as freedom keeps shrinking.

Securitization theory: Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde argue that security is not a fixed

category of “real” threats. It is created when political actors successfully frame an issue as an existential threat, which then justifies extraordinary measures outside normal politics (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, 1998). In South Asia, militaries and governments have long used the language of terrorism, secession, or foreign conspiracy to justify measures that weaken civilian oversight. Pakistan’s use of military courts to try civilians after the 2023 riots is one recent case (Countercurrents, 2026). India’s use of national security law in Kashmir is another long-running example. Together, these three theories explain why South Asian democracy is disturbed in slow, legal ways as often as in sudden, dramatic ones, and why security logic so often becomes an excuse to avoid democratic accountability.

2.1 Theoretical Perspectives on Democracy, Security, and Civil-Military Relations in South Asia

Scholars who study South Asian political development have come up with some genuinely sophisticated explanations for military intervention, democratic durability, authoritarian resurgence, and interstate insecurity. The problem is that these different bodies of work have mostly grown up on separate tracks, rarely talking to each other. Civil military scholarship has focused mainly on the institutional conditions under which militaries manage to acquire political authority. Research on democratic backsliding has tended to emphasise the erosion of constitutional checks, political competition, and civil liberties. Security scholarship, meanwhile, has largely stuck to interstate rivalry, territorial disputes, and strategic competition. So the real analytical gap here is not a shortage of scholarship on any one of these processes. It's that so little work has tried to theorise how they interact and end up reinforcing each other within states whose institutions



were shaped by a particular colonial and postcolonial history.

Ayesha Jalal's landmark analysis of Pakistan makes the point that military predominance cannot simply be explained as a matter of military ambition. It grew out of the interaction between state insecurity, weak political institutions, bureaucratic authority, and the way the military consolidated itself institutionally in the years following Partition (Jalal, 1990). Paul Staniland builds on this institutional line of thinking by showing that civil military trajectories are shaped by how security environments, political organisation, civilian legitimacy, and military institutional structures interact with one another. His comparative work on India and Pakistan is particularly telling, since it shows that two states with broadly similar colonial institutional inheritances can end up with strikingly different civil military outcomes (Staniland, 2008). Together, these studies make a strong case that military influence is something historically and institutionally produced, not just the product of a military's own ambitions.

The literature on democratic durability and backsliding brings in a complementary, but analytically distinct, dimension. Maya Tudor's comparative study of India and Pakistan highlights how important nationalist organisation, elite coalition building, and the institutional foundations of political legitimacy are in explaining why the two countries ended up on such different democratic paths (Tudor, 2013). Her later work goes further, showing how democratic erosion often happens gradually, through the slow concentration of executive authority and the weakening of institutional constraints, rather than through a dramatic coup or sudden regime collapse (Tudor, 2023). Christophe Jaffrelot, looking specifically at India, shows that democratic erosion there is tangled up with majoritarian nationalism, shifting ideas about citizenship, and the growing

personalisation of political authority (Jaffrelot, 2021). These are all important contributions for understanding why democracies decline in the present day, but they tend to treat security politics as background context rather than as something that actively drives institutional erosion. Sumit Ganguly's work takes the opposite starting point, placing security at the very centre of South Asian political development. His research looks closely at the India Pakistan rivalry, the Kashmir dispute, competing nationalisms, military competition, and nuclear deterrence (Ganguly, 2002, 2016; Ganguly and Kapur, 2012). This body of work does a good job of showing how persistent external insecurity shapes the way states behave and how political leaders make decisions. What it doesn't really dig into, though, is how repeated security crises can gradually reshape the domestic balance between civilians and the military, weaken democratic institutions, and shift where political authority actually sits within a state.

