



**Sanskriti IAS**

*3rd Mar 2026*



**IMPORTANT**

**EDITORIAL HIGHLIGHTS**

**DELHI CENTRE:**  
636, Mukherjee Nagar  
New Delhi-110009

**PRAYAGRAJ CENTRE:**  
1/1/8A, Stanley Rd,  
Maharana Pratap Chauraha,  
Civil Lines, Prayagraj, UP - 211002

 **9555-124-124**

 **sanskritiias.com**

## GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

### INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 1 & 2

# Pacts with Canada on uranium, critical minerals; PM says new energy in ties



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney at Hyderabad House in New Delhi, Monday. ANIL SHARMA

## India-Canada CEPA by year-end, defence dialogue established

Shubhajit Roy  
New Delhi, March 2

MOVING TO transform ties to a "next level partnership" and put behind a bitter recent past, India and Canada signed a "landmark deal for long-term uranium supply" after Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Mark Carney held talks in New Delhi Monday.

The two sides also signed pacts on critical minerals, decided to establish the India-Canada Defence Dialogue, and

agreed to conclude a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement by the end of the year, and set a USD 50 billion bilateral trade target by 2030.

In all, they signed eight government-to-government pacts, and 24 MoUs or partnerships among universities and institutions in areas such as AI, healthcare, agriculture, and innovation.

This is a huge turnaround in bilateral ties which took a severe hit after Carney's predecessor Justin Trudeau, in September 2023, alleged that Indian government agents were involved in the killing of Khalistan separatist Hardeep Singh Nijjar — a charge India rejected as "absurd" and "politically motivated".

Following bilateral talks  
»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

## Pacts with Canada

with Modi, Carney said, "So this is not merely the renewal of a relationship, it is the expansion of a valued partnership with new ambition, focus and foresight, a partnership between two confident countries charting our own course for the future."

Calling this an "important milestone", Modi said, "Since our first meeting, our relationship has been infused with new energy, mutual trust, and positivity. I credit my friend, Prime Minister Carney, for the growing momentum in every area of co-operation."

"India and Canada share an unwavering belief in democratic values. We celebrate diversity. The well-being of humanity is our shared vision. This vision inspires us to move forward in every field. Today, we discussed transforming this vision into a next level partnership," he said.

Without mentioning the pro-Khalistan activities in Canada, Modi said, "We agree that terrorism, extremism and radicalisation are common and serious challenges not only for our two countries but for all of humanity. Our close cooperation against these challenges is crucial for global peace and stability."

On trade, he said, "Our goal is to reach \$50 billion in trade by 2030. Unlocking the full potential of economic cooperation is our priority. Therefore, we have decided to finalise the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement soon. This will create new investment and employment opportunities in both countries."

Carney said, "We are advancing towards a Canada-India Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, with the aim to conclude by the end of this year. This ambitious agreement will reduce barriers, increase certainty, unlock opportunities for exporters, investors and workers in both our countries, with the aim to double trade by the end of this decade."

Modi said, "Canada's pension funds have invested \$100

billion in India. This is a symbol of their deep belief in India's growth story."

He said the pact on critical minerals will "strengthen resilient supply chains". "In civil nuclear energy, we have signed a landmark deal for long-term uranium supply. We will also work together on small modular reactors and advanced reactors," Modi said.

Carney said, "As India seeks access to critical minerals for its manufacturing, its clean tech and its nuclear plans, Canada's resource base and world leading companies position it as a strategic partner. As one example, the nuclear agreement, the uranium agreement signed today... the fact that 40 per cent of the world's mining companies are listed in Canada."

On defence cooperation, Modi said, "Growing cooperation in the field of defence and security is a symbol of our deep mutual trust and the maturity of our relationship. We will work to enhance defence industries, maritime domain awareness, and military exchanges. To this end, we have today decided to establish the India-Canada Defence Dialogue."

Later, at a media briefing, Indian officials rejected allegations of any link to transnational violence or organised crime in Canada after a new report in The Globe and Mail sought to connect Indian consular staff operating in Vancouver to the killing of Nijjar.

