Entangled Geographies of Mythic and Material Frontiers: Conflict, Eschatological Space, and Transborder Violence at the Landward Interface of the Asia-Pacific

MOHAMMAD JAWAD Ali Aqa[1]

Abstract – This article reconceptualizes the Afghan–Pakistan frontier as a critical landward interface within the Asia-Pacific security ecology, challenging the region's dominant maritime and state-centric analytical bias. Drawing on Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) data on the Asia-Pacific region and a qualitative content analysis of secondary scholarship on the Islamic State–Khorasan Province (IS-KP), the study employs a connected–complementary mixed-methods design to examine both the spatial patterns and ideational meanings of political violence. At the quantitative level, a province–year OLS regression analysis demonstrates that proximity to the Afghan–Pakistan border is a statistically significant predictor of conflict frequency in Afghanistan, underscoring the frontier's structural role as a corridor of transborder violence shaped by porous borders, ethnic incongruence, and resilient trust networks. At the qualitative level, the analysis shows how IS-KP constructs the imaginary geography of Khorasan as an eschatological geography, sacralizing territory, delegitimizing Westphalian borders, and advancing a mythic spatial project that transcends state sovereignty. Theoretically situated within critical geopolitics, the article foregrounds the entanglement of material terrain and imagined geographies in the production of violence. It argues that the Afghan–Pakistan frontier is not a peripheral anomaly but a constitutive landward node within the Asia-Pacific conflict ecology, where insurgency, mythic geopolitics, and borderland dynamics converge to challenge prevailing security frameworks.

Key Words: Afghan–Pakistan Border, Transborder Conflict, Eschatological Geography, Critical Geopolitics, Asia-Pacific

Introduction

This article has advanced a critical geopolitical re-reading of the Afghan–Pakistan frontier as a layered and entangled space within the Asia-Pacific security ecology. The Asia-Pacific security discourse is overwhelmingly framed through a maritime and state-centric lens, emphasizing sea-lane security, naval balance, and interstate deterrence. Yet empirically, the region's conflict ecology is dominated not by interstate war but by intrastate contention, insurgency, and violence against civilians. Nowhere is this disjuncture more evident than in Pakistan's northern and Afghanistan's eastern and southern provinces, where persistent violence reflects the interaction of porous frontiers, transnational trust networks, and ideational challenges to sovereign territoriality.

[1] Research Fellow, Hiroshima Peacebuilders Center (HPC), Japan; Ph.D. Graduate of Tokyo University of Foreign Studies

This paper proceeds from the observation that the Afghan–Pakistan frontier constitutes a critical fault line within the Asia-Pacific security iconology. Meanwhile, the Islamic State–Khorasan Province (IS-KP) sacralizes the Khorasan imagined geography as an eschatological "promised frontier," delegitimizing Westphalian borders and reimagining space as the theater of an apocalyptic struggle.

By integrating statistical analysis of conflict patterns with qualitative reconstruction of mythic geographies, the paper advances a critical geopolitical account of how material terrain and imagined space jointly structure violence.

Research Question

The paper addresses the following interconnected research questions through a connected-complementary mixed-methods design:

1. **Patterns (Quantitative Layer):**
   How does proximity to the Afghan–Pakistan frontier (Durand Line) statistically shape the frequency of conflict events across Afghanistan's provinces, and how does this relationship reflect broader dynamics of border incongruence and transborder trust networks?
2. **Meanings (Qualitative Layer):**
   How does the Islamic State–Khorasan Province (IS-KP) construct the Khorasan imagined geography as an eschatological geography, and what implications does this spatial imaginary have for sovereignty, borders, and Asia-Pacific security frameworks such as FOIP?

To answer the above questions, this paper employ a connected-complementary mixed-methods design in two layers. Layer 1 (Patterns): a province–year OLS model tests whether proximity to the Afghan–Pakistan frontier statistically shapes conflict frequency. Layer 2 (Meanings): a qualitative content analysis of secondary scholarship reconstructs IS-KP's eschatological geography of Khorasan, focusing on sacred sites, border delegitimation, and spatial binaries.

Theoretically, the paper situate the study within critical geopolitics, extending its concern with the social construction of space by foregrounding the entanglement of material terrain and ideational geographies. Empirically, the paper show that border proximity is a significant predictor of conflict events, while ideational mechanisms, *hijrah*, *jihad*, capitalized by terrorist groups, animate a mythic spatial project that challenges sovereignty.

1. An Overview

This section provides an overview of the conflict dynamics in the Asia-Pacific region, before narrowing the focus to South Asia and ultimately the Afghanistan–Pakistan frontier areas. This section also introduces the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED, 2025) on the Asia Pacific region.

1.1.Overview of Conflict Dynamics in the Asia-Pacific (2009–2025)

With respect to the definition of the Asia-Pacific, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED, 2025) adopts an expansive regional categorization encompassing more than forty-five countries. This classification spans continental states such as China, Afghanistan and Pakistan, maritime powers including Indonesia, Japan, and the Philippines, as well as smaller Pacific Island nations. Such breadth captures the region's pronounced geopolitical heterogeneity and allows for systematic identification of diverse conflict manifestations across both land-based and maritime domains.

Within this broader geographical framework, the analysis narrows its empirical focus to Afghanistan as the primary site of investigation, situating its conflict dynamics within the strategic and discursive architecture of the Asia-Pacific. This approach foregrounds Afghanistan not as a peripheral outlier, but as a landward node embedded within the wider Asia-Pacific security ecology.

ACLED data on the Asia-Pacific region records a wide spectrum of political violence and conflict-related events. This includes protests, battles, riots, explosions or remote violence, violence against civilians, and strategic developments. The proportional distribution of these events reveals that protests are the most common pattern of conflict in the Asia-Pacific. As shown in Table 1, ACLED register nearly 389,000 protest events between 2009 and 2025, constituting the majority of all recorded incidents in the Asia Pacific, followed by battles (88,875) and explosions or remote violence (53,901). The latter two conflict events are very frequent in Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Pakistan.

Table 1. ***Aggregate Conflict Events by Type in Asia Pacific Countries (2009 – 2025)***

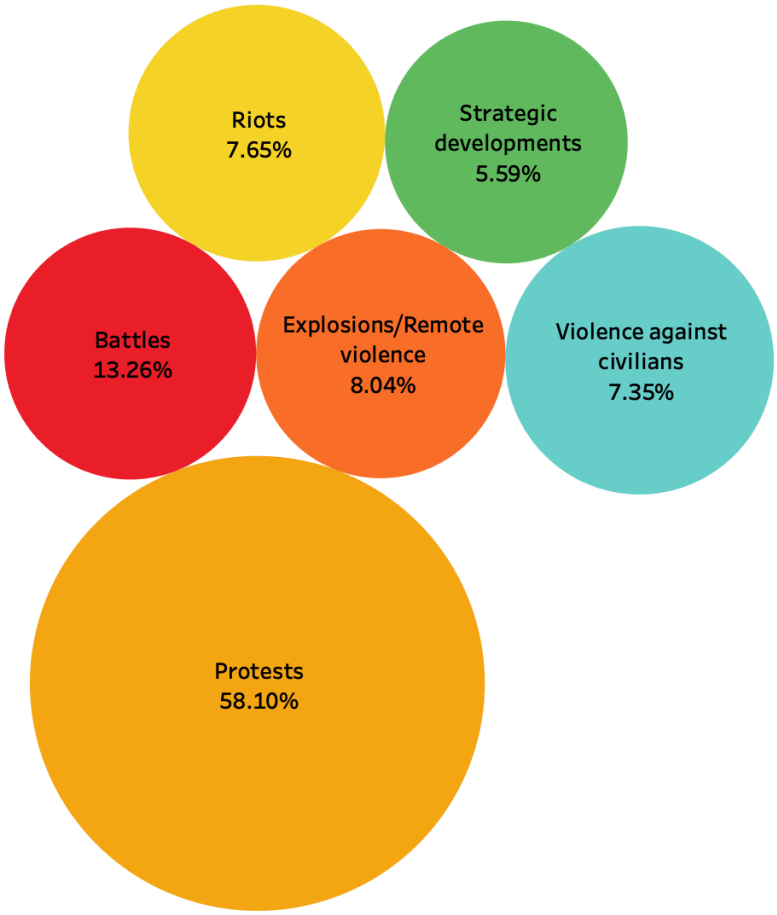
Country	Battles	Explosions/ Remote violence	Protests	Riots	Strategic developments	Violence against civilians
India	6,926	1,794	145,144	23,747	6,390	7,076
Pakistan	8,062	7,075	77,513	4,492	1,786	6,073
Myanmar	24,359	23,392	17,866	245	17,403	10,887
Afghanistan	41,128	17,499	1,428	197	2,908	5,079
South Korea	1	2	42,687	330	95	8
Bangladesh	1,922	248	13,007	12,487	618	3,927
Nepal	77	371	17,543	4,744	864	644
Indonesia	649	78	18,209	1,846	643	1,113
Philippines	3,889	601	3,012	112	1,039	9,416
China	7	13	11,982	554	1,466	2,481
Thailand	1,700	2,727	4,492	236	2,312	1,618
Japan		1	12,736	14	46	2
Sri Lanka	47	78	6,944	870	322	400
Taiwan			6,756	92	11	4
Australia	2		3,832	76	28	3
Cambodia	46	10	1,871	187	202	130
Malaysia	10	1	974	41	382	59
Papua New Guinea	24	3	213	728	236	57
New Zealand			1,106	14	10	1
Mongolia			702	6	41	4
Vietnam	8	1	306	61	35	158
North Korea	2	2	5	4	481	53
New Caledonia	1		209	126	40	
Maldives		1	317	30	16	4
French Polynesia		1	138	3	4	1
East Timor	1		46	8	12	8
Guam			57		2	
Laos	13	3	12	1	5	20
Solomon Islands			14	13	21	4
Fiji			37	4	7	3
Singapore			14		19	
Wallis and Futuna			21		6	
Samoa			14	2	7	1
Vanuatu			6	2	7	
Bhutan	1		2	2	3	3
Northern Mariana Islands			11			
Antarctica			9			
American Samoa			6		1	
Cook Islands			5		1	
Marshall Islands			4		1	
Tonga			2		3	
Kiribati					3	
Nauru					3	
Palau			1		2	
Brunei			1		1	
Christmas Island			1	1		
Micronesia					2	
Niue					1	
Tokelau					1	
Tuvalu					1	

