

HYBRID WARFARE CHALLENGES FOR UNITED STATE'S FORCES IN SOUTH ASIA:A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE US-MIDDLE EAST NEXUS SINCE OCTOBER 2023 till 2025

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Abstract

This paper will discuss the changing challenges of hybrid warfare that the US forces face in South Asia, and especially the interrelation of the Middle East conflict and South Asian security dynamics since October 2023. With the help of the qualitative analysis of secondary sources published by policy think tanks and military institutes, the research answers three research questions: How has the US-Middle East nexus affected the dynamic of hybrid warfare in South Asia? What are the new challenges in the region to the US forces? What are some of the strategic adjustments needed? The analysis indicates that Iranian weakening of the region has ironically increased realignments such as Saudi-Pakistan mutual defence pact whereas the US strategic ambiguity has provided room to the other security structures. The major findings are that the US forces are faced by hybrid threats that include proxy warfare, information operations and the evolving alliance frameworks. The article ends by making policy suggestions on the need to engage in calibrated fashion, intelligence cooperation and the need to acknowledge the role of the South Asian agency in security arrangement.

Keywords: Hybrid war, South Asia, American foreign policy, nexus of Middle East, Pakistan, strategic competition, Afghanistan, Taliban, India-US relations.

1. Introduction

Since October 2023, a radical change in the geopolitical conditions in South Asia takes place because of the chain of interconnected events in the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific. Hamas strikes on Israel on October 7, 2023, caused a series of military reactions that essentially changed the regional orientations, the impact of which is felt much further than the Levant. In the case of the United States that has strategic interests in both regions, the developments have created complex hybrid wars that are not within the traditional security structures.

This paper critically examines the problem of the hybrid warfare that the US forces face in South Asia in the framework of the US-Middle East nexus since October 2023. The importance of this question is that there are several dimensions of threats being brought together: the weakened yet dangerous position of Iran, new Sino-Pakistani-Iranian security collaboration, the re-evaluation of US strategic commitments in case of great power competition, and re-emergence of Afghanistan as a potential terrorist haven.

This investigation has three research questions:

1. How has the US-Middle East nexus affected the dynamics of hybrid warfare in South Asia since October 2023?
2. What are the emerging hybrid warfare challenges to the US forces deployed in or engaged with South Asia, to Afghanistan and to India?
3. How can the US provide strategic adjustments to make it respond efficiently to these issues?

The research work uses the qualitative research methodology, which relies on secondary data in form of policy think tank analysis, government reports as well as scholarly literature. The primary sources encompass the testimonies in US congressional committees, policy documents of such institutions as the Atlantic Council, Middle East Institute, Carnegie Endowment, Soufan Center, and peer-reviewed journal articles. This will be between October 2023 till end 2025.

2. Literature Review

The modern literature on hybrid war in South Asia focuses on the merging of conventional and unconventional threat vectors. The conceptualized version of hybrid warfare involves the integration of military, political, economic, and informational tools to meet the strategic goals without going beyond the limits that would provoke the traditional response (Schmid, 2011; Clarke, 2019). This conceptualization becomes especially applicable to the South Asian situation as the region has nuclear dynamics and history of proxy war.

The recent studies indicate the changing US-Middle East-South Asia nexus. Daniel B. Shapiro of the Atlantic Council (2025) also gave testimony before the Senate Subcommittee on Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counterterrorism on the strategic recalibrations in the wake of the weakening of Iran. Shapiro claimed that the magnitude of the Iranian miscalculation since October 2023 has left new opportunities to change regional security structures never seen before, yet the possibility of the revival is high.