P Kumaran, Secretary (East) in the Ministry of External Affairs, said, "India categorically rejects allegations of involvement in transnational violence or organised crime. These claims are baseless, politically motivated and unsupported by credible evidence despite repeated requests."

"India believes that concerns of this nature must be addressed through credible law enforcement and judicial processes and not through public or politicised narratives," Kumaran said.

## GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

### INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 8

HAD A SUBSTANTIAL FOLLOWING IN THE SUBCONTINENT SINCE 1979

# Najaf to Qom: Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran, and Shia politics in India

Asad Rehman  
New Delhi, March 2

AS NEWS of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's killing emerged on Sunday, protests broke out in cities and towns across the country with a Shia Muslim presence — from Kashmir Valley and Ladakh to Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka.

For Shias, including those in India, Khamenei was not just a political leader who was the "Supreme Leader" of Iran, but also a religious leader. Shia clerics said Khamenei's importance for the community could be compared to what the Christians have for the Pope. While a sizable number of South Asian Shia Muslims follow Ali al-Husayni al-Sistani, the dean of the Hawza in Najaf, Iraq — the oldest Shia seminary in the world — Khamenei also had a substantial following in the Indian subcontinent.

When the centre of Shia Islam was Najaf, political interventions from the Shia leadership were negligible.

However, all that changed with the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's ascendance to power. Khomeini popularised this concept of "Wilayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist)", the Shia political doctrine that holds that top religious scholars should rule in the absence of the 12th Imam, whom the Twelver Shias believe will reappear at the end of time. Popularised by Khomeini, the concept forms the basis of Iran's Constitution, placing supreme political and military power in the hands of a cleric.

Since 1979, the project that the Iranian government embarked on through its embassies was almost missionary and very proactive... Ruhollah Khomeini (the 'Supreme Leader' of Iran till 1989) and his successor Khamenei have been looked at as an integral part of the Shia faith. It has almost always been religious and not political. But there also continue to be Shias in India who prioritise Najaf, not Qom (one



A poster of Ayatollah Khamenei near the Chhota Imambara in UP's Lucknow. EXPRESS

of Iran's theological centres," said West Asia expert Bashir Ali Abbas, who is Senior Research Associate at the Council for Strategic and Defense Research.

Iran's project to make itself more significant among Shia Muslims yielded dividends and now many among Indian Shias look at Iran as an authority on religion. Iran taking on the combination of Israel and the US over Palestine has also led to it being viewed as a "lone crusader" against western imperial powers, increasing its influence on Muslims across the world sympathetic to the Palestinian cause.

Shia Muslims, specifically in parts of Kashmir, Kargil, and Lucknow hold Khamenei in great reverence. The Rizvi Syeds of Lucknow and the Awadh region in UP trace their lineage to Iran. During the 18th Century, the nawabs of Awadh, including Asaf-ud-Daula, were Shia Muslims. Even today, Lucknow has a sizable Shia population and most of them are comparatively wealthier than Sunni Muslims, giving them more

political power.

Shias have traditionally not been very vocal on issues seen as important to the Muslim majority. During the decades-long Ram Janmabhoomi dispute in Ayodhya, the UP Shia Central Waqf Board claimed ownership of the Babri Masjid, arguing it was a Shia Waqf built by Shia noble Mir Baqi during Babur's reign. The Board also opposed the Sunni Waqf Board's claim over the mosque.

It favoured a peaceful, mediated settlement, and even proposed building a mosque at a different location to allow the Ram temple to come up at the site. The Shia-Sunni divide is a global phenomenon and is visible in India too, with several incidents of clashes between the communities having been recorded. In 2005, the All India Shia Personal Law Board (AISPLB) was created as Shias felt the All India Muslim Personal Law Board, dominated by Sunnis, ignored their concerns.

