

CHALLENGES TO REGIONAL CONNECTIVITY BETWEEN THE MIDDLE EAST, SOUTH ASIA, AND CENTRAL ASIA (MESACA)

Dr Zia Ul Haque Shamsi

ziashamsi@ndu.edu.pk

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19447681>

Keywords

Middle East, South Asia, Regional Security, Iran, China, India, Pakistan, Nuclear Weapon States.

Article History

Received: 26 January 2026

Accepted: 26 March 2026

Published: 07 April 2026

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Corresponding Author: *

Dr Zia Ul Haque Shamsi

Abstract

The Middle East has traditionally been linked to North Africa primarily through historical and socio-cultural ties. However, it is time to look at this all-important region alongside the other important sub-regions, South Asia and Central Asia, from the perspective of regional connectivity. Iran, an important regional player, lies between the Middle East, South Asia and Central Asia. However, it may pose serious connectivity challenges for MESACA due to certain security concerns emanating from its nuclear ambitions. Whereas South Asian rivals, India and Pakistan, are already nuclear-weapon states and have a long history of wars and conflicts. Moreover, Pakistan and India share borders with another regional power, China, which has border disputes with India, over which the two most populous states have had limited wars and conflicts. At the same time, Afghanistan remains in a chaotic state that could once again become a major battlefield if regional stakeholders do not take control of the situation. Consequently, MESACA remains under threat of another large-scale military conflict, with the possibility of nuclear exchanges, even if the probability is low. Therefore, connectivity challenges in the MESACA region are serious due to security fears. This paper aims to highlight the significance of the MESACA from the perspective of regional connectivity, which could prove a game-changer at a time when the international system is rapidly evolving. Drawing on deductive reasoning and qualitative analysis, the paper identifies serious security concerns, regular interventions by extra-regional powers, and a lack of political will among the region's major stakeholders as key factors in the strategic neglect of connectivity among the three sub-regions, MESACA.

INTRODUCTION

The world is rapidly shifting toward multipolarity, marking the first such shift in over a century. While the U.S. would still maintain preeminence in the military domain, the world's economy would be dominated by China and perhaps India in the decades to come. The U.S. is unwilling to accept that it will soon lose its status as the world's largest economy. Perhaps this is one reason that the U.S. is raising the levels of conflict in the Middle East, Europe, and the Indo-Pacific region. Through QUAD and AUKUS, the U.S. is trying

to encircle China to contain its already expanded influence. QUAD includes India, Japan, and Australia, with the U.S. leading, whereas AUKUS includes the UK and Australia, with the U.S. leading. In fact, AUKUS introduces a nuclear dimension in the otherwise Nuclear-Free Zone. Moreover, President Trump's desire to acquire Greenland at any cost has created a wedge among the European nations.

On the other hand, Russia is rapidly expanding its influence in its western neighbourhood, which the

EU has many concerns about. The EU and the U.S. have been warning against Russia's movement westward, whereas Russia maintains it will never allow Ukraine to become part of NATO. The Ukraine War is about to complete its fourth year, and the end is not in sight.

The significance of MESACA lies in its strategic location and the vast natural resources each sub-region is blessed with. The countries forming MESACA comprise 30-35, of which at least 12-14 are in the west and northwest of Iran, whereas seven states are in the east, north, and south of the Persian state, thus putting Iran at the center of MESACA. The three sub-regions cover a total area of 12-14 million square kilometres and have a population of over 2.5 billion, which is nearly 40 per cent of the world's population. MESACA not only connects the Middle East, South Asia, and Central Asia, but can also connect to Europe in the northwest and to ASEAN states via Myanmar. However, the true potential of MESACA for its connectivity remains unrealised due to serious security concerns in Afghanistan, Iran, and Indo-Pak wars and conflicts.

Theoretical Precepts

The categorisation of various regions dates to the era of colonisation. However, the placement of various countries within a particular region may have changed for geopolitical or geostrategic reasons. In the absence of an authentic and conclusive categorisation of Middle Eastern states, this author has categorised all West Asian countries as part of the broader Middle East for this research. Iran, though part of West Asia, remains independent of any regional categorisation. In contrast, Afghanistan is part of South Asia because it joined the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 2007. The purpose of leaving Iran independent of any regional classification is to enhance its importance as a link between the Middle East, South Asia and Central Asia (MESACA).