According to the analysis of the US withdrawal out of Afghanistan and their implications in the region by the Middle East Institute, there are new security frameworks that do not involve the United States (MEI, 2025). According to this scholarship, China, Iran and Pakistan have been busily changing their defense policies to counter the vacuum left by diminished American presence and trilateral security cooperation has been institutionalized through institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

2.1 Afghanistan as a Strategic Blind Spot

A critical dimension of the literature addresses Afghanistan's re-emergence as a strategic concern for Western security. The Soufan Center's Intel Brief (February 2025) warns that since the disastrous US withdrawal in August 2021; Afghanistan has remained a strategic blind spot for Washington and the West more broadly. With no US presence on the ground, there are limited opportunities for intelligence collection, especially human intelligence (HUMINT), making it difficult to assess the extent to which terrorist groups like al-Qaeda are metastasizing in the country

Based on the analysis of Soufan center, it is estimated that there are tens and hundreds of al-Qaeda fighters in Afghanistan. According to the reports by the long war journal, the al-Qaeda has training camps in twelve provinces in Afghanistan such as Kandahar and Takhar and there are other camps thought to be in operation in Badghis, Helmand, Ghazni, Kunar, Laghman, Nangarhar, Nuristan, Parwan, Uruzgan and Zabul. In Indian subcontinent, al-Qaeda continues to exist with the cover of Taliban, Haqqani Network and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

The TTP now enjoys Afghan sanctuary provided by the Afghan Taliban and uses it to launch attacks against Pakistani security forces across the border, a dynamic that has led to direct clashes between Kabul and Islamabad. As the Soufan Center notes, despite ruling the country for nearly five years, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has only been formally recognized as a nation-state by the Russian Federation, though many states engage with the Taliban short of granting formal recognition.

2.2 India-US Relations Under Strain

The literature on India-US relations during the Trump administration reveals significant friction. (The Diplomat's March 2025). According to expert analysis from Johns Hopkins SAIS, the relationship between the two countries "seems to have jumped the rails," with high expectations for ties under President Trump having dissipated. Joshua T White, Professor of Practice at Johns Hopkins SAIS, notes that the level of political attention has dropped markedly compared with the Biden years, when there was "a significant outlay of time and investment". The analysis by the Diplomat proves that even after the meetings on the high level and a phone call between Modi and Trump, the reality at the ground level shows that the reset in relations is still not achieved. Defence transactions such as the sale of P-8I Poseidon aircraft at 4 billion dollars and the joint manufacture of the fighter jet engines of 414 are yet to be finalized or

postponed. Trade negotiations have also stalled, with the U.S. Trade Representative initiating investigations against India on the question of excess manufacturing capacity.

White attributes the deterioration to multiple factors: Trump's reaction after the May 2025 India-Pakistan conflict and his perception that India did not respond with sufficient gratitude, Pakistan's successful courting of the Trump administration, and a longer-standing debate in Washington over what the United States gains from the partnership. As White notes, "India has frankly struggled to even defend its own borders and its own maritime areas," leading to questions about whether India "could be a real and valuable security provider in its neighborhood".

2.3 Pakistan's Strategic Repositioning

The strategic consequences of the Saudi-Pakistan mutual defence pact that was signed in September 2025 have received a significant amount of scholarly interest. The Italian Institute of International Political Studies (ISPI, 2025). defines such an agreement as a geopolitical marriage bonding both financial and nuclear forces and complicating the US influence in the Gulf. This analysis emphasizes that the pact serves as a counter-alignment tool for both parties, with Saudi Arabia seeking protection against Iran and Israel while Pakistan looks for allies to deter India.

The strategic autonomy of India is an important research that gives critical ground to understand the limitations of US policies. Shafeeq (2025) approaches the subject of Indo-US strategic partnership using a structural realist perspective by asserting that strategic hedging has always existed in India long-term policy of non-alignment. Although its relations with Washington have intensified, India still has defense relations with Russia and economic relations with China, which makes it difficult to form an effective anti-China coalition by the US.

The Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI August 2025) break-down of the second-term Trump South Asia policy suggests a two-track approach of both the reaffirmation of India as a strategic counterbalance to China and the realization of the utility of Pakistan in the stability of the region and crisis management. The analysis mentions that Trump gave public praise to cooperate with Pakistan in counterterrorism, and intervened openly in the March 2025 India-Pakistan border crisis, attributing the credibility of the Islamabad government offering international scrutiny, which put Pakistan on a higher credibility without damaging US-India relations.