AISPLB general secretary Maulana Yasooob Abbas told *The Indian Express*, "Ayatollah

Ali Khamenei has been martyred. We held protests in Lucknow last night. Through the protests, we are sending a message to countries such as Bahrain, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and others. These are the countries that have harmed Iran and helped America and Israel in the killing of Khamenei. We will continue to support the Iranian people and the state."

The Shia community, which constitutes around 15% of the Muslim population in the country, has traditionally had good ties with the establishment, especially the BJP. The community, which is concentrated in Lucknow and some other cities such as Hyderabad, Budgam (Kashmir), and Kargil in Ladakh, enjoyed good relations with former PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who was BJP MP from Lucknow, and current Lucknow parliamentarian Rajnath Singh.

BJP leaders in Lucknow said while Adityanath had almost ended the distinction between Shia and Sunni Muslims in the state, a section of the BJP leadership still favours having "cordial" relations with the Shia community.

# GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

## INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 13

• WAR IN WEST ASIA

# Iran's power pyramid, with Supreme Leader at the top

**EXPERT EXPLAINS**  
BY AK RAMAKRISHNAN  
RETIRED PROFESSOR OF WEST ASIAN STUDIES, JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY

THE ASSASSINATION of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, 86, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, marks the end of a significant figure of a style of leadership that the Islamic Revolution of 1979-79 and the post-revolution politics have produced.

Khamenei was killed in an attack by the US and Israeli forces and a process to find his successor was set in motion immediately, so that the Assembly of Experts, a deliberative body, can choose the next leader.

Meanwhile, the three-member Interim Leadership Council that will assume the duties of the Supreme Leader has already been formed under Constitutional provisions. The events show the established procedures that the Iranian political system has in place for times of crisis.

### Threads of religion and politics

Ayatollah Khamenei represented and led a political system consisting of hierarchical but interrelated institutions, and a political culture developed through a variety of processes after 1979.

However, the close linkages between religion and politics in the Shia-majority Iran have a longer history. The anti-monarchist ethos of Shia religious leaders and their participation in a range of political movements in modern Iranian political history warrants recognition here.

Key examples include the Tobacco Movement of the 19th century, launched against concessions granted by the Iranian royals to the British and the Constitutional Revolution of 1906-11 for a constitutional monarchy. An anti-monarchist stance has been common in the participation of religious leaders.

The ideological leadership provided by the first Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, while remaining in exile in France, for the 1979 revolution was crucial in shaping the character of both the revolution and the Islamic Republic.

While almost every section of the Iranian



Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Wikimedia Commons

population participated in the anti-Shah protests of the late '70s, the religious section was able to muster more legitimacy and popularity due to its ideological and strategic leadership.

The strategic advantage for the Shia clergy can be attributed to multiple factors, a significant one being the role of mosques as a major site of political activism. Friday prayer gatherings became a point of religious-political assembly. This was because the Shah's apparatuses, like his secret police SAVAK, surveilled public places, leaving mosques as among the few places of *ba'z* (sanctuary) in a repressive society.

### Khomeini and Khamenei

The ideological leadership of religious scholars further lent a revolutionary interpretation of religious texts and practices. They enabled people to link the transformative potential of their belief system to the requirements of anti-monarchist and anti-imperialist political action.

Islamic interpretations given by intellectuals like Ali Shariati did not envisage a political leadership of the clergy. But, Ayatollah Khomeini's interpretations on the linkages between Islam and politics projected the idea of Islamic Government under the leadership of the religious jurist. Khomeini's idea of *velayat-e-fa'qih* (rule of the jurist) thus became a cornerstone of the political system.

The Islamic Republic's Constitution drew heavily from these ideas and from the republicanism of the French political system. The overarching power of the Supreme Leader in the 1979 Constitution is adopted from the rule of the jurist-prudent idea.

Ayatollah Khomeini was followed by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as the Supreme Leader after Khomeini died in 1989. The Constitutional changes in 1989 broadly

maintained its original character. The level of power that Khomeini wielded was curtailed to an extent.