A postcolonial lens offers a useful bridge between these different strands of scholarship. Colonial state formation left behind institutional legacies around territorial sovereignty, coercive authority, bureaucratic organisation, and how internal versus external threats get categorised in the first place. These legacies were not simply carried forward unchanged after independence, nor were they discarded. They were picked up, reshaped, and contested in different ways by the political elites and institutions that came after colonial rule. That means today's democratic and security crises need to be understood as part of these deeper, historically rooted structures of authority, rather than treated as isolated failures of present day governance.

The main contribution this study is trying to make is to treat democratic backsliding and security politics not as two things happening in parallel, but as processes that actively feed into and reinforce one



another. The existing scholarship already explains, quite convincingly, why Pakistan ended up with military predominance, why democratic institutions have held up better in some South Asian states than in others, why democratic erosion has picked up pace in India in recent years, and why the India-Pakistan rivalry has proven so persistent. What is still missing is a cross-national account of how institutional fragility and security insecurity interact with each other to produce cumulative shifts in where political power actually lies. By comparing Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and India side by side, this paper argues that security crises can give political actors an opening to expand their executive and coercive authority, and that weakened democratic institutions can, at the same time, intensify securitization and loosen civilian control over security institutions.

Put simply, the paper builds a historically grounded account of the democracy security relationship, one in which civil-military relations, democratic backsliding, securitization, and strategic insecurity are not treated as separate variables but as interconnected processes rooted in postcolonial state formation. The contribution here is not just about bringing existing variables together in the same analysis. It is about showing the feedback loop at work, the way democratic weakness can push a state toward greater dependence on security actors and institutions, and how that same security dependence can, in turn, deepen democratic erosion still further. Seen this way, the relationship between democracy and security in South Asia is not a story of two separate declines happening side by side. It is a single, self-reinforcing cycle, and understanding it requires looking at both halves of the story at once.

2.2 Methodology and Comparative Case Selection

This study uses a qualitative, comparative case study approach to examine how democratic disturbance and

strategic insecurity relate to one another in South Asia. The four cases, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and India, were chosen using a most different systems logic. These countries differ substantially in their political institutions, civil-military relations, economic structures, regime trajectories, and strategic environments, yet all of them have experienced significant democratic stress and political disruption in the 21st century. Pakistan offers the clearest example of persistent military influence over civilian politics. Bangladesh shows how quickly a long-established dominant party order can collapse. Sri Lanka demonstrates how a severe economic crisis can trigger mass political mobilisation while constitutional procedures still manage to carry through a political transition. India, by contrast, offers a case where electoral competition continues even as concerns grow about democratic erosion and institutional independence.

The selection, then, is theoretically purposive rather than statistically representative. The goal is not to generalise from four countries to South Asia as a whole, but to identify the recurring mechanisms that link institutional weakness, political disturbance, securitization, civil-military relations, economic fragility, and strategic insecurity across different political settings. The cases are examined through structured comparison, with particular attention paid to four shared dimensions, namely the sources of democratic disturbance, the role of civilian and security institutions, how domestic political crises interact with external security pressures, and what this all means for regional stability.

Nepal and the Maldives were left out of the study because including every South Asian democracy would stretch the analysis too thin and reduce the depth of the within case analysis. Nepal has its own distinctive post conflict and federal democratic trajectory, while the Maldives represents a small



island political and strategic environment quite different from the four cases selected here. Myanmar is also excluded from the core comparison. Although its 2021 military coup is clearly relevant to questions of civil-military relations, its political trajectory and its prolonged armed conflict environment set it apart analytically from the main comparative set. Myanmar is therefore treated as a contextual regional comparator rather than a full case in its own right. The methodology, as a result, combines within case process tracing with cross-case comparison. Rather than claiming a single causal relationship, the study asks whether similar interactions recur across different national contexts, and whether democratic weakness and strategic insecurity really do appear to reinforce one another.