Source: ACLED (2025)

In addition, other forms of conflict, such as riots (51,275), violence against civilians (49,237), and strategic developments (37,487) show the security vulnerability of the region. To illustrate, Figure 1 provides details on their share of total conflict events. Protests alone make for 58.1 percent of all events, while battles account for 13.3 percent**,** explosions or remote violence 8.0 percent, riots 7.7 percent, violence against civilians 7.4 percent**,** and strategic developments 5.6 percent. This suggests that the hotspots of violent conflict Af-Pak frontier areas, however, the

defining feature of the Asia Pacific's conflict environment is protest-driving contentious politics.

Figure 1. *Scale of Conflict by Event Type in the Asia Pacific (2009 -2025)*



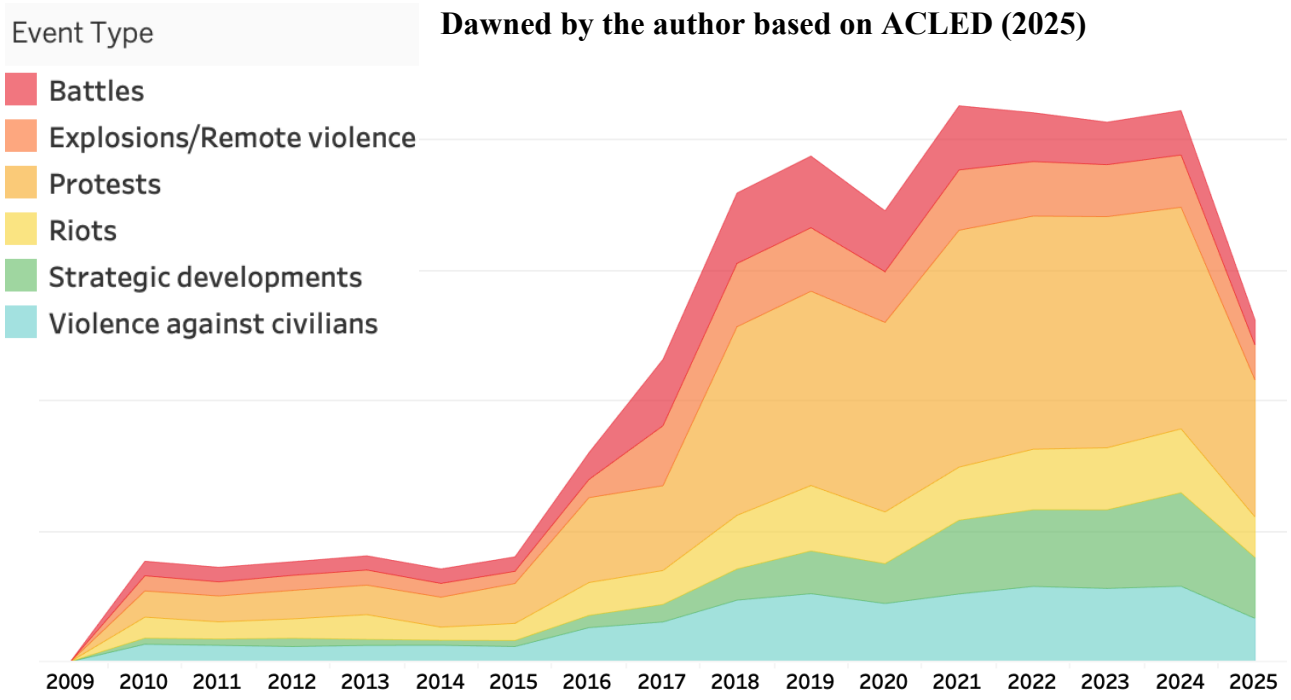
Drawn by the author based on ACLED (2025)

Moreover, the pattern of the conflict is varied by country level. Protests and riots are commonplace in India and Pakistan, while Afghanistan and Myanmar are showcase patterns of armed clashes and remote violence. Consolidated democracies such as South Korea (42,687 cases) and Japan (12,736 cases) nonetheless register high levels of protest activities, reflecting the existence of contentious politics even in stable political systems. Although there are far fewer incidents in smaller Pacific nations like Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands, the proportion of riots and protests relative to population size underscores persistent vulnerabilities.

Moreover, the data reveals at least three key stages in the temporal dynamics of conflict (Figure 2). Conflict levels stayed largely constant between 2009 and 2014, despite Afghanistan's ongoing violence. After 2015, the number of annual occurrences increased significantly, reaching a peak between 2018 and 2022 when there were over 20,000 events, mostly as a result

of large-scale protest movements in India, Hong Kong, Thailand, and Myanmar. The region is still hit by cycles of instability, as evidenced by the continued violence against civilians, even though overall occurrence slightly decrease after 2023.

Figure 2. *The Temporal Dynamics of Conflict by Event Type in the Asia Pacific (2009 – 2025)*



Dawned by the author based on ACLED (2025)

Taken together, the evidence presented in Table 1 and Figures 1–2 demonstrates that the Asia-Pacific conflict landscape is defined less by interstate war than by the occurrences intrastate contentious politics, insurgency, and violence against civilians. It is because protest activities make nearly three-fifths of all events.

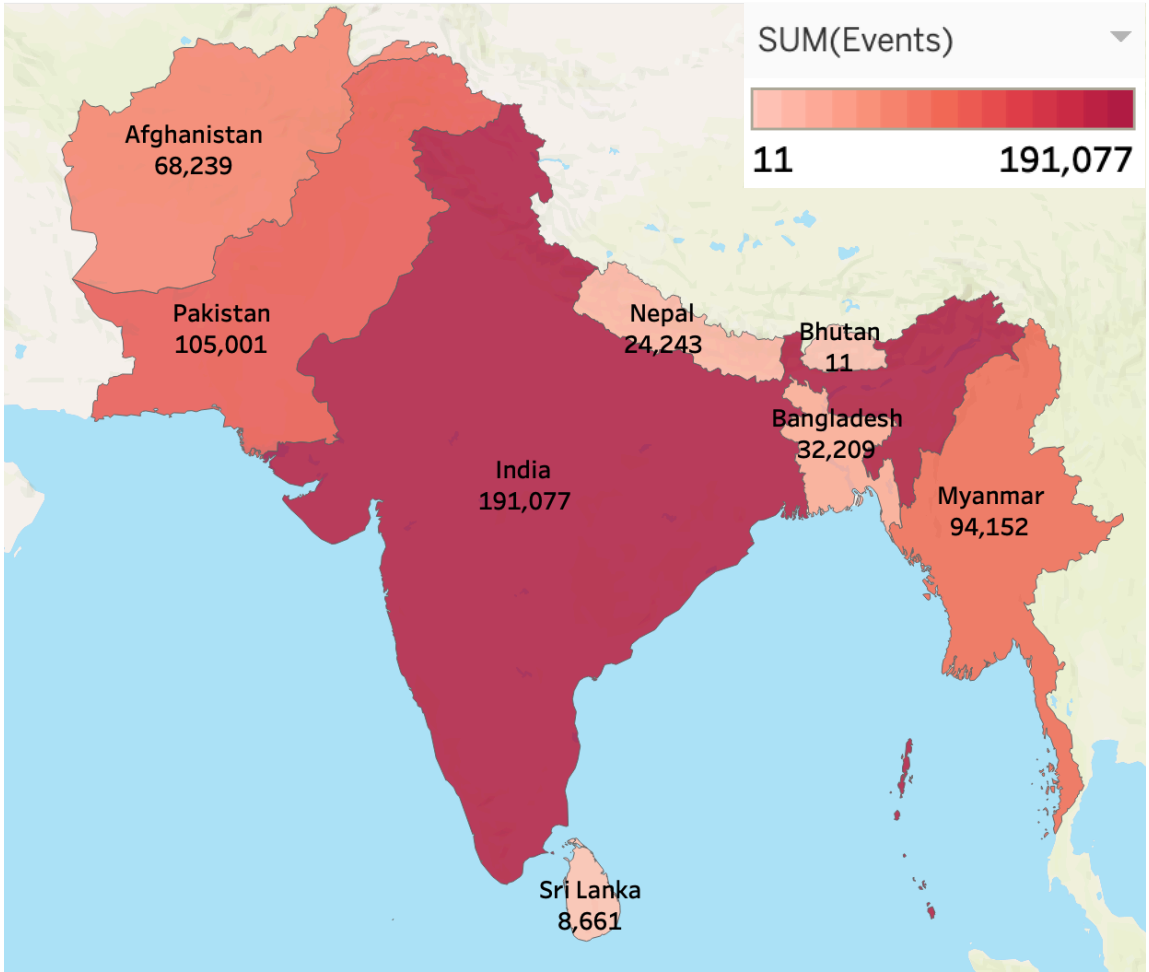
1.2.Overview of the Conflict Dynamics in South Asia (2009–2025)