Realism serves as the basic theoretical construct for this research. Realism in its many shades, political, structural or neo-realism, with further explanations by Waltz's defensive realism and Mearsheimer's offensive realism, helped develop

understandings about the complexities of wars and conflicts in the MESACA region. Challenges to regional security will be viewed through the lens of offensive realism, given that the MESACA region includes several larger states with a history of aggressive behaviour against their smaller or weaker neighbours.

The international realm is anarchic. It consists of independent political units called states, which are the primary actors. All states maintain certain levels of offensive military capability, which may be perceived as potentially dangerous by other states. Hence, states remain unsure about the intentions of other states and continue to enhance their power base to remain sovereign. However, most states think rationally and consolidate themselves to survive in the anarchic environment.

Major international relations theories agree with the concept of a state as a unitary actor pursuing its national interests to achieve its political objectives. Realism holds that world affairs are governed by an anarchic system that survives on conflict and self-interest. There is ongoing tension among competing nations to expand their power bases by seizing scarce resources. Realism's focus on conflict and state power aligns it more with military strategic issues than anything else. Realism has its roots in the era of Thucydides, and Kautilya, ably proffered by Machiavelli in the Middle Ages, Thomas Hobbes in the seventeenth Century, and Hans Morgenthau in the previous century.

Thucydides, who studied the Peloponnesian Wars (431-404 BC), saw international relations as competitive due to the inherently conflicting nature of unequal power relations among states. His distinction in categorising states by potential and actual strength makes him a pioneer of classical realism, which holds that "security and survival are the primary values and war is the final arbiter." Whereas, Machiavelli emphasised that the Ruler has the ultimate power in his state and over its people, for which he must acquire power by any means.

The views of these classical realists serve as a reference point for analysing the state behaviour of relatively larger states within a particular region, even in contemporary times. The same was evident

when the KSA-led quartet imposed an embargo on a tiny neighbour, Qatar, in June 2017, which lasted for over three years.

Realism remained dominant during the Cold War era because it provided a rationale for war, non-cooperation, and rivalry among allies. Unfortunately, the precepts of classical realism remain in practice even in the 21st century. Perhaps, this is one reason for most wars since the end of the Cold War between Unequal Military Powers (UMPs), particularly in the MESACA region.

Morgenthau believed that states have an intrinsic desire to dominate others, which makes war and conflict inevitable. Realism proffers that opposing interests and conflict among states are inevitable. Realists' precepts remain focused on power instead of morality. They maintain that universal moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states, and they must be filtered through the concrete circumstances of time and place.

The above arguments from the realist school helped in understanding and explaining the behaviour of relatively larger states in the MESACA region, engaged in protracted conflict, particularly in situations where the number of conflicts has grown over the years under the guise of 'interests.'

The Need for Expanding Regional Connectivity between MESACA

Expanding regional connectivity within MESACA can be a game-changer, particularly for the relatively underperforming states. However, the security threats to Iran and turmoil in Afghanistan, along with strategic stability in South Asia, must be ensured.

MESACA comprises geographical regions spanning from the western tip of the Asian part of Turkey to the Gulf of Aden in the South, moving eastward till the Bay of Bengal, and up north touching the southern boundaries of Russia. The region is blessed with huge reserves of hydrocarbons, glacial mountains, important international sea-lanes of communication, including much-desired warm-water ports, vast expanses of agricultural land, and relatively favourable climatic conditions.

The historical bonds among the regional states date back to the prehistoric era of trade and travel, much before the religious linkages made them inseparable. However, the entire region suffered immensely under colonialism, even after state boundaries were defined in Europe following the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648.

In the fast-evolving global order, regional connectivity in the MESACA region is even more important given its proximity to a resurgent Russia and an ever-growing China. China is developing the Pakistani port of Gwadar as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), connecting all three regions via the shortest possible logistics routes. China's ever-expanding capacity to export goods and services to the rest of the world originates in western China and, following the land route through Pakistan, reaches Gwadar port in the shortest possible time. From Gwadar, the sea route can be used to reach the Middle East, Africa, and the ASEAN region. Likewise, Russia and the Central Asian Republics (CARs) can route via Afghanistan to the much-needed warm-water port of Gwadar for the despatch and reception of goods and services, respectively. South Asia can have its own SAARC Highway as and when India decides to join the project, which would be far more beneficial to India than to any other country in the region. The SARRC Highway may be built from the western tip of Afghanistan, through Pakistan and into India via the traditional Grand Trunk (GT) Road, to the eastern tip of Bangladesh, and into Myanmar.

Likewise, goods and services from Africa and the Middle East, including hydrocarbons, can pass through Gwadar port to China, India, and Bangladesh, which are among the largest consumer markets. Speedy logistics means that relatively cheaper goods and services are what the future holds for the MESACA and the world.