The Supreme Leader, selected by the elected Assembly of Experts, a popularly elected President and the Majlis (the Parliament) represent different facets of the political system. The selection of Khomeini's successor was not without controversy. Even though Ayatollah Montazeri was designated to the position, it ultimately went to Khomeini, who was already President of Iran for two terms between 1981 and 1989.

His Presidency saw the eight-year Iran-Iraq war and he made it a point to regularly visit the families of martyrs of the war.

In that sense, Ayatollah Khamenei fit both religious and political roles well. Known for his headline politics internationally and seen as a pragmatic leader by some Iranian analysts, his leadership came under severe scrutiny in recent years. The Mahsa Amini protests of 2022 and the recent demonstrations over economic frustrations pointed to the domestic concerns over the regime's authoritarian rule and Iran's global economic isolation. His idea of a resistance economy — one that is self-reliant to confront economic sanctions — was not enough to overcome Iran's economic woes.

### After Supreme Leader

The political system of Iran has seen elections being regularly held for the Presidency, the Majlis and local governments. The ideological divergence among the so-called reformists and hardliners has remained a major feature of Iranian politics for decades now.

Khamenei, even while supporting hard-line candidates, developed a political practice of the Supreme Leader to manage differences. His *fatwa* on the non-use of nuclear weapons and his approval of nuclear negotiations, including the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2015 with Western nations, showed that ideology and pragmatism could coexist in important realms of state conduct.

However, continued sanctions, Iran's international isolation and the Iranian people's desire to have more say in the affairs of the country, along with more meaningful participation, created a significant divergence between the system and its people.

There are many legitimate questions that arise out of the gap between people's demands and the delivery and conduct of the state today. The ongoing war and the assassination of its leadership place unprecedented challenges to the political order in Iran.

### • KEY BODIES

#### Interim Leadership Council

Under Article 111 of Iran's Constitution, a temporary leadership council would assume the Supreme Leader's duties until a successor is elected. This council comprises President Masoud Pezeshkian; Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Ejei; and Ayatollah Alireza Arafati, deputy chairman of the Assembly of Experts and a member of the Guardian Council.

#### Supreme National Security Council (SNSC)

Responsible for debating and building consensus on critical national security issues, the SNSC is Iran's top national security body. While the president serves as its chairman, its other members include top ministers, the Speaker of parliament, the Chief Justice, and top military officials representing the armed forces and the IRGC, among others.

#### Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)

The IRGC is the strongest and best-equipped section of Iran's armed forces. Formed soon after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, it answers directly to the Supreme Leader — unlike the ordinary military. Over the decades, it has gained and extended its influence both at home and abroad.

#### Basij and Quds Force

- The Basij militia, an internal security paramilitary force controlled by the IRGC, is often used to crack down on protests inside Iran.
- The Quds Force, an elite IRGC unit focusing on special operations outside Iran, has spearheaded the country's regional strategy of supporting affiliated Shiite groups in West Asia.

#### Assembly of Experts

Made up of senior ayatollahs elected every eight years, the Assembly is the body that appoints the Supreme Leader. The constitution also gives it power to question and even dismiss a leader. In practice, the republic's most senior figures usually choose the leader, which is then approved by the Assembly.

#### Guardian Council

Half appointed by the Supreme Leader and half by the Chief Justice of Iran, the 12-member Guardian Council can veto laws passed by parliament and disqualify election candidates. In the past, this mandate has been used to block potential critics of Khamenei.

## After strikes on Iran, expanding theatre of conflict in West Asia

Rishu Singh

New Delhi, March 2

IRAN HAS COMPLETED the assault on Israel on Wednesday, as the US and Israel launched their first coordinated air strikes on Iran's oil infrastructure.

Iranian, Hamas, Qatar, and the UAE have been targeted, according to the US. The strikes were aimed at disrupting the oil supply chain and forcing Iran to negotiate with the US and Israel.

#### Iran's confirmed targets

Iran's strikes have been aimed at Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, and the UAE. In many regions, civilians and soldiers have been killed and injured. Some major cities have been targeted.