2.4 Terrorism as a Geopolitical Resource.

One of the most controversial branches of literature is the discussion of terrorist organizations as a strategic resource in the great power conflict. According to Indian journalist Saeed Naqvi(2025), the United States might be cultivating an enduring fascination with its terror property in Afghanistan to unstage the Chinese Xinjiang territory. According to this view the US establishment has long been advocating terrorism as an unstated asset and the rationale being that the various groups such as the ISIS and Al Qaeda are sworn enemies of the US adversaries such as the Assad regime in Syria, the Shia militias in Iraq, the Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Ayatollahs in Iran.

Although this interpretation is controversial, it shows how the US counterterrorism policy in South Asia is complex and contradictory. According to Naqvi (2025), this relationship has put India in an extreme dilemma of having to strike a balance between its strategic alliance with the United States and its fears of the terrorist organizations being used against China, with whom India has an ever-increasing conflictual interest.

3. Research Questions and Methodology.

The three research questions discussed in this paper include qualitative analysis of secondary sources. The approach uses the document analysis of policy papers, congressional testimonies,

academic journals, and think tank reports that are published in 2023-2025. The choice of sources was made to give preference to the sources offered by reputed organizations such as the Atlantic Council, Middle East Institute, Carnegie Endowment of international peace, RAND Corporation, Soufan center, and peer-reviewed scholarly journals.

The analytical paradigm is based on the theory of hybrid warfare, according to which the conflict is characterized as the multidimensional combinations of the conventional military operations, irregular tactics, cyber operations, and information warfare. It is a framework allowing the systematic study of the various threat vectors to US interests in the South Asian region.

The following are some of the instances that will be examined: (1) the Saudi-Pakistan mutual defence pact; (2) the US-India strategic partnership dynamics; (3) the emerging China-Iran-Pakistan security cooperation; (4) the Afghanistan-Pakistan border security dynamics; and (5) the Taliban governance and the presence of the terrorist group in Afghanistan.

4. The US-Middle East Nexus Since October 2023: Implications for South Asia

The time after October 2023 has been associated with the radical changes in the Middle East security processes with a direct impact on South Asia. As the testimony by Atlantic Council shows, the Iranian stance has been undermined to a considerable extent thanks to the ongoing military pressure, and its major regional allies are going through degradation (Shapiro, 2025). The overthrow of the Assad government in Syria and the destruction of the capabilities of the Hezbollah have weakened the power projection capabilities of Iran using proxy networks.

The South Asian security, however, has had unintended effects due to the weakening of Iran in the region. According to the Middle East Institute, Iran has stepped up its Look East Policy, in search of strategic allies in both Pakistan and China to offset losses in the Levant. This realignment has enhanced trilateral security co-operation between China, Iran and Pakistan with the three nations conducting the first trilateral counterterrorism meeting in 2023 and then formalizing their security partnership.

The context of emerging complex realignments can be seen in the Saudi-Pakistan mutual defence pact that was signed in September 2025. According to the analysis of ISPI, the agreement commits the sole Muslim-majority nuclear force to the largest economy in the Gulf, establishing novel security figures that do not adhere to the conventional US-based alliances (ISPI, 2025). The accord states that any aggression towards either of the countries will be considered aggression towards both countries, including military, nuclear or intelligence cooperation.

In the case of the United States, these developments present hybrid warfare challenges that are a combination of both the traditional security issues and the emerging dimensions. The undermining of the US security assurances in the Gulf, manifested through Saudi Arabian efforts to seek other alliances, puts in place the possibility of regional actors insuring against the perceived US withdrawal. According to Shapiro (2025), whereas US military strength in the region is still very strong, diplomatic possibilities need regular interaction to consider partner apprehensions regarding the length of commitment.