MESACA comprises several important regional states. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is rich in oil and houses the holiest places for Muslims. Iran is another important state that connects the Middle East with South Asia and is one of the world's largest gas producers. Pakistan is the

second-largest Islamic state and one of the nuclear-weapon states of the region. India is the second-largest country in the world with nuclear capability and global ambitions. It is one of the largest producers of goods and services, particularly in information technology. India is also one of the largest consumer societies, with a population of over a billion. Likewise, some CAR countries are extremely rich in minerals and other natural resources. Historical richness notwithstanding, CAR's countries can act as a bridge between South Asia, Russia and Europe. Turkmenistan is one of the largest gas producers and can supply the much-needed energy to Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. The final negotiations with the new Taliban-led Afghan government on the 56mm Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline are in the final stages. Once concluded, Turkmenistan would supply the most economical energy to the energy-starved countries.

MESACA has immense potential as both a producer and a consumer. The MESACA region, with over 2.5 billion people, is historically, culturally, and geographically intricately interconnected. Moreover, it is naturally connected to another 1.5 billion people in China and Russia, which are global players, and hence the relationship can prove to be a game-changer.

In the Middle East, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has led the blockade against a geographically smaller neighbour, Qatar, which lasted for over three years and ended without any significant achievement. However, the blockade against Qatar seriously dented the GCC's dream of becoming the EU soon.

Afghanistan Turmoil

Afghanistan is the most sought-after landmass, perhaps because of its location. From Alexander to the British via the Moghuls, and the Soviets to the Americans, nearly every military power of the time has invaded this country. Some stayed for an extended period during the early years of recorded history, while others left early, such as the Soviets, departing within just 10 years.

Why is Afghanistan so dear to the military powers of the time, and that too at regular intervals throughout recorded history? It calls for a closer

look at its map and its neighbours. Afghanistan's location remains attractive to global powers for strategic reasons. It sits at the crossroads of Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia. Afghanistan remains a crucial location for understanding MESACA's connectivity predicament, given its security concerns.

Despite foreign troops' withdrawal from Afghanistan, it remains in chaos and on the brink of collapse. Even after over five years, the government of Afghanistan remains unrecognised. State institutions are nearly dysfunctional due to a lack of funds, and despite OIC's best efforts, the requisite funds are not available to manage the state's affairs. China and India are making efforts to assist Afghanistan's Taliban government despite reservations about its style of governance.

Afghanistan remains shrouded in uncertainty despite the complete withdrawal of foreign forces. The U.S. signed a Peace Agreement with the Taliban in Doha on 29 February 2020, under which all its forces were supposed to withdraw from Afghanistan in 14 months. However, President Biden sought a little more time to complete the process, and finally, all U.S. and NATO troops left Afghanistan by the middle of August, and the Taliban entered Kabul without firing a shot on 15 August 2021. Though it was not an unexpected outcome, it has taken more than expected for regional as well as extra-regional countries to recognise the new Afghan government led by the Taliban. Now, this is unfair to the people of Afghanistan, who have already suffered immensely due to repeated foreign occupations and continued wars and conflicts over the last four decades. Because the U.S. leadership should have visualised that the Taliban would ultimately take over Afghanistan after the U.S. and NATO troops had left the country, which they had controlled by force only.

The people of Afghanistan are starving due to a lack of basic amenities, which are not available to them due to a lack of requisite resources. Despite Pakistan's best efforts to provide humanitarian assistance in the form of food and medicines, Afghans are going through a torrid time due to extremely harsh weather and a lack of

international support at this critical time. The Taliban government does not have enough resources to manage the state affairs due to U.S. restrictions on the release of funds necessary to provide relief to the people of Afghanistan. Perhaps, the U.S. Administration is taking revenge for its military defeat from the Taliban government without any consideration for the plight of the people of Afghanistan, for which the U.S. cannot be absolved under any pretext.

The Middle Eastern region cannot remain oblivious to its neighbouring sub-region, South Asia, particularly given the nuclear dimension. China-India relations remain tense primarily for two reasons: first, due to active border disputes between the two nuclear neighbours; and second, because India has joined the U.S. in the QUAD and signed the bilateral BECA Agreement. The U.S. is using India to stand firm against China and, in the process, is arming India with modern weapon systems and state-of-the-art technologies. However, India is using these capabilities to cow down Pakistan due to its support for the people of Kashmir. India's latest military acquisitions have led to an increased gap in the conventional domain, which is being filled with expanded nuclear capability by Pakistan. This is a dangerous situation because the two nuclear-armed neighbours have been to war and in conflict on several occasions. The latest being the four-day war in May 2025. India attacked Pakistan's counterforce and countervalue targets to take revenge for the country's alleged involvement in a terrorist incident in Pahalgam, Indian Held Kashmir, on April 22, 2025, in which at least 26 tourists were killed. Though Pakistan condemned the attack and offered its fullest cooperation for the investigation, India decided to attack another nuclear state for an alleged involvement in a terror incident.