South Asia makes one of the most volatile subregions of the Asia-Pacific. As depicted in Figure 3, India is experiences more than 191,000 recorded events, driven largely by protests (17,840) and riots (9,684) (also see Table 2). Pakistan comes next with more than 105,000 events, blending high levels of protest activity (5,157) with significant level armed violence, including 2,636 battles and 3,538 explosions or remote violence, mirroring its dual susceptibility to both contentious politics and insurgency. Afghanistan and Myanmar stand out as critical conflict hubs, with totals of 68,239 and 94,152 events, respectively. Afghanistan is characterized predominantly by battles (8,676 cases) and remote violence (8,764 cases), highlighting the prominence of insurgency, whilst Myanmar experiences significant strategic developments (7,225) and elevated instances of armed confrontations, particularly following the 2021 military coup.

Table 2. *Conflict Events by Type in South Asia (ACLED 2025)*

Country	Battles	Explosions/ Remote violence	Protests	Riots	Strategic developments	Violence against civilians
Afghanistan	8,676	8,764	1,141	183	2,552	3,679
Bangladesh	1,254	212	4,046	5,014	496	2,513
Bhutan	1		2	2	3	3
India	2,163	1,301	17,840	9,684	3,815	4,332
Maldives		1	244	28	14	4
Myanmar	4,457	6,802	3,386	189	7,225	4,414
Nepal	73	258	3,782	2,647	599	534
Pakistan	2,636	3,538	5,157	2,349	1,250	2,566
Sri Lanka	46	69	2,849	661	266	357

Figure 3. *South Asia Conflict Intensity Map (drawn by the author based on ACLED 2025)*



Additionally, Bangladesh and Nepal exemplify mid-level conflict occurrence characterized by prevalent political contention. Bangladesh registers over 32,000 incidents, primarily consisting of protests (4,046 cases) and riots (5,014 cases), whilst Nepal documents more than 24,000 occurrences, similarly characterized by protest and riot activities. In contrast, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Bhutan exhibit comparatively lower totals. Sri Lanka registered 8,661 occurrences, predominantly protests (2,849), in the post-civil war era, whilst the Maldives and Bhutan are negligible, with merely a few hundred and a handful of instances, respectively. These trends underscore the uneven distribution of violence in South Asia, with India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Myanmar identified as the focal points of regional unrest.

1.3.Main Theoretical and Empirical Arguments

The paper advances two core empirical findings and one overarching theoretical claim.

First, statistical analysis of the ACLED data (2025) on the Asia-Pacific region demonstrates that conflict intensity in Afghanistan is geographically patterned by proximity to the Afghan–Pakistan frontier. Provinces adjacent to Pakistan experience significantly higher levels of violence than inland provinces. Although the explanatory power of geography alone is modest, the consistent positive association highlights the frontier's structural role as a conflict corridor. This pattern reflects the enduring effects of porous borders, the incongruence between ethnic and national boundaries, and resilient transborder trust networks—particularly among Pashtun communities—that undermine state-centric security frameworks.

Second, qualitative content analysis shows that IS-KP constructs the Khorasan as an eschatological frontier central to apocalyptic prophecy. Through narratives of hijrah, jihad, and sacred geography, IS-KP delegitimizes Westphalian borders and promotes a borderless Islamic order. This mythic geopolitics transforms territory into divine space, mobilizing violence by collapsing distinctions between the material and the sacred. Such ideational mechanisms illustrate how non-state actors weaponize religious imagination to challenge sovereignty and territorial order.

Taken together, the paper makes a broader theoretical contribution to critical geopolitics by demonstrating the entanglement of material geography and ideational spatial imaginaries. The Afghan–Pakistan frontier is not merely a physical border but a layered geopolitical formation where historical buffer logic, contemporary insurgency, and mythic eschatology converge.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study employs critical geopolitics as its framework to examine both the mythic and divine mapping of the world as well as the material effects of geography, such as how geographical proximity facilitates political violence. Geopolitics has long been invoked to approach a "general theorem of power" (Sprout, 1954), in which influencing variables are broadly divided into geographical and human or social factors (Sprout, 1954; Meinig, 1956; Vuving, 2020). Geography is often considered a great "unequalizer" that can change the structure of international competition (Vuving, 2020). Since geographical features are stable (Meinig, 1956) and certain regions are privileged by terrain and climate (Vuving, 2020), they condition human

action and provide explanatory power for state behavior. As Dolman (2012) stresses, geography's enduring features, land, sea, and now outer space, define the strategic opportunities available to states. For example, until the rise of the United States, the Eurasian continent—which is especially privileged due to its diversity of terrains and climate zones—was the historical seat of great powers (Vuving, 2020). Accordingly, geography benefits some areas or power structures while also acting as an equalizer and "unequalizer" (Vuving, 2020). Thus, potential routes to great power status include dominance of the Heartland, the Rimland, or the oceans (Meinig, 1956; Sloan, 1999).

In general, geopolitical theory examines how geography affects international politics, emphasizing how spatial elements influence state behavior and power relations. According to Dolman (2012), the explanatory power of geopolitics is derived from Earth-centered physical and spatial features. Although critical geopolitics has since been added to the field, classical geopolitics first appeared in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This section surveys key classical theories before turning to the critical approach that guides the analysis. The pioneers of classical geopolitics, which is frequently linked to deterministic views of geography determining destiny, connected geography to the distribution of power in the world. These included Alfred Thayer Mahan, Nicholas John Spykman, and Halford John Mackinder, who established the groundwork for what Wu (2018) refers to as Anglo-American geopolitics. Their contributions focused on the long-standing competition between sea and land power.

Alfred Thayer Mahan advanced the Sea Power Theory in *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* (1890), arguing that naval dominance, through control of sea lanes, trade routes, and bases, was essential for economic prosperity and military superiority. According to Mahan, the ability of states to control the seas as a means of influence and transportation was the deciding factor in world politics (Meinig, 1956). He distinguished three geographic elements that supported Britain's maritime dominance: location, resources, and defensive strength (insularity) (Sprout, 1954). Despite its geographical periphery, Britain's insular location was strategically crucial because it provided safe access to European coastlines. Mahan also maintained that no Eurasian state could rule both land and sea in tandem because maintaining continental borders would deplete the resources needed for naval superiority. His support for Anglo-American joint sea control by the early 1900s thus foreshadowed the collective maritime security strategies later embodied in NATO (Sprout, 1954; Meinig, 1956).

Halford Mackinder countered with his Heartland Theory, introduced in his 1904 paper *The Geographical Pivot of History*. He argued that control of the vast Eurasian inland, the "Heartland" (primarily Eastern Europe and Central Asia), would allow the domination of the "World Island" (Europe, Asia, and Africa) and thus the world (Fettweis, 2000). For Mackinder, power derived from manpower, resources, equipment, and organization, paralleling the economic categories of labor, land, capital, and management. He maintained that modern railways and communications would integrate Eurasia, Africa into a vast, secure, and resource-rich base of political power (Gray, 2004). In this view, insular states such as Britain or the United States could not indefinitely compete with a united Eurasia. Mackinder's famous dictum, "Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island commands the World" (Mackinder, 2004, p. 106), captured his deterministic logic that a consolidated land power could eclipse maritime supremacy (Bassin,

2006; Meinig, 1956; Gray, 2004). His theory influenced Cold War containment strategies and remains central in Eurasian geopolitics (Park, 2023).

Nicholas Spykman refined Mackinder's insights by proposing the Rimland Theory in *The Geography of the Peace* (1944). He argued that the coastal "rimland" fringes of Eurasia, from Europe to East Asia, were decisive for global balance. His dictum, "Who controls the Rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world," shaped U.S. Cold War containment policy (Meinig, 1956; Gray, 2004; Vuving, 2020). Additionally, Spykman highlighted that alliances were rarely based on a rigid land-sea division, pointing out that maritime powers frequently sided with Eurasian land states in opposition to competing maritime rivals. He described the conflict between Rimland and Heartland as being akin to the "thousand-year struggle between Teuton and Slav" (Meinig, 1956). The necessity of examining dynamic coalitions rather than static binaries was highlighted by this recognition of shifting alignments.