3. Democratic Disturbance in South Asia: Country Cases

3.1 Pakistan: The Permanent Civil-Military Imbalance

Pakistan has oscillated between civilian rule and direct military rule since its independence in 1947 (Countercurrents, 2026). Even under civilian governments, the army has kept a strong hand in politics, foreign policy, and the economy. The clearest recent flashpoint came after Imran Khan lost a no-confidence vote in April 2022. Khan accused the military and the United States of conspiring to remove him, a claim the army denied (USIP, 2023). When Khan was arrested in May 2023, his supporters attacked military installations, including the army's own headquarters in Rawalpindi, in scenes that shocked a country used to seeing the army as untouchable (USIP, 2023).

What followed was a long crackdown. Roughly ten thousand of Khan's party workers were arrested, according to various estimates. Military courts were authorised to try civilians linked to the attacks, a step

that raised hard questions about due process (Countercurrents, 2026). Khan himself was barred from the February 2024 election and has remained in jail on multiple charges since August 2023, even though candidates backed by his party still won the most seats in that election (New Lines Magazine, 2025). Under army chief Asim Munir, the military has since deepened its grip through a compliant civilian coalition, media controls, and continued repression of PTI supporters (Carnegie Endowment, 2026). Analysts at the Carnegie Endowment call this a "hard state" approach: short-term stability bought at the cost of long-term legitimacy (Carnegie Endowment, 2026). Pakistan's disturbance is not just political theatre. It has security consequences. Militant attacks rose by about seventy percent between 2023 and 2024, partly linked to the return of Taliban rule next door in Afghanistan (New Lines Magazine, 2025). Separatist violence in Balochistan has also grown, including the hijacking of a train that killed thirty-one people (New Lines Magazine, 2025). A distracted, distrustful political system struggles to fight a two-front security problem.

3.2 Bangladesh: From Landslide to Flight

Sheikh Hasina and her Awami League ruled Bangladesh from 2009 until August 2024. Her last three elections, in 2014, 2018, and 2024, were all criticised by international observers for lacking real competition (Freedom House, 2025). The 2024 vote was boycotted by the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party and won by the Awami League with 223 of 298 seats (Countercurrents, 2026's companion reporting confirms similar figures in The Friday Times, 2024). Discontent had been building for years over corruption, unemployment among the young, and shrinking press freedom under laws like the Digital Security Act (Australian Institute of International Affairs, 2024).



The spark came from an unlikely place, which is a court ruling in June 2024 that reinstated a job quota reserving thirty percent of civil service posts for descendants of 1971 war veterans. Students saw this as another form of patronage for the ruling party (LPE Project, 2024). When Hasina compared the protesting students to collaborators of the old regime, the protests turned into a mass uprising (The Conversation, 2024). Security forces killed hundreds of protesters, including children, during the crackdown (Australian Institute of International Affairs, 2024). On 5 August 2024, with crowds closing in on her residence, Hasina resigned and fled by helicopter to India. Army chief Waker-uz-Zaman announced the resignation and the formation of an interim government (Al Jazeera, 2024).

Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus was sworn in as chief adviser three days later (House of Commons Library, 2026). A year on, the promised reforms remain incomplete, elections have not been held, and rival factions from the uprising are competing for power rather than cooperating (Al Jazeera, 2025). Tensions with India have also grown, since Hasina remains in Delhi and Dhaka has requested her extradition (House of Commons Library, 2026). Bangladesh shows how fast a seemingly durable, election-winning government can collapse once public trust runs out, and how unclear the path back to stable democracy can be even after the old order falls.

3.3 Sri Lanka: Collapse and Course Correction

Sri Lanka's crisis had a different trigger, which is economic collapse. Years of tax cuts, heavy foreign borrowing, and a sudden, disastrous ban on chemical fertiliser combined with the pandemic to wreck the economy (The Diplomat, 2022). By 2022, inflation had passed fifty percent, fuel and medicine were scarce, and the country defaulted on its foreign debt for the first time in its history (Asia Pacific Foundation, 2025). Protesters, mostly young and

largely non-partisan, occupied the presidential palace grounds in July 2022, forcing President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to flee the country (International Crisis Group, 2024). A Supreme Court ruling in 2023 later held Gotabaya, his brother Mahinda, and their brother Basil responsible for the collapse, though none faced prosecution (International Crisis Group, 2024).