#### US Navy's 8th Fleet headquarters, Bahrain

The US Navy's 8th Fleet headquarters, Bahrain, has been targeted. The US Navy's 8th Fleet, based in Bahrain, is responsible for the US Navy's operations in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean.

#### Iran's oil infrastructure

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### • Strikes, counter-strikes



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# GS 2: SOCIAL JUSTICE THE HINDU: 13

**LEGAL**

## Marriage as partnership: HC reframes role of 'homemaker'

**Arnaal Sheikh**  
New Delhi, March 2

**"A HOMEMAKER does not 'sit idle'; she performs labour that enables the earning spouse to function effectively," the Delhi High Court observed, rejecting a common assumption that non-earning spouses seeking maintenance are economically inactive.**

A recent judgment reframed how courts assess homemakers, stating that the contribution of a spouse managing the household cannot be dismissed merely because it does not generate income or appear in financial records. It treats homemaking not as dependency, but as labour that shapes legal entitlements arising from marriage, including maintenance and financial support after separation.

The observations came in a case concerning maintenance claimed by a wife who had left employment and was caring for the couple's child while the husband, a drilling engineer working in Kuwait, and earning more than Rs 5 lakh per month, lived abroad. This raised the question whether educational qualifications or theoretical earning capacity could justify the denial of maintenance.

The court noted that a newly married woman was often expected to "give up her employment to devote her time to the household" even when she was educated and professionally capable. Yet, when marriages deteriorate, "the same husband takes a starkly contrary position and contends that the wife is well-qualified...and is deliberately choosing to remain unemployed while seeking maintenance." This stand, the court said, "cannot be encouraged."

**• WIDER JUDICIAL TREND**

- In *Kannan Naidu v. Kamala Anni*, the Madras HC recognised homemaking as an indirect financial contribution while deciding property rights.
- In *Suranjan Saha v. Anupma Saha*, the Delhi HC rejected demands that a homemaker produce income tax returns to prove unemployment, observing that requiring such proof from a person with no taxable income amounts to "demanding the impossible".

**The case**

After separation, the wife sought interim maintenance under the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence (PWDV) Act, 2005, alongside proceedings under Section 125 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973, which provides maintenance for wives, children and parents unable to maintain themselves. Under the PWDV Act, courts may grant monetary relief and interim maintenance during proceedings.

A magistrate and an appellate court denied relief, describing her as an "able-bodied" and educated woman capable of employment and referring to bank transactions to suggest independent means. The family court, however, granted monthly maintenance of Rs 50,000. The High Court had to decide whether educational qualification and theoretical earning capacity could defeat a maintenance claim.

Addressing the label of the 'idle' spouse, the court listed the activities that disappear from legal accounting: managing households, raising children, and reorganising one's life around the earning spouse's career and transfers.

The judgment reframed marital economics itself: "Where one spouse earns income in the marketplace, and the other sustains the domestic sphere, the economic stability of the household is the result of combined, though differently manifested, contributions." In sum, the court moved homemaking from the realm of moral appreciation into legal recognition.

**'Capacity to earn' vs 'actual earning'**

Matrimonial litigation has long held that an educated spouse should support herself. But the court said that "the capacity to earn and actual earning are distinct concepts...mere capacity to earn cannot be a ground to deny maintenance".

The court also noted the difficulties associated with re-entering the workforce after long career breaks.

Although voluntary decisions to leave employment may carry practical consequences, it insisted that courts must evaluate reality rather than assumptions. Maintenance, the court said, cannot be viewed only as protection against destitution but as a mechanism of fairness between spouses.

The court situated this within a partnership model of marriage: "A marriage is not only a personal relationship but also a partnership in which each spouse contributes in different ways." So, maintenance becomes recognition of contribution, even where that contribution was unpaid.

## GS 3: SCIENCE &amp; TECHNOLOGY THE HINDU: 3

# 1 in 4 Indian breast cancer patients carry inherited genetic risk

**The Hindu Bureau**

CHENNAI

One in four Indian breast cancer patients carries an inherited genetic variant linked to cancer risk, with the majority of these variants occurring outside the well-known BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes, a new study has found.