Together, the theories of Mahan, Mackinder, and Spykman constitute Anglo-American geopolitics (Wu, 2018), a tradition that systematized Eurasia into the Heartland, the Inner Crescent (or Rimland), and the Outer Crescent (or marginal seas) (Meinig, 1956). Land-sea rivalry was formalized by their frameworks into what Gray (2004) refers to as a "grand theory" of geopolitics. Strategic analysis is still shaped by the traditional focus on geography as fate and the structural limitations imposed by terrain, resources, and connectivity.

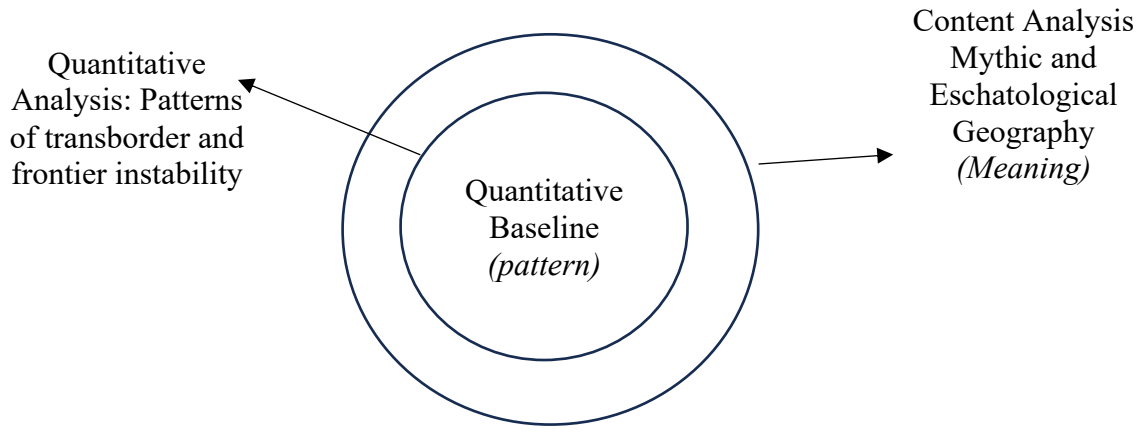
However, this classical determinism is challenged by critical geopolitics, which emerged in the late 20th century and emphasizes discourse, power dynamics, and the social construction of space (Ó Tuathail, 1996; Agnew, 2006; Hu & Lu, 2016). Critical geopolitics reveals how geographical imaginaries are created and disseminated to justify policy, as Müller (2008) shows through discourse analysis. While Agnew (2006) emphasizes the deconstruction of hegemonic spatial imaginaries, Su and Huntington (2021) emphasize the role of discourse in creating geopolitical meaning. Further elucidating how religion functions as a tool for fabricating mythic geographies and incorrect interpretations of territoriality is spiritual geopolitics (Agnew, 2006; Sturm, 2013). Building on these insights, this study applies critical geopolitics to investigate the *mythic and imaginary geography* that spurs political action, with particular attention to the *entanglement* of geographic and human factors. The notion of entanglement extends critical geopolitics by recognizing how material terrain and human imagination are inseparably linked in shaping political violence. For instance, Khorasan is imagined by the Islamic State Khorasan (ISK) as a mythic geography, which directly shapes conflict dynamics. The content analysis presented in the second layer of analysis of this paper demonstrates how such constructed geographies operate as powerful drivers of strategic behavior and political violence.

3. Methodology: Connected Complementary Mixed Design

This article is theory-driven and employ a mixed-method research design, structured around two complementary layers of analysis. The approach follows a "connected-complementary" logic of triangulation, whereby each method both substantiate the evidence, contextualize the others, and provide validity to the findings. The first layer is regression analysis, that provide statistical evidence and show patterns in conflict dynamic radiating from the middle land of the Hindu Kush beyond Westphalian state borders into South Asia. This quantitative dimension established

baseline patterns of transborder and frontier instability. The second layer consist of qualitative content analysis, which capture the mythic, ideological and eschatological imaginaries of the Khorasan imagined geography. This layer elucidates on the meaning for certain patterns that exist beyond just numerical data, situating them in the broader mythic and eschatological geographies articulated by groups such as ISK. Lastly, it provides historical analysis to situate the finding in the context, tracing long-term continuities and path dependence that both regression model and content analysis alone cannot capture (Figure 4)

Figure 4. *Conceptual Model: Three Layer Connected Complementary Analysis*



Taken together, this layered research design allows for mythological triangulation: the regression analysis outline *patterns*; the content analysis explicate *meanings.* The triangulation metaphor is borrowed "from the navigation and military strategy that use multiple reference points to locate the object's exact position (Jick 1979; Flick 2018, p.18). It is because multiple viewpoints facilitate a better accuracy. The use of mixed-method in social science in can be traced back to Campbell and Fiske (1975). Triangulation can provide various methodological perspective "objective facts, subjective attitudes, current and historical issues" (Flick 2018; 18). It is often defined as "the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon" (Jick 1979; Flick, 2018). Triangulation and mixed method approach is often used interchangeably and are called convergent methodology, multimethod or triangulation or "tripartite" methodology (Jick 1979; Laitin, 2002).

The application of mixed method approach is widely recognized and often encouraged in social science research. It facilitates the analysis of action, structure, agency and their meaning all in tandem (Brandom, 2008). Given that structure and agency are often intertwined, mixed methods are ideal for examining their interaction (Thaler, 2015). The use of mixed methods is particularly common in studies of conflicts. For example, Varshney (2002) used it to study communal violence in India, Scacco (2010) to study riots in Nigerian cities of Kaduna and Jos, and Wood 2003; Collier, Hoeffler and Sambanis, 2005; Kalyvas, 2006; Weinstein, 2007) to study civil wars. The latter used four cases mixed method to study rebel groups in Mozambique, Peru, and Uganda. It has also been applied in the study of interstate wars, such as Kapur's (2007) work on deterrence theory and its effects on the Indo-Pakistani conflict.

There is no "best" method for applying mixed methods; rather, the choice depends on the research question. Both within-method and between method triangulation are undertaken by researchers (Jick 1979; Flick, 2018; Thaler 2015). The data used in mixed method approach is integrated, complementary and supplementary (Thaler 2015). Connected complementary method which is employed here is when the findings of one method is related to the finding of the other method, which is the case for this study. The approach is encouraged because, depending on the research question, relying on a single method can lead to a myopic view of the subject (Thaler 2015).

3.1.Datasets and Analytical Techniques

The three-layers mixed method design employed in this paper make use of quantitative and qualitative data sources and analytical techniques (see table. 3). The baseline layer, regression analysis makes use of the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED, 2025) for the Asia Pacific region. ACLED's data on the Asia-Pacific region records a wide spectrum of political violence and conflict-related events in more than forty-five countries. The dataset is filtered to focus specifically on Afghanistan, yielding a sample of (*N=40,664*) events. This includes a wide range of conflict types such as protests, battles, riots, explosions or remote violence, violence against civilians, and strategic developments.

Table 3. *Summary of Datasets and Analytical Techniques*

Method	**Levels of Analysis**	**Number of Observation**	**Data Type**	**Timeframe**
Layer 1: OSL	District Level	*40,664*	ACLED (2025)	Jan 2017 – Aug 2025
Layer 2: Content Analysis	Meaning Units	73	Secondary Resources	2015 - 2025

For the first layer, and ordinary least squares (OSL) regression model is specified to assess the effect of frontier proximity (independent variable) on conflict (depended variable). Using ACLED's Asia Pacific detest, this paper estimates a province–year panel model of Afghanistan, applying OSL:

$$Battles_{i,t} = \alpha + \beta \,.Frontier\ Proximity_i + \epsilon_{i,t}$$

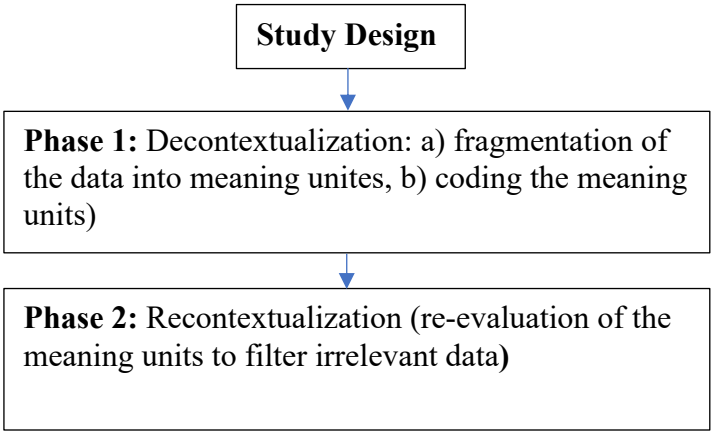
In this specification $Battles_{i,t}$ denotes the number of battle- related conflict events in province i during year t while $Frontier\ Proximity_i$ is an ordinal variable measuring a province's proximity to Pakistan, coded 0 = non-frontier, 1 = semi-frontier, 2= frontier provinces. For ease of interpretation, this measure is treated as continuous in the regression models, implying that the effect of moving from non-frontier to semi-frontier provinces is assumed equivalent in magnitude to the shift from semi-frontier to frontier provinces. Robustness checks with categorical coding yield substantively similar results. The parameter α represents the model intercept, and $\epsilon_{i,t}$ is the error term.