What makes Sri Lanka different from Pakistan or Bangladesh is what came next. Parliament, following its own constitutional procedure, elected Ranil Wickremesinghe to finish the term, and elections were eventually held on schedule in 2024 (International Crisis Group, 2024). Anura Kumara Dissanayake, representing the National People's Power alliance, won Sri Lanka's 2024 presidential election with 42.31 percent of the vote, marking a major electoral breakthrough for the JVP-led political movement (Election Commission of Sri Lanka, 2025; Reuters, 2024). The transition was peaceful. This case is a reminder that a democratic disturbance does not always end in an authoritarian outcome. Sometimes, as International IDEA has argued in its regional foresight work, institutions bend without breaking (International IDEA, 2025).

3.4 India: The Paradox of the World's Largest Democracy

India presents a harder case, because its elections keep happening and keep being competitive at the vote-counting stage. Yet by most measures used by Freedom House and the Varieties of Democracy project, India's civil liberties, press freedom, and judicial independence have declined since 2014 (Atlantic Council, 2025). Analysts describe a pattern of executive aggrandizement: pressure on independent media, tighter control over civil society funding, and communal polarisation that has coincided with an eighty-four percent rise in communal riots in 2024 compared with 2023 (CSSS, 2025). Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party won a



third term in 2024, though with a reduced majority that forced it into a coalition, which some analysts read as a sign that Indian voters can still check executive overreach at the ballot box (The New Global Order, 2025). India's case matters for the whole region because of its size and its self-image as the anchor of South Asian democracy (The Friday Times, 2024). If the region's largest democracy keeps sliding toward what scholars call "electoral autocracy," it removes a possible model of stability for its smaller neighbours, and it changes how India behaves toward Pakistan, Bangladesh, and China.

3.5 Spillover: Afghanistan and the Region's Bad Neighbourhood

South Asia does not sit apart from its more troubled edges. The Taliban's return to power in Kabul in 2021 removed even the pretence of electoral government from Afghanistan and gave militant groups new sanctuary. Analysts link Pakistan's rising militant violence directly to this return (New Lines Magazine, 2025). Further east, Myanmar's 2021 coup shows the same pattern the region keeps repeating: a fragile elected government, a military unwilling to accept a result it dislikes, and years of conflict afterward (Atlantic Council, 2025). None of these events sit inside a tidy "South Asia" box on a map, but their instability crosses borders freely, through refugees, weapons, and militant networks.

4. Strategic Security in the 21st Century

4.1 The India-Pakistan Rivalry and the 2025 War

No relationship defines South Asian strategic security more than the one between India and Pakistan. Both states have had nuclear weapons since 1998, and both have fought several wars and countless border skirmishes since independence. For decades, an unwritten rule limited official military responses mostly to the disputed region of Kashmir (East Asia Forum, 2025b). That rule has been eroding steadily.

In 2016, India struck suspected militant camps in Pakistani-administered Kashmir. In 2019, it struck Balakot, just inside Pakistan proper, after an attack on Indian paramilitary forces (East Asia Forum, 2025). The rule broke down further in 2025. On 22 April, gunmen killed twenty-six civilians, mostly Hindu men, in a tourist town called Pahalgam in Indian-administered Kashmir (Carnegie Endowment, 2025). India blamed Pakistan-based militants. On the night of 6-7 May, India launched Operation Sindoor, striking nine sites, including camps linked to Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, in Pakistan's Punjab province and in Pakistani Kashmir (Al Jazeera, 2025). This was the first time since the 1971 war that India struck targets inside Pakistan's political heartland rather than only the contested Kashmir region (East Asia Forum, 2025).