5. Hybrid Warfare Challenges for US Forces in South Asia

5.1 Proxy Warfare and Non-State Actor Networks

The hybrid warfare threat that the US forces in South Asia face in the nearest future is the further existence of the proxy networks that attack the American interests and allies. According to Middle East Institute, there is an increased terrorist activity on the western borders of

Pakistan, where Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) acts out of the territory of Afghanistan, and Baloch separatist groups are operating across the borders (MEI, 2025). Although the main target of these groups is the Pakistani security forces, they also pose a threat to the safety of the Chinese infrastructure project and create a potential escalation of the conflict that can attract the US interests.

The Afghanistan aspect brings in very essential complexity. Al-Monitor analysis (Aug, 2025) confirms that Pakistan is engaged in its most intense conflict since the US began its withdrawal with the Afghan Taliban with the Defence Minister of Pakistan saying that it was an open war. The core of this war is that Pakistan accuses the Afghan Taliban of complicity with TTP that has caused havoc in Pakistan. The Afghan Taliban rejects the accusation by claiming that it is its internal affair to deal with the security situation in Pakistan.

It is this structural misconception as political scientist Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili puts it, which was the seed of all that came after. She points out that the two parties never had a candid discussion regarding how the relationship would actually be. In the case of the US forces, it is a dilemma to help Pakistan fight the Taliban, as it will result in the loss of its potential allies in Afghanistan, and on the other hand, not taking sides will encourage terrorist organizations that are threats to both nations.

This is further complicated by the Iranian aspect. Studies have shown that Iran has been backing the Baloch separatist movements and Jaish al-Adl as some of its pressure tactics against Pakistan and the region at large (MEI, 2025). The trilateral security cooperation that has been formed between China, Iran, and Pakistan is an effort of dealing with these common threats but with risks of more intertwining to the core that would make US intervention more difficult.

5.2 The Afghanistan Conundrum

The withdrawal of the US in Afghanistan has established circumstances which can be explained by the analysts as a strategic blind spot. The Soufan Center cautions that since the US has no presence on the ground there are few chances of gathering intelligence, particularly the human intelligence, and they will not know to what level terrorist groups are multiplying in Afghanistan.

The counterterrorism community still has worries that Afghanistan may become a haven to foreign fighters once again. Taliban should not be given the advantage of the doubt on the continued association with al-Qaeda. In 2024, the de facto leader of al-Qaeda, Saif al-Adel, urged the al-Qaeda adherents to come to Afghanistan to join the outfit. Al-Qaeda has always held the position of force multiplier and in a weakened form would be able to successfully enhance terrorist organizations as well as other violent extremists that are present across South Asia.

The Afghanistan conundrum is of one form or another to the US forces. First, the absence of intelligence gathering capabilities leaves the US in the position of being mostly unaware of the activities of the terrorist groups in the country. Second, any new US military intervention in Afghanistan would be a temptation to a larger regional conflagration, the resurgence of refugee flows, the empowerment of jihadist ideologies and the further commitment of Pakistan to an unwinnable security dilemma. Third, the possible redeployment to the Bagram Air Base, to which the Trump administration is reportedly contemplating a possible redeployment, would be both diplomatically and militarily risky.

5.3 India-US Relations as a Strategy Issue.

The decline of the Indian US relations poses a unique hybrid warfare dilemma to the US troops. Even though the high level visits and warm rhetoric have been made, as The Diplomat observes, no real gains have been made on major defense and economic agreements. The P-8I Poseidon deal of \$4 billion and the co-production agreement of F414 fighter jet engine are yet to be settled and the trade talks are at a halt.

According to the professional opinion, the most significant challenge is the Indian strategic autonomy. India still retains defense connections with Russia and economic connections with China although it is increasingly cooperating with Washington. The fact that the sinking of an Iranian warship, IRIS Dena, which had returned to the Indian Navy after taking part in the Milan exercise, occurred in the waters of India new days after hostilities between the United States and Iran began is a pointer of the increasing strategic divide that exists between Washington and New Delhi on the regional issues. India has not openly criticized the action of the US in Iran but this action was largely considered as weakening the role that India plays as the security ally of choice of the United States in the region.