Coming to the Middle East, the GCC's dream of becoming the EU has been seriously dented since 5th June 2017, when the KSA-led quartet of the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt imposed an embargo (HISAR) on Qatar—recalling Lord Palmerston, who, some two centuries ago, stated that there are no permanent friends or foes in international relations, but only permanent interests. HISAR

proved that the concept of Ummah is dead in the present international state system; only the interests of independent and sovereign states are supreme.

Yemen, like Afghanistan, remains uncertain. The civil war is turning into a larger regional conflict with Saudi strikes on UAE-supported groups at Yemen's Mukalla port, accusing foreign-backed vessels of delivering weapons to southern separatists on December 30, 2025. Without going into the historical past of Yemen's civil war, the ongoing military conflict started in 2014 when KSA-led regional forces intervened to reinstall the government of Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, who had fled Yemen due to the resurgent Houthis' advances on the capital Sana. Although the Saudi-led offensive achieved its primary objective of restoring Hadi's government, the conflict developed into a full-scale war. The people of Yemen are now faced with famine and large-scale internal displacement. Moreover, the end of the crisis is not in sight. Houthis have been carrying out missile and rocket attacks on Saudi oil facilities regularly.

While Libya remains unstable, there is no respite for the Syrians either. Emerging from the consequences of the Arab Spring in early 2011, the Syrian conflict has had a much wider impact on regional security. The number of regional and extra-regional states and non-state actors involved in the Syrian conflict may outnumber those in other regional conflicts, including Libya, Yemen, and even Afghanistan. That is why the Syrian conflict remains unresolved even after Asad's removal from power on December 8, 2024.

The Nuclear Dimension

Without going into the details of nuclear programmes of the regional countries like India, Pakistan, and Iran, it is necessary to elaborate upon important events through the lens of escalation related to the nuclear dimension.

In the South Asian situation, India and Pakistan declared themselves as nuclear-weapon states in May 1998 after India carried out a series of tests, followed by Pakistan within the space of two weeks. Subsequently, Pakistan initiated the Kargil conflict only a year after becoming a nuclear power

and to date, it was the most dangerous situation since the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 between the USSR and the United States when a nuclear war was minutes away. The Kargil situation was defused by U.S. President Bill Clinton's intervention, who at once declared Kashmir a nuclear flashpoint.

In the last two decades, both India and Pakistan came close to war and conflicts, but active intervention by the US helped them pull back from the brink. The latest being in February 2019, when India carried out a deep air strike in Pakistan, to which Pakistan responded the next day and shot down two fighter jets of the IAF in broad daylight. One pilot was ejected in Pakistan's area and captured by the local population, but Pakistan returned the pilot on humanitarian grounds within a few days.

In the Middle East, as early as 1981, Israelis attacked Iraq's nuclear installations and destroyed its capability for good. Operation Opera, or Operation Babylon, was a surprise airstrike conducted by the Israeli Air Force on 7 June 1981, which destroyed an unfinished Iraqi nuclear reactor located 17 kilometres (11 miles) southeast of Baghdad, Iraq. It's more than 40 years now, Iraq had to abandon its nuclear ambitions. In 1976, Iraq purchased an Osiris-class nuclear reactor from France. ... Israel called the operation an act of self-defence, saying that the reactor had "less than a month to go" before "it might have become critical." The airstrike reportedly killed ten Iraqi soldiers and one French civilian.

The next important event related to the nuclear dimension occurred in 2008 when Israelis carried out a cyber-attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. Iran's nuclear programme was pushed back by at least ten years. One nuclear power reactor is operating in Iran, after many years of construction. Two further large Russian-designed units are planned; the first commenced construction in November 2019. The country also has a major programme developing uranium enrichment, which was concealed for many years. Natanz was first targeted in a cyberwarfare operation known as the Olympic Games, which used the Stuxnet computer virus. This action destroyed hundreds of centrifuges and caused other damage. Israel and the U.S. carried

out the operation. Its objective was to stealthily manipulate the speed of the sensitive enrichment centrifuges, causing attrition rather than blatant physical destruction. The Stuxnet worm reportedly infected more than 200,000 machines at 14 Iranian facilities and may have destroyed up to 10 per cent of the 9,000 centrifuges at Natanz. The third important event with nuclear dimensions was the power failure caused by a deliberately planned explosion that struck Iran's Natanz uranium enrichment site in November 2019. Iran declared it an act of sabotage and nuclear terrorism. The 16-23 November 2019 blackout was the most wide-scale internet shutdown ever in Iran.