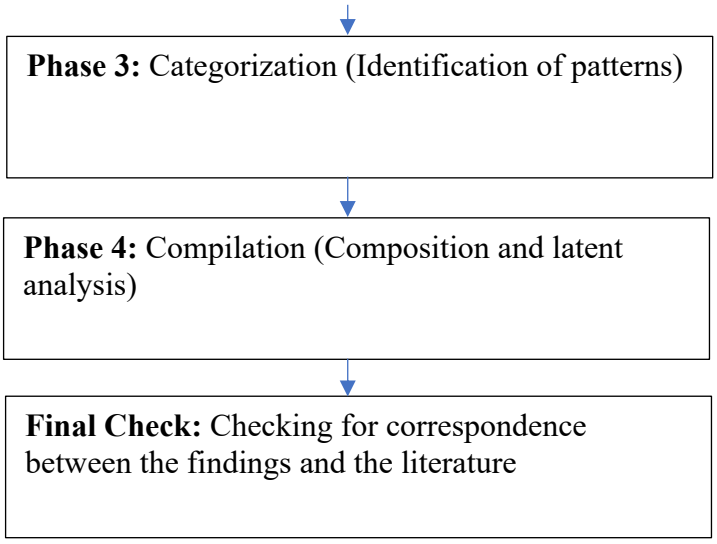
The second layer employs Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) to examine a set of secondary sources (Zarandi & Noorali, 2025; Giustozzi, 2018; CSIS, 2018; Musselwhite, 2016; Whiteside, 2016; Petit, 2015) that capture the eschatological geographical imagination of the Islamic State (ISIS) in its mythic Wilayat-e Khorasan (Islamic State Khorasan Province, IS-K). Given the ethical, safety and practical constraints of using primary sources, such as ISIS publications (Dabiq and Al-Naba), secondary academic sources are utilized alternatively. As QCA permits the analysis of various types of written texts (Bengtsson, 2016), secondary recognized academic sources provide a reliable alternative. This layer of analysis helps in triangulating evidence and capturing the discourses, ideologies, and narratives surrounding the security dynamics of the region.

Data collection, for the second layer, involved purposive sampling from relevant academic literature. Purposive sampling, a qualitative strategy, selects information-rich content relevant to the research question (Patton, 2002, p. 230). The unit of analysis in this study consists of textual passages (sentences or paragraphs) within secondary sources that address ISIS's eschatological and geopolitical construction of the Khorasan. This methodology conforms to recognized qualitative techniques, wherein the unit of analysis may consist of textual segments, phrases, or paragraphs instead of a full document (Zhang & Wildermuth, 2009). All pertinent excerpts from the chosen corpus are incorporated, yielding a sample of *N=72* coded units, which were examined until theme saturation was attained.

The study applies a four-stage framework for QCA, decontextualization, recontextualization, classification, and compilation, as outlined by Bengtsson (2016). At the decontextualization phase, the data, consisting of secondary academic sources, is fragmented into smaller "meaning units", which include sentences and paragraphs pertinent to the research question (Bengtsson, 2016). Next, comes the coding phase where each identified meaning unit is assigned a code using a "open coding process" (Berge, 2001), enabling the identification of patterns. In the recontextualization process, meaning units are re-evaluated, and irrelevant content, or "dross," is eliminated (Bengtsson, 2016). During the categorization phase, themes and categories are identified (see table 4). This is followed by the compilation phase, wherein the analysis is written, relevant quotations are chosen, and a "latent analysis" is carried out to unravel the text's underlying meaning (Bengtsson, 2016). The last phase examines the link between the findings and the existing literature on the geopolitics of mythic space.

Table 4. Content Analysis *Study Design*





The data obtained is fragmented into smaller "meaning units", which include sentences and paragraphs pertinent to the research question (as in Bengtsson, 2016). Then the meaning united are assigned a code using a "open coding process" (as in Berge, 2001) (N=72).

4. Analysis

This section provides the statistical results first to establish the patterns followed by content analysis to elaborate the meaning and historical analysis to situate the finding in the context.

4.1.Regression Assumption Checks

Regression assumptions were assessed prior to interpreting the model results. The collinearity diagnostics indicated no evidence of multicollinearity, with tolerance = 1.00, VIF = 1.00, and a maximum condition index of 2.28. The histogram of standardized residuals revealed a sharp peak at zero and a positively skewed distribution, while the P–P plot showed systematic deviation from the line of normality. These results suggest non-normal residuals, which are consistent with the count-based nature of the dependent variable (conflict events). Although this technically violates the normality assumption of OLS, the very large sample size (N = 40,664) mitigates these concerns, as OLS is robust to modest violations of normality under the central limit theorem. Nonetheless, the skewed distribution highlights the potential value of alternative models, such as Poisson or negative binomial regression, which may provide a better fit for count data (see table 5).

Table 5. *Regression Assumption Checks*

Assumption	Test/Indicator	Result	Interpretation
Normality	Histogram & P–P Plot of residuals	Skewed, deviations from normal line	Non-normal residuals (expected

			with count data); acceptable given N=40,664
Collinearity	Tolerance = 1.00, VIF = 1.00, CI max = 2.28	No issue	No multicollinearity
Independence	Durbin–Watson = 1.57	Acceptable	No major autocorrelation
Linearity	Visual inspection of residuals vs. predicted values	Approximate	Relationship broadly linear

4.1.1 Results: The Frist Layer (Regression)

The model was statistically significant, $F(1, 40{,}662) = 444.98$, $p < .001$, though its explanatory power was limited ($R^2 = .011$). The regression coefficient for proximity was positive and significant $(B = .440, SE = .021, \beta = .104, t = 21.10, p < .001)$, with a 95% confidence interval of [.400, .481]. This indicates that each step closer to the Pakistani frontier was associated with an increase of approximately 0.44 conflict events. While the effect size is modest, the finding supports the hypothesis that provinces nearer to Pakistan experience higher levels of conflict activity (table 6).

Table 6. *OLS Regression Results Predicting Conflict Events by Geographical Proximity to Pakistan*

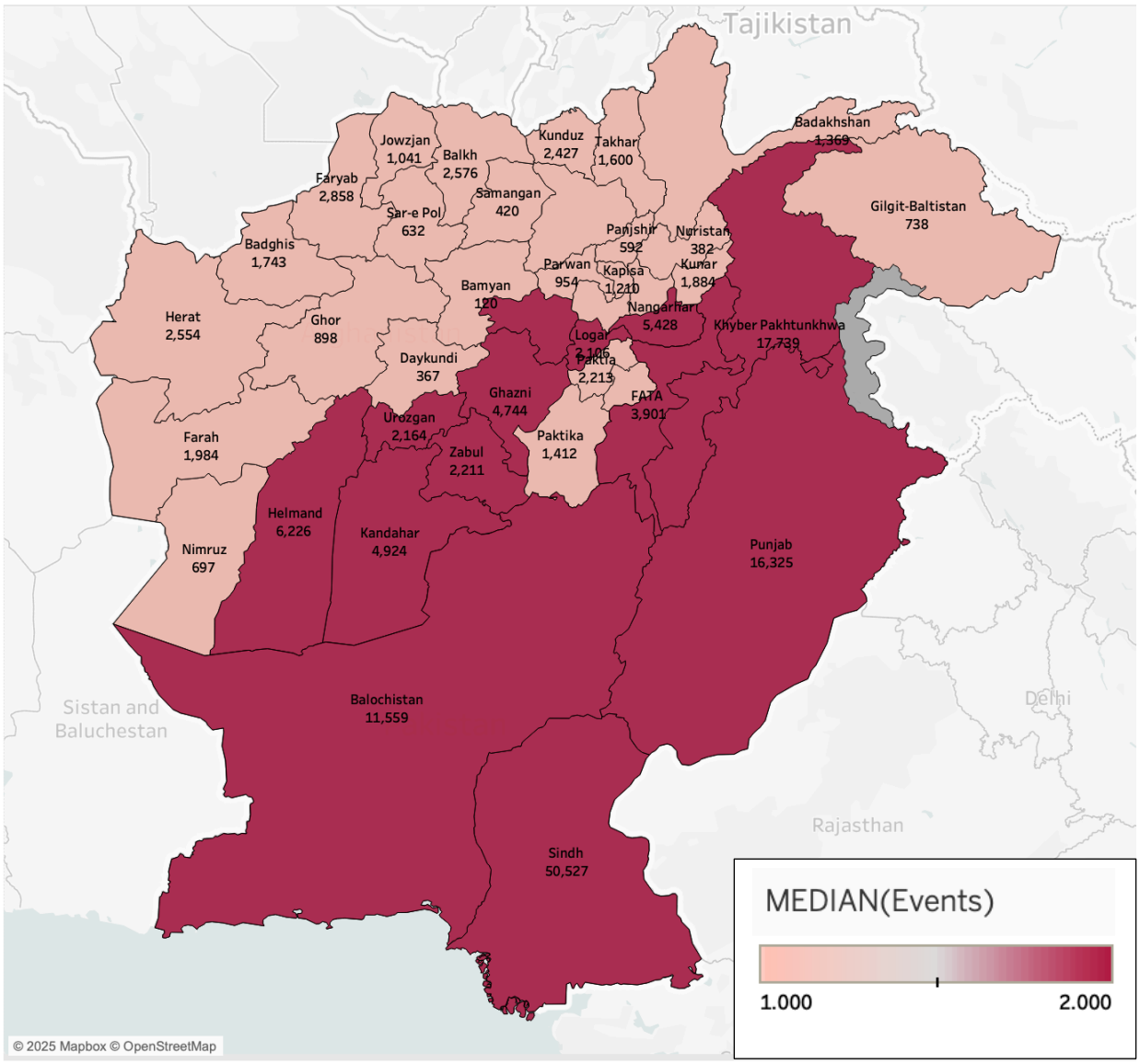
Predictor	*B*	*SE B*	*β*	*t*	*p*	*95% CI for B*
Constant	1.147	.026	–	44.634	$< .001$	[1.096,1.197]
Geo - Proximity to Pakistan	.440	.021	.104	21.095	$< .001$	[0.400,0.481]