In the case of US forces, this poses a problem of managing alliances. India cannot be trusted as a partner by the US to contain China or even maintain regional conflicts. According to Joshua White, there is a tangible danger of atrophy in the relationship and even in case rhetoric is enhanced, the administration might not invest much effort in developing the relationship.

5.4 Information Warfare and Strategic Narratives.

The second major hybrid challenge is the information warfare. Since October 2023, the narrative competition in South Asia has become more intense, and various state and non-state actors use digital means to influence opinions. In the report by the Australian Institute of International Affairs, applications of generative AI in supporting cognitive warfare and social instability in the region have been reported (AIIA, 2025).

In the case of US forces, the information warfare issues are experienced in the fight to sustain credibility and influence through competing narratives. Intervention in conflicts by the US such as its supposed intervention between India and Pakistan in the May 2025 Kashmir crisis has led to controversy that has weakened the view of US objectivity. According to the Forbes analysis, the Trump administration was boasting of mediation with the ceasefire, but India denied mediation by third parties, instead of framing the resolution as bilateral (Cohen, 2025).

5.5. Cyber Warfare and Critical Infrastructure Threats.

Another dimension of hybrid threat that is very important is cyber operations. The literature of hybrid warfare in South Asia highlights that digital technologies are used as a tool of attack on critical infrastructure, espionage, and the establishment of the environment of further progression (Research Gate, 2025). There have been advanced attacks on the digital infrastructure in Pakistan which has led to the endeavor to enhance cyber protection.

In the case of the US troops, cyber threats do not limit to the facilities of the US forces in the region but also its network of partners. The adoption of the latest technologies, such as AI-enabled ones, into the military practice has both opportunities and threats. According to policy studies, AI arms race between India and Pakistan decreases crisis decision-making time, which can lead to the low nuclear thresholds (AIIA, 2025).

5.6 Economic Coercion and Competition of Infrastructure.

The economic aspects of hybrid warfare have been growing more relevant since October 2023. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a project worth more than 65 billion Chinese to invest in the country, which is an economic development initiative and also a strategic tool (Cohen, 2025). The fact that Baloch separatist groups have been attacking CPEC infrastructure shows that there are non-state actors who can mar economic projects of strategic consequences. The US reaction to the economic coercion is through indirect and direct tools. The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) that was introduced at the 2023 G20 Summit can be viewed as an effort to provide a different connectivity system that will counter the influence of China (ISPI, 2025). Implementation of IMEC is however based on long-term political trust among the involved states and this is what the Saudi-Pakistan mutual defence pact could complicate.

5.7 Dynamics and Strategic Hedging Alliance.

The most complicated hybrid situation is the management of alliance processes in the case of strategic hedging by regional associates. The studies of the Indian strategic autonomy prove that even though the US-India partnership is increasing, New Delhi has independent foreign policy stands such as the energy imports with Russia and military relations with Moscow remain (Shafeeq, 2025). The effect of this multi-alignment policy is that it causes confusion regarding the ability of India to act as a reliable partner of the US in containing China.

Likewise, the fact that Pakistan is politically active in the same direction as China, the United States, Iran, and Saudi Arabia indicates that this country has a complicated system of strategic hedging that cannot be categorized as either aligned or not. The joint defense agreement with Saudi Arabia intensifies the involvement of Pakistan in the Gulf and its security relations with China offers defense and investment in economies. The US in its attempts to reengage Pakistan should find a way of negotiating these conflicting commitments as it tries to balance the consequences of its relations with India.

The National Interest analysis (August 2025) argues that the United States is not pivoting to Pakistan nor abandoning India, but rather enforcing terms: secure mine shafts, curb Russian oil imports, and police dual-use exports. The era of free hedging for India is over, this analysis suggests, and conditional incentives are not a rupture but an attempt at receiving long-deferred reciprocity.