Pakistan called the strikes an act of war and retaliated with shelling, drone strikes, and, according to its own account, the downing of Indian aircraft, including a French-made Rafale jet. What followed was four days of the most intense fighting between the two countries in decades, including drone duels, a large beyond-visual-range air battle involving over a hundred aircraft, and missile exchanges that reportedly reached close to each capital's outskirts (Stimson Center, 2025). Pakistani media reported that Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif convened the National Command Authority, the body that oversees nuclear weapons decisions, though Pakistan's defence minister later denied this. Both countries' top military officers later said that nuclear use was never seriously considered (Dawn, 2025). A ceasefire, reportedly encouraged by pressure from the United States, took hold on 10 May (Al Jazeera, 2025; East Asia Forum, 2025).

Analysts disagree about what this war means for the future. Some, writing for the Royal United Services Institute, argues that limited war under a nuclear



shadow can still be managed carefully, with both sides accepting real restraint even while fighting (RUSI, 2025). Others, writing for War on the Rocks, argue the opposite that India has learned it can strike deep into Pakistan and call what it terms Islamabad's "nuclear bluff," which could make the next crisis far more dangerous, since the old red lines have moved (War on the Rocks, 2025; War on the Rocks, 2026). A year later, The Diplomat reported that the space for restraint was narrowing further, with compressed timelines and stronger domestic pressure to strike hard and fast in any future crisis (The Diplomat, 2026). This is the strategic security problem in its sharpest form that is a nuclear rivalry where the tacit rules that once contained conflict are being tested, turn by turn, with the two most likely triggers being domestic political pressure and non-state terrorism.

4.2 Terrorism and Non-State Violence

Terrorism remains the thread that connects South Asia's domestic disorder to its interstate conflict. The Pahalgam attack that triggered Operation Sindoor is the clearest example, but it is far from unique. Pakistan's own militant violence rose roughly seventy percent between 2023 and 2024, driven partly by groups operating from Afghan territory and partly by separatist violence in Balochistan (New Lines Magazine, 2025). India has for years accused Pakistan of using militant proxies in Kashmir while avoiding direct blame, a strategy some Indian officials describe as hiding behind the "nuclear umbrella" (BASIC, 2026). Whether or not one accepts India's framing entirely, the underlying pattern is real. Weak state control over armed groups, whether by design or by incapacity, keeps producing attacks that can escalate into interstate crises within days.

4.3 Great Power Competition: China, the United States, and a Region Up for Grabs

South Asia's security problems increasingly play out with outside powers watching closely, and sometimes intervening. China has built deep economic ties across the region through its Belt and Road Initiative, including the Hambantota port project in Sri Lanka, which became a symbol of debt-driven Chinese influence after Colombo could not repay its loans (Asia Society, 2024). During the 2025 India-Pakistan war, reports suggested Chinese-made air-defence systems helped Pakistan down at least one Indian jet, a claim that, whatever its precision, points to the deepening military links between Beijing and Islamabad. India's own military planners now treat China's shadow support for Pakistan as a standing factor in any future crisis (Carnegie Endowment, 2025).

The United States, meanwhile, has pulled back. In January 2025, the Trump administration cut most American foreign assistance, removing a tool Washington had used to support democratic institutions and counter Chinese influence in the region (CNAS, 2025). At the same time, some American lawmakers have pushed for sanctions on Pakistan's military leadership over Imran Khan's imprisonment, while others in the same administration have tried to build ties with that same military establishment, producing a policy that looks inconsistent from the outside (New Lines Magazine, 2025). For a region already juggling internal instability, this uneven and reduced external engagement leaves more room for China's model of transactional, non-conditional support to fill the gap (CNAS, 2025).