Another important event from the viewpoint of nuclear dimension was the killing of the Iranian nuclear scientist. The alleged head of Iran's nuclear weapons program, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, was assassinated on November 27, 2020. Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iran's foreign minister, suggested that Israel was behind Fakhrizadeh's assassination.

All these events clearly reflect that the entire Western world and Israel do not want Iran to become a nuclear-weapon state. On this ground, its interests converge with those of other regional states, such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This author is of the view that no matter how much time and effort is invested, Iran wants to become a nuclear-weapon state for two reasons: security and regional supremacy.

Lack of Political Will

The lack of political will among regional players is perhaps the main hurdle to achieving regional connectivity among the MESACA sub-regions. China did make a brief intervention to help resolve the deep historical and ideological conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia. However, Iran's nuclear ambitions do not allay Saudi's security concerns. Likewise, the Saudi-led quartet, UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt, sieged a tiny neighbour, Qatar, in June 2017, cutting all ties until late 2020 when the siege was lifted.

Yemen remains a bone of contention between the regional powers, and now, Saudi-UAE differences have opened another chapter of conflicts between

traditional allies. While Syria and Libya appear to be settling down, the Gaza Peace Plan and the formation of the Gaza Peace Board are making headlines amid suspicion.

India and Pakistan, arch rivals, had their latest round of a limited-duration war in May 2025. India unleashed an unprovoked barrage of surface-to-surface weapons and attacks by UAVs and drones, following a terrorist incident in Indian Held Kashmir on April 22, 2025, and without any conclusive outcome of investigations, blamed Pakistan and attacked a nuclear neighbour, challenging the Cold War dictum that two nuclear states do not go to war with each other. Pakistan Air Force (PAF) shot down 6-7 fighter jets of the Indian Air Force (IAF), in the longest and largest air battle since World War II. After four days of intense exchange of fire in multiple domains, the U.S. intervened and brokered a ceasefire.

The theoretical precepts of realism, as practised by nearly all regional leaders, are restricting them from advancing a plan to expand regional connectivity within MESACA. Though the Chinese BRI has been implemented in different parts of the region, there is no effort to formalise it.

Conclusion

The challenges to regional connectivity due to security concerns in MESACA are serious and require attention at the Summit level. The regional stakeholders must take charge before extra-regional forces intervene militarily again, while their political intervention cannot be blocked due to their long-term interests in the region.

Since the end of the Cold War, most wars have occurred either in the Middle East or in the adjacent South Asian region. Unfortunately, all these wars and conflicts were between the Unequal Military Powers (UMPs), and therefore, the result was obvious. The infrastructure and the social fabric of Iraq, Libya, Syria, Yemen and Afghanistan have been destroyed, and hundreds of thousands of innocent people were killed. At the same time, millions have been rendered homeless and forced to leave their homes to take refuge in foreign lands.

Iran, on the other hand, remains under US sanctions due to its nuclear programme, which not only concerns the extra-regional powers but also the regional states. Saudi Arabia has repeatedly voiced its concerns about increased nuclear activities by Iran, which threaten regional security. Saudi officials have stated that "Iran's moves to produce uranium enriched to 60 per cent fissile purity and uranium metal to 20 per cent 'represent an increasing threat' to regional security and non-proliferation of weapons." According to a recently published International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report on Iran, the country is producing more Uranium metal in violation of its commitment under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Therefore, it hampers efforts to secure "a comprehensive nuclear deal that ensures global and regional security and stability." The U.S. offensive forces have been gathering in and around the region for a possible attack on Iran, and if the attack goes on, it might trigger another long-drawn war in the region. There is a need for the regional players to craft a strategy to expand regional connectivity and block extra-regional players from kinetic and non-kinetic interventions.

About the Authors

Dr Zia Ul Haque Shamsi has authored four international books: "Nuclear Deterrence and Conflict Between India and Pakistan", "South Asia Needs Hybrid Peace", "Understanding Sun Tzu and The Art of Hybrid War", and "Deterrence and Diplomacy." He has also translated Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* into Urdu.

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