6. Strategic Adaptations for US Policy

Various policy reports by different institutions provide a recommendation of the US strategic adjustment in South Asia. Staniland (2025) recommends the United States to develop a reputation of a friendly outsider, which is flexible and willing to cooperate with various local actors. This strategy focuses on expertise, technology, and capital assistance in assisting countries to become developed and stable without defining the engagement as a mere response to China.

According to Shapiro (2025), the military maintenance of capabilities and a diplomatic initiative should be combined. The long term US presence in the region under CENTCOM serves as a deterrent and reassurance to the partners and diplomatic talks should aim at consolidating the gains made by military pressure to the Iranian-aligned forces. Since the year 2021, the incorporation of Israel into CENTCOM has generated interoperability benefits that can be utilized in the cooperation of regional security.

The Middle East institute stresses on the necessity to resolve the underlying causes of instability, such as the Kashmir problem, which has not been resolved yet, and the issue of governance that is present in Pakistan and Afghanistan (MEI, 2025). The United States must encourage regional cooperation institutions without interfering in the conflict situations that the local actors wish to resolve by themselves.

As far as Afghanistan is concerned, it is advisable that the responsibility of monitoring the situation in Afghanistan should not be assigned to the intelligence community as the Soufan Center argues. Afghanistan itself was not mentioned at all in the national security strategy of Trump administration, and the term terrorism was referred to 5 times only. This implies that there should be new strategic focus in the region.

As to the case of India, the analysis based on ISPI implies that the United States should reconsider its strategy and accept the fact that strategic freedom of New Delhi will remain independent of the US influences (ISPI, 2025). Washington does not need to insist on convergence but instead concentrate on areas of convergence and tolerate divergence where Indian interests are not in line with those of the US. The drone partnership suggested by the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center of Security Studies (April 2025) can serve as an example of scalable, attritable defense mechanisms that can be developed by the United States and India in the future, without relying on prestige platforms but practical cooperation.

7. Conclusion

This has been analysed in terms of the US forces in South Asia facing the challenges of hybrid warfare in the framework of the US-Middle East nexus since October 2023. The study shows that the weakening of Iran region has actually enhanced the speed of realignments in the region that complicates the US strategic goals. The Saudi-Pakistan mutual defence agreement, the new China-Iran-Pakistan security partnership, and the strategic hedging that has been maintained by India all indicate the attempts of the regional actors to work around the unpredictability of US commitment.

This analysis leads to four important findings. To begin with, the problems of hybrid warfare in South Asia have a multifaceted nature such as proxy warfare, information operations, cyber threats, economic coercion, and alliance politics that cannot be addressed in a compartmentalized manner. Second, the US strategic power in South Asia is undergoing greater challenge and alternative security structures are finding their way out without the US involvement. Thirdly, Afghanistan is still considered to be a strategic blind spot and terrorist groups may reorganize themselves under the Taliban regime despite the fact that the US intelligence gathering efforts are still minimal. Fourth, the worsening of the relationships between India and the US is also a major challenge, since the strategic autonomy of New Delhi and the expectation of Washington to have a reciprocal relationship has caused friction which has weakened the partnership.

The strategic adjustments that are suggested to sustain military competence and tolerate diplomatic flexibility, embrace strategic latitude of regional allies, reinvest in intelligence gathering on Afghanistan, and rebalance the expectation in the India partnering, provide a scheme to negotiate these issues. Unless the United States decides to put money back into the tools and strategies that respond to the real ambitions of the regional actors, as Staniland (2025) concludes, the United States is likely to be the one sitting on the sidelines as South Asia builds its security architecture outside of American involvement.

The future will be shaped by how the US policy will respond to dealings with Pakistan, how it will handle the India relationship, how it will respond to the Chinese efforts of influencing it as well as whether it will be willing to re-engage with Afghanistan. The time in which these dynamics can be shaped is dwindling and the consequences of strategic negligence may prove to be exorbitant.

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