4.4 Economic Fragility as a Security Multiplier

Economic distress deserves its own place in this discussion, because it links the democratic and security stories together in a very direct way. Sri Lanka's default happened after years of unsustainable borrowing, much of it tied to Chinese-financed



infrastructure projects whose returns never matched their cost (Asia Society, 2024). When the money ran out, the state could not buy fuel, medicine, or cooking gas, and citizens filled the streets not for ideology but for survival (Foreign Policy, 2022). Bangladesh's growth story looked stronger on paper, yet high youth unemployment and inflation sat underneath the quota protests from the very start (The Conversation, 2026). Pakistan's economic troubles, meanwhile, have made its government more dependent on international lenders and, some analysts argue, more willing to trade security cooperation for financial support, whatever the terms (New Lines Magazine, 2025). A state that cannot pay its bills has less room to resist pressure, whether that pressure comes from a foreign lender, a hostile neighbour, or its own angry citizens. Economic fragility, in other words, is not a side issue next to democracy and security. It is often the fuse that lights both fires at once.

5. The Democracy-Security Nexus: A Debate

Scholars disagree on how tightly democratic disturbance and strategic insecurity are linked, and this paper does not pretend the relationship is simple or one-directional. Three positions deserve mention.

The first view holds that weak civilian institutions directly cause security problems, because militaries and unaccountable agencies that escape democratic oversight tend to pursue riskier, more opaque security policies. Pakistan is the textbook case: a military establishment that answers weakly to elected civilians has also driven a policy of using militant proxies in Kashmir and Afghanistan for decades, with security costs that Pakistan itself now bears (New Lines Magazine, 2025). The second view runs the other way: that security threats, real or manufactured, are used to justify limits on democracy, rather than the other way around. This is the securitization argument (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, 1998). Military courts trying civilians in Pakistan, emergency laws in Sri

Lanka's Prevention of Terrorism Act, and expanded surveillance powers in India after various attacks all follow this pattern: a security justification precedes a democratic rollback (Countercurrents, 2026; Asia Media Centre, 2025). The third view, associated with scholars of hybrid regimes, argues the two problems are not causally linked at all in a strict sense.

They are both symptoms of a deeper condition: institutions in South Asia, across judiciaries, election commissions, central banks, and militaries, were often built to serve colonial or post-colonial elites rather than the public, and they remain captured by narrow interests today (International IDEA, 2025). On this view, fixing democracy and fixing security both require the same underlying work: building institutions that answer to ordinary citizens rather than to a small circle of power. This paper leans toward a middle position. The evidence from Pakistan supports the first view strongly. The evidence from India and Sri Lanka's counter-terrorism laws supports the second. And the region-wide pattern, repeating across five very different countries in under five years, supports the third. None of the three views fully explains South Asia on its own, but together they describe a region where democratic weakness and security fragility are, at minimum, mutually reinforcing.

6. The Collapse of Regional Cooperation: SAARC

One institution that should, in theory, help manage these problems has instead become a case study in its own right. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, formed in 1985, has not held a summit since 2014, largely because of the freeze in India-Pakistan relations (International IDEA, 2025). International IDEA's own foresight work on the region's future warns that continued India-China tension, alongside the standing India-Pakistan freeze, could see the "already limited space for regional



cooperation” through SAARC shrink even further, with disputes over borders, trade, and diplomacy pushing other South Asian states to take sides (International IDEA, 2025). A region that badly needs shared water management, counter-terrorism cooperation, and economic integration instead has almost no working forum for any of it. This is not a side note. It is part of why crises like the 2025 war had so few regional institutional brakes to slow them down.

7. Policy Recommendations

This analysis makes one thing clear. You cannot tackle democratic resilience and strategic security in South Asia separately, since the two are too tangled together. The recommendations below draw on the three frameworks laid out in Section 2, namely democratic backsliding, hybrid regimes, and securitization. Each one points to a different way that weak institutions and insecurity end up feeding off each other.

7.1 Strengthen Democratic Checks and Civilian Oversight

Democratic Backsliding Theory

Governments need to strengthen the checks on executive power that come from parliament, the judiciary, elections, and other institutions, especially during political and security crises. Defence and national security decisions should stay under real civilian and legislative oversight rather than being shielded from it. Emergency powers, too, should be temporary, clearly defined by law, and open to independent review. Such recommendations follow directly from democratic backsliding theory, which points to the erosion of institutional constraints and accountability as one of the main ways democracies weaken over time.