Findings of the study, conducted by the Indian Institute of Technology-Madras (IIT-M) and Karkinos Healthcare, along with Kumaran Hospital, Chennai, and the Chennai Breast Centre, were published in *BMC Cancer*.

The study analysed germline DNA from 479 unselected breast cancer patients, whose samples were sourced from the National Cancer Tissue Biobank at IIT-Madras. The researchers examined 97 cancer susceptibility genes, including BRCA1, BRCA2, and 15 genes involved in the homologous

recombination repair pathway. A special focus was placed on RECQL, an emerging breast cancer gene with highly population-specific patterns.

The study found that 24.6% of patients carried at least one pathogenic or likely pathogenic variant. Only 8.35% had BRCA1 or BRCA2 variants, while a significantly larger proportion, 11.9%, had inherited pathogenic variants in genes belonging to the homologous recombination repair pathway. Overall, 67% of all positive findings occurred in non-BRCA genes, demonstrating that the inherited landscape of breast cancer risk in India is far more complex than previously appreciated.

The findings underscore the need to re-examine current genetic testing strategies in India, which heavily rely on BRCA-only, and to shift to broader multi-gene panel or exome-based germline testing.

## GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

### THE HINDU: 10

# Rupture across the Durand Line

Pakistan and Afghanistan engage in intense military clashes, signalling a break in political, military, and societal ties across the Durand Line; driven by differences over Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan and collapsing strategic trust, the once carefully cultivated Paki-Taliban relationship now lies in tatters on an unequal battlefield

#### WORLD INSIGHT

D. Suba Chandran

For the second time in six months, Pakistan and Afghanistan have engaged in an intense military clash. Unlike the periodic clashes across the Durand Line during the last two decades when the U.S. was in Afghanistan, the latest clashes – first in October and now again last week – are significant. Pakistan used air and missile strikes deep inside Afghanistan, including in Kabul and Kandahar, while the Taliban targeted multiple Pakistani military posts across the Durand Line. Military and civilian casualties in these two attacks, last year's and the ongoing one, have been high. The latest attacks come despite a ceasefire mediated by Türkiye and Qatar following the post-October 2025 clashes.

Following the latest military strikes, Pakistan's Defence Minister declared that it would be an "open war" against Afghanistan. What has happened between Pakistan and Afghanistan during the last six months? After creating the Taliban in the 1990s and nurturing it ever since, even under intense American pressure until August 2021, why is Pakistan's Deep State now going after its creation? Why has the Taliban, despite being supported by Pakistan and taking refuge within Pakistan during the U.S.-led war on terrorism, turned against its erstwhile mentor?

#### The cross-Durand rupture

The two rounds of military clashes highlight a rupture in the bilateral relationship at three levels.

First, at the political level, between Islamabad and Kabul. Though the two countries had differences during the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan during 2001-21, they were expected to be bridged when the Taliban captured Kabul immediately after the American exit in 2021. Instead, despite multiple rounds of dialogue, the bilateral relationship has only worsened. Pakistani Defence Minister's declaration of an "open war" on Afghanistan signifies a political rupture.

Second, there is a rupture between Pakistan's Establishment and the Taliban leadership. From the mid-1990s, the political and military rise of the Taliban would not have happened without the Pakistan Establishment's support. Successive military and ISI chiefs supported the Taliban. Today, under new military and ISI leadership in Pakistan, that link remains ruptured. Islamabad would not have declared an "open war" without Rawalpindi's approval.

Third, there is a widening rupture between the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan. During the last few years, there has been an intense debate over deporting the Afghans, who have arrived in Pakistan during different phases, and made the country their home. Ever since the current Pakistani government began actively pushing them back, there has been an intense resistance from Afghanistan and the Taliban. However, within Pakistan, there was no major societal debate, contrary to the state's position. Though a small section of Pakistan seeks to build consensus on the issue, it remains a minority voice. Beyond the political and military rupture across the Durand Line, the societal divide will haunt the two nations for generations to come, as this alliance was forged over centuries.