$R^2_{Model} = 0.011 (adj.\, R^2 = 0.011, F(1{,}40662) = 444.98, P < .001, N = 40{,}664$

4.1.2. Discussion: Trust Networks and the Incongruence of National Borders with Ethnic Boundaries in Afghanistan & Pakistan

The results of this study demonstrate a statistically significant association between proximity to Pakistan and the frequency of conflict events in Afghanistan. Provinces located adjacent to or directly bordering Pakistan experienced higher levels of conflict activity compared to those situated farther inland. Each incremental step closer to the frontier was associated with an increase of nearly half a conflict event, underscoring the geographic dimension of Afghanistan's conflict dynamics (see figure 4)While the effect size is modest, the consistent positive relationship provides empirical support for the hypothesis that border proximity plays a role in shaping patterns of violence.

Figure 5. *Median of Conflict Events by Province: Afghanistan and Pakistan (2009 – 2025)*



Based on ACLED (2025)

The findings are consistent with existing literature emphasizing the salience of borderlands in conflict studies. The Afghan–Pakistan frontier has long functioned as a porous and contested zone, facilitating the cross-border movement of insurgent groups, arms, and illicit trade. Weak state capacity in frontier provinces further compounds their vulnerability, enabling external actors and non-state groups to exploit these spaces. The statistical association observed here reflects this broader geopolitical reality: frontier provinces are not merely geographic peripheries but active conflict corridors that shape the trajectory of the Afghan war.

At the same time, the analysis reveals the limitations of geography as a sole explanatory factor. The regression model accounts for only about 1.1% of the variance in conflict events, suggesting that proximity alone does not sufficiently explain the complex drivers of violence. Other

factors—such as local governance capacity, ethnic and tribal cleavages, socio-economic marginalization, and the legacies of foreign intervention—likely exert stronger influences on the distribution of conflict. This finding aligns with peace and conflict studies research that emphasizes the multidimensionality of conflict, where spatial factors interact with political, social, and institutional conditions to generate varying levels of violence.

The Durand Line is the formal national boundary between Afghanistan and Pakistan; however, the ethnic and national boundaries are not congruent, producing significant security and geopolitical ramifications. Pashtuns have maintained their parastate trust networks across this frontier (Young Greven, 2014), which exacerbates the situation. The 1893 Durand Line artificially divided the Pashtuns between Afghanistan and British India (later Pakistan), and Afghanistan has never formally recognized this boundary (Barfield, 2012, p. 48). The Pashtu proverb "*Lar o Bar Yaw Afghan De*"("Across both sides, we are one Afghan") captures their enduring transborder solidarity. Scholars note that Pashtuns on both sides have resisted fencing along the line; former Afghan President Hamid Karzai once declared that he did not accept the demarcation because "it has raised a wall between the two brothers" (Hilali, 2013).

In Pakistan, the tribal Pashtun-inhabited region known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) exemplifies this problem. Both the colonial British state and later Pakistan conceived of the tribal frontier as a naturally autonomous region because such an arrangement best served their geostrategic interests. This external framing led to the freezing of political development in tribal communities, reducing the state–tribe relationship to a matter of strategic utility (Raza & Shapiro, 2019). Covering approximately 27,200 square kilometers with a population of 4.5–5 million, FATA remained governed under the Frontier Crimes Regulations (FCR) since 1890—a colonial legacy that survived long after independence. Comprising seven agencies (Khyber, Khurram, Bajaur, North and South Waziristan, Mohmand, and Orakzai), the region was administered directly by the federal government rather than provincial systems (Gul, 2008). During the War on Terror, FATA became highly volatile, described by former U.S. intelligence chief John Negroponte as a "source and center of terrorism" (Gul, 2008), highlighting how local autonomy became intertwined with global security concerns.

In Afghanistan, Pashtun transborder trust networks, unbound by the national boundary, created enduring obstacles for the formal state, which has struggled either to integrate or dissolve them. These networks enjoy a dual geography, conferring a security advantage that undermines state sovereignty (Young Greven, 2014). For example, the Afghan Taliban's Quetta Shura was based in the Pakistani city of Quetta (Dressler & Forsberg, 2009), while the Haqqani network operated from North Waziristan (Hilali, 2013). Such cross-border sanctuaries allowed insurgents to outmaneuver Afghan state institutions, which are confined to national borders. Recognizing this challenge, the U.S. Department of Defense launched the "AfPak Hands Program" in 2009 to train personnel in regional languages, culture, and political dynamics (Team GlobDef, 2012).

Afghanistan's ethnic composition further complicates this problem, as nearly every ethnic group has co-ethnics across its borders—with Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and others. Yet while Soviet-era social engineering severed many northern cross-border ties, southern Pashtun networks persisted, sustaining insurgency (Barfield, 2010: 30). This structural asymmetry explains why integration or dissolution of trust networks has been far more difficult in the south.

Historically, Pashtuns on one side have also intervened in the politics of the other. For instance, Nader Khan raised his army in North and South Waziristan to march on Kabul in 1929, toppling Amir Habibullah Kalkani, the "bandit" king and first non-Pashtun ruler, who briefly held power after the ouster of Amir Amanullah Khan (Rais, 2017).

On both sides of the border, governance has historically relied less on formal state institutions than on entrenched customs and traditions: *Pashtunwali*, *melmastia* (hospitality), *riwaj* (tradition), and *badal* (revenge). These codes underpin durable trust networks in which "a brother must stand by another in times of need," often superseding state authority (Gul, 2008). Such ties are reinforced by *Pashtunwali* (Barfield, 2010, p. 185; Young Greven, 2014) and institutions such as the Loya Jirga, a council of elders historically deemed indispensable by the British for maintaining order (Beattie, 2011, p. 576; Yousafzai et al., 2012; Akhtar, 2016). Three historical factors explain the persistence of these networks: first, the Durand Line cut through cultural areas, dividing families and tribes across states; second, colonial and Pakistani authorities deliberately maintained porous borders, facilitating mobility and solidarity; third, *Pashtunwali* and *rewaj* preserved internal coherence, though not in the form of a proto-state (Rais, 2017).

Consequently, state-building in southern Afghanistan repeatedly faced armed pushback, as informal networks competed with central authority. Charles Tilly (2004: 22) argued that democratization in Europe depended on the integration or dissolution of trust networks, yet in Afghanistan these networks resisted incorporation, sustaining insurgency and violence. Today, opposition to Pakistan's fencing of the Durand Line reflects this enduring cultural rejection of imposed boundaries—Karzai's declaration that it had "raised a wall between the two brothers" exemplifies the sentiment (Hilali, 2013). Likewise, calls for "Pakhtunistan", envisioning the unity of Pashtuns on both sides, underscore the continuing incongruence of national boundaries with cultural ones (Qureshi, 1996).