7.2 Reform Civil-Military Relations and Informal Power Structures

Hybrid-Regime Theory

In systems where formal democratic institutions exist alongside powerful unelected actors, constitutional authority on paper does not always match where real political power actually sits. South Asian states should work to clarify civilian authority over defence and security policy, bring more transparency to military budgets and appointments, and build institutional mechanisms for handling civil-military disagreements when they arise. This draws on hybrid-regime theory, which looks at the informal power structures that operate alongside formal democratic institutions.

7.3 Prevent Excessive Securitization of Political Dissent

Securitization Theory

Governments need to draw a clear line between genuine national security threats and legitimate political opposition, peaceful protest, civil society activity, and critical journalism. Counterterrorism and national security laws should include clear definitions, proportionality requirements, judicial safeguards, and independent review, rather than leaving room for these tools to be misused. It follows securitization theory, which shows how political actors can turn ordinary political issues into supposed existential threats, and in doing so justify exceptional measures that would otherwise be hard to defend.

7.4 Strengthen Regional Crisis-Management Mechanisms

Securitization and Hybrid-Regime Theories

South Asian states should invest in stronger crisis communication, military-to-military contacts, diplomatic consultation, and confidence-building mechanisms, particularly in the aftermath of terrorist



incidents and border crises. These kinds of mechanisms can help prevent domestic political pressures and securitized narratives from spiraling quickly into interstate escalation. They matter even more in contexts where decision-making is highly centralised or only weakly constrained.

7.5 Address Economic Fragility and Institutional Legitimacy

Democratic Backsliding Theory

Economic crises should not be treated as purely economic problems. They can also become sources of institutional and political instability. Greater fiscal transparency, stronger anti-corruption measures, more accountable public services, and better protection for vulnerable populations can all help rebuild public confidence in democratic institutions. This recommendation follows from democratic backsliding theory, since institutional legitimacy and state capacity play a real role in how well democratic systems hold up during periods of crisis.

7.6 Integrated Policy Approach

Taken together, these recommendations show how the three theoretical frameworks of paper connect to real policy. Democratic backsliding theory calls for stronger institutional checks and accountability. Hybrid-regime theory points to the need to regulate informal concentrations of political and military power. And securitization theory stresses the importance of safeguards against the excessive use of national security narratives to shut down democratic contestation. Together, they suggest that stability in South Asia cannot be achieved through security measures alone. Democratic institutional resilience and accountable security governance need to be strengthened at the same time, in order to break the

cycle where institutional weakness and strategic insecurity keep reinforcing each other.

8. Conclusion

South Asia in the 2020s tells one continuous story, even though it is set in five different countries. Sri Lanka's president fled a mansion he could no longer defend from his own hungry, angry citizens. Pakistan's most popular politician sits in jail while the army he once tried to challenge tightens its grip. Bangladesh's long-ruling prime minister left by helicopter after her own police killed hundreds of students. India's ruling party keeps winning elections while courts, media, and minorities report shrinking space. And in May 2025, two nuclear-armed neighbours came closer to open war than they had in over fifty years, over an attack carried out not by an army but by a small group of gunmen.

These are not five unrelated stories. They are one story about institutions that were never built strong enough, security establishments that grew used to operating without real civilian checks, and publics that have, again and again, run out of patience before their governments ran out of excuses. Strategic security in South Asia cannot be separated from the health of its democracies, because unaccountable power, whatever form it takes, tends to make worse security decisions and better excuses for making them. The region's future depends less on new weapons or new alliances than on whether Pakistan's civilians can check its army, whether Bangladesh's reformers can build lasting institutions rather than another strongman, whether India's courts and press can hold their ground, and whether India and Pakistan can build even a thin layer of trust before the next crisis moves too fast for anyone to stop it.

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