Keeping vigil: A Taliban security personnel rides an armed vehicle on the outskirts of Jalalabad on February 28, 2025.

#### Origins of the divide

In August 2021, when the U.S. left Afghanistan and the Taliban took over immediately after that, the ISI chief was among the first foreign leaders to visit Kabul in September. In Rawalpindi, there was a sense of achievement that finally their boys were back in Kabul, and an expectation that the relationship would rapidly improve. Pakistan expected Kabul would control the Tehrik-e-Taliban-Pakistan (TTP) and that they would even force its leadership to surrender.

On the contrary, as the data would prove, there was an increase in militant activities in the tribal regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa during 2022-25. During this period, Pakistan was divided over how to respond to the TTP threat. Under Imran Khan, the political and military leadership pursued a more carrot-and-stick approach towards the TTP. After his exit, and under the current Army chief, Pakistan shifted to a military approach towards the Taliban and the TTP.

Besides this, Kabul's support, or its inability to control the TTP, is an important factor for the fallout. However, the differences between Pakistan's Establishment and the Taliban started much earlier, when Pakistan's Deep State was under pressure from U.S. Admiral Mike Mullen's hard-hitting statement that the Taliban (the Haqqani network in particular) was the "veritable arm of the ISI." Though the ISI did not give up the top leadership of the Taliban and al Qaeda, several second-rung leaders got arrested or handed over to the U.S. While the U.S. accused the ISI of playing a double game, similar sentiments grew within the Taliban as well.

When the U.S. wondered why Pakistan was unwilling to give up on the Taliban, many within Pakistan would cite sociological reasons for the long-standing ties. In the tribal regions, they would say,

giving refuge and defending that decision was least understood by the West.

Perhaps, Pakistan ignores or does not want to appreciate the same reason today. The Afghan Taliban do not want to give up today's TTP members, who gave refuge to them when they were running and hiding before 2021.

Another factor is the Islamic State in Khorasan for not wanting to give up the TTP. The Taliban – whether in Afghanistan or in Pakistan – has never been monolithic.

Different tribes and sub-tribes fought along the Taliban and the TTP banner then; today, a section sees the Islamic State as a better banner and ideologically closer. For the Afghan Taliban, an expansion of the IS-Khorasan is a bigger threat, hence it does not want to antagonise the TTP.

Kabul also blames Pakistan for externalising its internal threat. Given the terrorist infrastructure and the ideological support base within Pakistan, it is not going to be an easy task for the political and military leadership to address militancy within. However, blaming Afghanistan and India would be an easy strategy to externalise an internal problem that Pakistan had cultivated since the 1980s. What now lies in tatters is both the Pakistan-Taliban relationship and, more importantly, the age-old societal links, along with Pakistan's carefully cultivated strategic depth narrative. For Pakistan, Afghanistan should now be a strategic trap that it would want to avoid. The Afghan-Pakistan relationship would remain conflict-prone.

#### An unequal battlefield

There is an inherent asymmetry between Pakistan and Afghanistan in terms of military, economic, and political strength. Militarily, the Taliban is no match to Pakistan's armed forces. Without an air force or navy, it can never fight an "open

war" with Pakistan. While Pakistan's air force and missiles provide the reach to strike deep inside the Afghanistan territory, the Taliban has a limited arsenal to hit deep inside Pakistan. Though there is an expectation that drone warfare would provide a level playing field for the Taliban, it could only cover a limited geography, east of the Durand.

Though Pakistan's economy has also been facing challenges, Afghanistan's is worse. As a landlocked country, it is dependent on the Karachi port for almost everything. On trade, Afghanistan is more dependent on Pakistan and not vice versa. Unless Afghanistan finds alternate routes that could bring goods in substantial numbers, Pakistan can strangle Afghanistan by closing the passes.