4.2. The Second Layer: Results of Thematic Analysis

The qualitative content analysis of the secondary sources reveals that IS-K imaginary of the Khorasan is highly entrenched in eschatological and mythical geopolitical narratives. The coding of the meaning units yielded seven themes T1–T7 (shown in table 7) which together elucidate how ISIS frames Khorasan as both a scared geography and a theater of apocalyptic struggle for their prophetic cosmic final battle. The results are presented thematically below:

Table 7. *Coding Table*

Theme Code	Theme Name	Description	Key words/Concepts	# of meaning units
T1	Illegitimacy of Westphalian borders	Delegitimating Sykes–Picot; borderless Caliphate	Caliphate, borderless, The end of Sykes-picot	9

T2	Eschatological Prophetic Sites	Specific locales framed as eschatological battlegrounds or holy centers.	*Dabiq*, Khorasan or Khorasan, Aleppo, Black banner, promised frontier, final battle, *Dajjal*	20
T3	Binary mythic world map (extinction of the gray zones)	Spatial division of the world: *Dar al-Islam* (lands of Islam) vs. *Dar al-Kufr* (lands of disbelief)	*Dar al-Islam*, *Dar al-kufr* Apostates, Gray Zone, *Dar al-sulh*	10
T4	Hijrah and jihad as spatial sorting practices	Deterritorialization through Hijrah, followed by reterritorialization	Hijra (migration), bay'ah (pledge of allegiance), Jihad, Territoriality	10
T5	Time Horizon	Eschatological imminence; urgency to anchor in Khorasan for final confrontation	Imminent *Malḥama*, final battle, apocalyptic urgency, end of times, prophecy of Khorasan	7
T6	Theological legitimation	Invocation of Koran and Hadith to legitimize spatial practices	Koran, Hadith, divine mandate, religious duty, Islamic state, ISIS territorial legitimacy	10
T7	Connection between people and land	Interrelation of belief, geography, and Muslim identity; the sacralization of space	People, land, ummah, Islamic duty, territoriality, faith and land, sacred land, Islamic territory	6

$$\boldsymbol{N = \sum_{T=1}^{7} T. = 72}$$ **meaning units**

T1. Illegitimacy of Westphalian borders

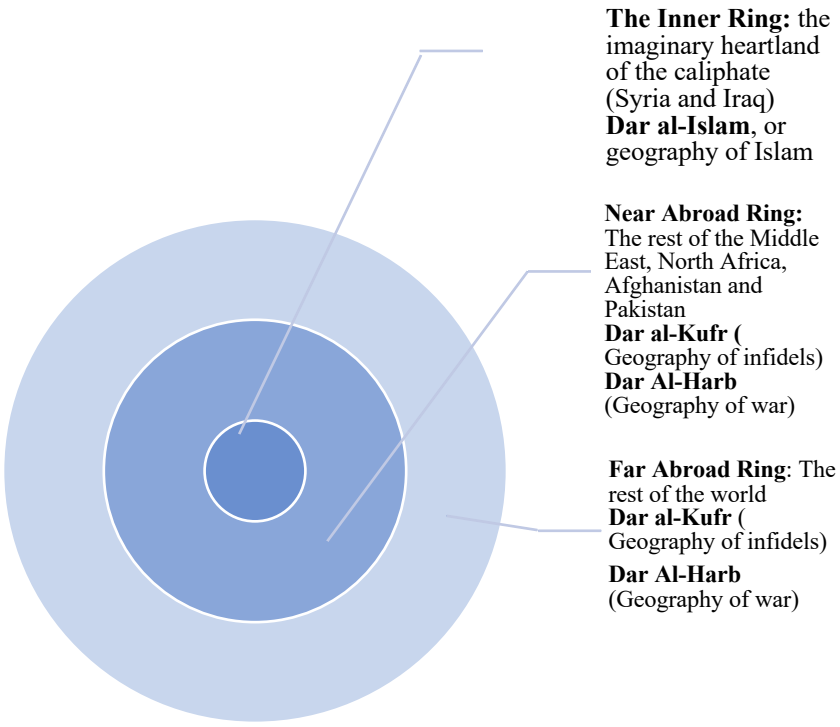
Across the sources, ISIS, consistently invoke religion to construct a mythic geography that challenges the order of Westphalian sovereign states and its cartographic borders. Instead, the group promotes an extraterritorial imagination of *Ummah*, rooted not in Westphalian sovereignly but in a divide one. Zarandi and Noorali (2025) note: "ISIS implemented "dissident religious geopolitics" that, with theological arguments, sought territoriality with religious justifications against the order of Westphalian states to provide territorial arrangements for global apocalyptic conditions." ISK also disdains international borders and imagine its territory transcending

national states like Afghanistan and Pakistan (Gambhir 2015, 9; CSIS, 2018, p.3; Giustozzi 2018, p.12). ISIS media constantly refer to the illegitimacy of Sykes – Picot order of the Middle East and invoke the imagination of *Ummah*. Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi's 2014 sermon illustrates this logic:

> "Its shade covers land from Aleppo to Diyala…their flags have fallen, and their borders have been destroyed…. Now the caliphate has returned" (Musselwhite 2016, p. 115).

At the strategic and geopolitical level, ISIS imagine a world order that blends eschatological ambition with expansionist geopolitics to frame its global mission. According to Zarandi & Noorali (2025) ISIS plans to "remain and expand" throughout three concentric circles in order to achieve its global geopolitical goal. Iraq and Syria made up the "inner circle," which is intended to represent the caliphate's territorial and symbolic heartland. The regional circle or "Near Abroad" encompasses the broader Middle East and North Africa while extending eastward into Afghanistan and Pakistan, the historic lands of earlier caliphates. The "Far Abroad" includes the rest of the world, particularly Europe, the United States, and Asia (Figure 6).

Figure 6: *The Three Circles of ISIS Cosmic Eschatological Geography*



In this imaginary world order, borders are delegitimized and replaced by the black flag as the marker of divine sovereignty. This theme demonstrate how the Khorasan region is also folded in the geographical project of a borderless caliphate.

T2. Eschatological Prophetic Sites

The key finding most relevant to the current study is how ISIS situates the *Khorasan* as a prophetic geography, central to its geographical imaginary. ISIS declared the establishment of its *wilayat* in the territory historically known as Khorasan, a region encompassing eastern Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, parts of India and Russia, the entirety of Central Asia, and even extending into the Caucasus (Giustozzi 2018, 2; Zarandi & Noorali, 2025). These are civilizational zones historically connected through the strategic and cultural corridor of the Hindu Kush. The group draws on classical *hadith* traditions that forecast the emergence of the Mahdi's[2] black banners from Khorasan, urging believers to join the prophesied army:

> "If you see the black banners coming from *Khorasan*, go to them immediately even if you must crawl over ice because indeed among them is the caliph, al-Mahdi" (Musselwhite 2016, 124).

Khorasan is not the only place that is mentioned as a holy site on ISIS' eschatological map; *Dabiq* and Jerusalem are also mentioned. *Khorasan* though is described as the "promised frontier" of the final battles. These references place the Hindu Kush corridor in a sacred historical context, connecting it to the cosmic fight against nonbelievers. Musselwhite posits that the resurgence of the global Jihad following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was closely associated with an eschatological prophesy from the province of *Khorsan*, where the black banners of Mahdi, regarded as the Muslim savior, will presumably manifest (2016, p. 82). The CSIS (2018) report confirms that IS-K sees Afghanistan and Pakistan as the bases of a caliphate that will grow globally. So, *Khorasan* is more than just a land; it is the foretold starting point of global redemption.

T3. Binary Mythic World Map

The material highlights ISIS's invocation of a binary spatial logic, dividing the world into *Dar al-Islam* (Geography of Islam) and *Dar al-Kufr/Dar al-Harb* (Geography of disbelief/war). There is no grey zone or space for neutrality in ISIS' mythic space. Although other Islamic interpretation permit the concept of *Dar al-sulh* (Geography of reconciliation), ISIS categorically reject it (Zarandi & Noorali, 2025; Strnad and Hynek 2020). This eliminates all possible areas of coexistence (Kadercan 2019; Strnad and Hynek 2020). In this rigid geographical dualism, even the Shi'ite branch of Islam is cast as the "other," with Shi'ites derogatorily labeled as *Rāfiḍah*, rejectors of the true faith (Wood 2015). As Musselwhite notes, ISIS associate the Shi'ites and jews with *Dajjal* (antichrist) who is said to exploit them to harm Islam (2016, 180).

In this framework, *Khorasan* is designated as sacred space, strongly situated within *Dar al-Islam*, while its adversaries are confined to the domain of disbelieve. This binary world map positions the Hindu Kush as a theological and geopolitical boundary where cosmic conflict manifests.

T4. *Hijrah* and *Jihad* as Spatial Sorting Practices

ISIS employs Hijrah (migration) and Jihad (armed struggle) as spatial mechanism of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. Believers are encouraged to leave their homelands

[2] Mahdi is a prophesied messianic figure who is said to appear at the end of times to redeem the world

and migrate into the Islamic State lands, especially *Khorasan*, which is depicted as a sanctified terrain. A 2015 ISK media statement declared:

> "There is no doubt that Allah the Almighty blessed us with jihad in the land of *Khorasan*… Know that the Islamic Caliphate is not limited to a particular country." (CSIS 2018, p. 3)

In addition to urging its followers for *Hijrah*, ISIS has also put practices of deterritorialization into motion. Following an assault on peaceful Shi'it protesters in Afghanistan, which resulted in 85 fatalities and 400 injuries, ISK issued a statement labeling the protesters as apostates and expressing their goal "to purify the land of *Khorasan* and all other lands of the Muslims." From them (UNAMA 2016; Mohammad Jawad, 2020).

This indicates a dual process: Muslims are reterritorialized from their existing states and reterritorialized into the Caliphate. Khorasan serves as a magnet for jihad, attracting global recruits into the eschatological geography of *Khorasan*.

T5. Time Horizon

The analysis reveals the importance of eschatological proximity in ISIS's geo-imaginary. The urgency of jihad in Khorasan is anchored by the prophecy of the Malḥama al-Kubra, or The Great Final Battle. Zarandi and Hassan Noorali (2025) emphasize that Khorasan is positioned as the theater where apocalyptic prophecies are initiated due to the closeness of the final hours. This urgency gives ISIS's expansionist objectives temporal legitimacy by portraying territory control as an urgent prelude to the final conflict rather than as a long-term strategy.