The Taliban's global outreach is also limited. Pakistan today has a regional clout, especially in West Asia, and the current leadership has a better equation with U.S. President Donald Trump. Perhaps the new status of Mr. Trump's "good general" in Pakistan provides Rawalpindi with more space to be more adventurous in the region than previous military leaders. This would also mean Pakistan can play tougher in negotiations.

Given these asymmetries, if the Taliban has to respond, it would engage in not-so "open wars" with Pakistan. Besides its willingness to control the TTP, the Taliban's capacity and its strategic calculation would limit its response vis-à-vis what Pakistan wants on the TTP. What would this mean for the future of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations and stability across the Durand Line? A tough question for the two countries, and for the region.

D. Suba Chandran is Professor and Dean at the School of Conflict and Security Studies at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru, and heads NIAS Pakistan Reader

#### THE GIST

Escalating cross-border strikes between Pakistan and Afghanistan expose a widening political, military, and societal divide between Islamabad and Kabul, despite earlier attempts at dialogue and de-escalation.

Disputes over the handling of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, rising militant activities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Pakistan's shift to a military approach deepen mistrust between the establishment and the Taliban leadership.

With clear asymmetry in military, economic, and diplomatic strength, the confrontation pushes the bilateral relationship into a fragile and conflict-prone phase.

## GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

### THE HINDU: 4 & 15

# France to increase nuclear warheads to ensure destructive power: Macron

Associated Press  
L'ILE LONGUE

French President Emmanuel Macron announced Monday that France will increase its number of nuclear warheads from the current level of below 300, but did not give a figure for the increase. It will be the first time France increases its nuclear arsenal since at least 1992.

"I have decided to increase the numbers of warheads of our arsenal," Mr. Macron said at a military base at L'Île Longue in northwestern France that hosts the country's ballistic missile submarines. "My responsibility is to ensure that our deterrence maintains – and will maintain in the future – its assured destructive power," Mr. Macron said.



**Laying out deterrence plan:** Emmanuel Macron speaks at a military base at L'Île Longue in northwestern France on Monday. AFP

Mr. Macron's speech was aimed at spelling out how French nuclear weapons fit into Europe's security amid concerns raised on the continent by recurring tensions with U.S. President Donald Trump.

European leaders have voiced growing doubts about U.S. commitments to

help defend Europe under the so-called nuclear umbrella, a policy long intended to ensure that allies – particularly NATO members – are protected by American nuclear forces in the event of a threat.

France is the only nuclear power in the European Union. "If we had to use our arsenal, no state,

however powerful, could shield itself from it, and no state, however vast, would recover from it," Mr. Macron said.

Some European nations have already taken up an offer Mr. Macron made last year to discuss France's nuclear deterrence and even associate European partners in nuclear exercises.

Earlier this month, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz said he'd had "initial talks" with Mr. Macron on the issue and had publicly theorised about German Air Force planes possibly being used to carry French nuclear bombs.

Mr. Macron has consistently insisted any decision to use France's nuclear weapons would remain only in the hands of the French president.



**On standby:** INS Surat, as part of a regional maritime security engagement, is currently in Bahrain. @INDIANNAVY X

# Indian ships ready for humanitarian operations: official

Saurabh Trivedi  
NEW DELHI

India is closely monitoring the evolving security situation in parts of West Asia following the recent escalation of tensions, with Indian Navy ships deployed in the region under Operation Sankalp placed on standby for possible humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations.

A defence official on Monday said developments are being tracked closely. "Under Operation Sankalp, two Indian Navy ships [a frigate and a destroyer] are already de-

ployed in the Gulf of Aden and the Gulf of Oman. They have been deployed for anti-piracy operations and the safety of merchant vessels since 2019. If required, these ships could be utilised for HADR operations. The Navy has prior experience in such missions," the official said.

The deployment under Operation Sankalp was initiated to safeguard Indian-flagged vessels and ensure maritime security in the region amid rising threats to commercial shipping.

The official said INS Surat is currently in Bahrain as part of a regional maritime security engagement.