T6. Theological Legitimation

The justification for ISIS's project in *Khorasan* is imbedded in hadith-based prophecies, which lend religious legitimacy to its geographical objectives. Castan Pinos (2020, p. 7) elucidates how ISIS employed "the interpretation of Islamic expansionist mandates" to dismantle Westphalian principles and reshape the Middle East. The caliph's declaration of the dissolution of the Iraq–Syria border was presented as the execution of a divine obligation. Within this context, the sacralization of Khorasan is derived from scriptural authority, positioning its conquest within a divine narrative.

T7. Connection Between People and Land

Finally, ISIS forges a close connection between the people, the *Ummah*, and holy places.In addition to being portrayed as a site of prophecy, Khorasan is also historically associated with the fate of the Muslim community. Zarandi and Hassan Noorali (2025) contend that ISIS portrayed the region as "historically connected to *Ummah's* destiny," blurring the distinctions between individuals and territory. This sacralization strengthens the assertion that occupying and safeguarding Khorasan is both a religious obligation and an existential imperative.

Together, the aforementioned coded themes show how Khorasan serves as the foundation for ISIS's eschatological geography. Illegitimacy of modern borders (T1) and the invocation of prophetic sites (T2) establish the region as a sacred frontier. This is fortified by the binary mapping of space (T3), the call to *Hijrah* and *Jihad* (T4), and the urgency of the eschatological horizon (T5). The theological grounding (T6) and the fusion of people and land (T7) further entrench the Khorasan region as indispensable to ISIS's global project. Overall, the results demonstrate that ISIS's construction of Khorasan as a scare site is inextricably linked to its attempt to reorganize political space through a mythic geopolitical framework that combines theology, prophecy, and territorial ambition.

4.2.1. Discussion: Situating the Findings Within the Literature on Mythic Geopolitics

The findings of the content analysis of the secondary sources on ISIS eschatological construction of Khorasan corresponds closely to the literature on the most known mythic geopolitics (Table 8). The coded themes (T1-T7) align closely with Carl Schmitt's theorization of mythic space and the Nazi *Großraum* project.

Just like Nazi mythic geopolitical project, ISK imagine a mythic geography that blends ideology, territory and the people. Challenging the Westphalian borders (T1) is a direct parallel to Schmitt's theoretical replacement of sovereignty with *Großraum* (greater space). The Nazi project was spatial in nature, seeking to create a new world order under the logic of National Socialism (Schlôgel 2003, 27–34). Carl Schmitt and other Nazi spatial legal theorists had a big impact on how this project developed (Minca & Rowan 2014; Barnes & Minca 2012). Schmitt's geographical thought centered on the concept of *Großraum* ("greater space"), commonly translated as a sphere of influence (Elden 2012). The Nazis operationalized their geographical project into a full-fledged program of territorial expansion. Within this framework, the Nazis argued that an estimated 30 million *Volkdeutsche*, people of German ancestry living outside Germany, necessitated the enlargement of Germany's borders (Berger 1994; Barnes & Minca 2012). For Schmitt, the new international legal order based on *Großraum* had to replace sovereignty with the *nomos*: a hierarchical spatial order of *Reichs* or empires, organized by culture, territory, and ideology (Miiller 2003, 43). Moreover, the literature demonstate how Schmitt saw history as a cosmic struggle between order and chaos (Minca & Rowan 2014). ISIS mirrors this dualism through its eschatological battle between *Dar al-Islam* (geography of Islam) and *Dar al-Kufr* (geography of apostates) (T3).

The findings also confirm the literature's observation that ISIS sacralizes specific geographies to construct its eschatological project. *Khorasan* emerges as a prophesied frontier from which the black banners of the Mahdi are expected to advance (T2, T5). This corresponds to O'Shea's (2016) observation that ISIS explicitly invoked the hadith of *Abu Hurayrah* to legitimize Khorasan as a divine battlefield. Just as the Nazis linked their project to historical continuity across the First, Second, and Third Reich (Barnes & Minca 2012; Minca & Rowan 2014), ISIS situates the Khorasan within an eschatological continuum, culminating in Jerusalem and the liberation of Muslim lands. The connection between people and land (T7) further echoes the Nazi slogan *Blut und Boden* "blood and soil" logic (Darré 1930), though reframed in religious rather than racial terms.

An important dimension of ISIS's eschatological geography of *Khorasan* lies in the mechanisms of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. In alignment with this, they call the for *Hijrah and Jihad* as spatial practices. Just as the Nazi project sought to create "empty space" through the forced removal of Jews and Slavs and then repopulate it with *Volkdeutsche* "authentic Germans" under the *Großraum* framework (Berger 1994, 572; Barnes & Minca 2012), ISIS advanced a theological goal for calling Muslims to migrate from *Dar Al-Kufr* to *Dar al-Islam.* In the case of Khorasan, this explicitly entailed a call for jihad[3] and the sectarian targeting of Shiʿa communities, who were framed as agents of corruption and deviation within the heartland of Islam. The group's theological demand that unbelievers be barred from sacred areas or have their claims rejected (Macdonald et al. 2018) is an example of deterritorialization. *Jihad* becomes a primary tool for disrupting established territorial orders and making room for a new religious geography (Dijkink 2006).

Table 8. *Correspondence of the Findings with the Literature on Most know Mythic Space Geopolitics*

Correspondence Axis	**Schmitt Mythic Space**	**ISK Eschatological Geography (Khorasan)**
Ontology of Space	Mythic-Historical, *Großraum* based on blood and territory	Scared frontier linked to prophecy (Black banner, *Khorasan* as a prophesized site
Border	Sovereign equality of states to be replaced by hierarchical *nomos.*	Illegitimacy of Westphalian borders, establishment of Caliphate
Spatial project	Replacement of "nonauthentic Germans" with "authentic" ones	Hijrah out of *Dar Al-Kufr* and settlement in *Dar Al-Islam*
Time Horizon	The third Reich as a historical continuity	Eschatological imminence

The findings can also be interpreted through the lens of eschatological geography, particularly in relation to ISIS's conceptualization of Wilayat Khorasan. Unlike the Taliban, whose insurgency is grounded in ethno-nationalist and tribal structures, ISIS has framed the Afghan–Pakistan frontier as a sacralized battleground, part of the prophetic geography of Khorasan where end-times conflicts are destined to unfold. This ideological construction amplifies the symbolic significance of the frontier, transforming it from a logistical corridor for insurgents into an eschatological arena of global jihad. The presence of ISIS in eastern Afghanistan and along the

[3] The call for Jihad in Afghanistan (Khorasan) resonated among the Jihadists across the Islamic world following Russian invasion, primarily because Khorasan is regarded a prophetic site where the banner of al Mahdi will manifest.

Pakistani border thus reflects not only strategic calculations but also an attempt to anchor contemporary violence in sacred geography.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that the Afghan–Pakistan frontier functions simultaneously as a sociological space of para-state trust networks and as a theological space of apocalyptic jihadist imagination. This dual character intensifies the persistence of violence: proximity to Pakistan exposes Afghan provinces both to the material mechanisms of cross-border insurgency and to the ideological currents of global jihadism.

In sum, this study underscores the importance of geography in understanding Afghanistan's conflict, while also reaffirming that spatial proximity to Pakistan represents only one dimension of a much larger and more complex picture. By integrating spatial, political, and socio-economic variables, future research can build on these findings to develop a more comprehensive account of the determinants of conflict in Afghanistan and other borderland regions.

Conclusion

This article has advanced a critical geopolitical re-reading of the Afghan–Pakistan frontier as a layered and entangled space within the Asia-Pacific security ecology. Moving beyond maritime-centric and state-focused understandings of Asia-Pacific security, the analysis demonstrates that landward borderlands—particularly those marked by porous boundaries, transnational trust networks, and contested sovereignties—play a decisive role in shaping regional conflict dynamics.

Empirically, the quantitative analysis establishes that proximity to the Afghan–Pakistan frontier is a statistically significant predictor of conflict frequency across Afghan provinces. While geography alone explains only a modest share of variance, the consistent association underscores the frontier's function as a structural conflict corridor. This pattern reflects the enduring incongruence between national borders and ethnic geographies, especially among Pashtun communities whose trust networks, mobility practices, and historical autonomy undermine state-centric territorial control. The Durand Line thus operates less as a fixed boundary than as a permeable interface through which violence, insurgent capacity, and political instability circulate.

Complementing these findings, the qualitative analysis reveals how IS-KP weaponizes geography through an eschatological spatial imaginary centered on Khorasan. By sacralizing territory, invoking prophetic narratives, and rejecting Westphalian borders as illegitimate, IS-KP transforms physical terrain into mythic space. Hijrah and jihad function as spatial sorting practices that deterritorialize followers from existing political orders and reterritorialize them within a divinely ordained geography of conflict. This mythic geopolitics collapses distinctions between the material and the sacred, mobilizing violence by reframing borderlands as arenas of cosmic struggle rather than zones of political negotiation.

Taken together, the findings advance a broader theoretical contribution to critical geopolitics by demonstrating how material and ideational geographies are inseparably entangled in the production of political violence. The Afghan–Pakistan frontier emerges not merely as a site of

insurgency or state failure, but as a historically sedimented geopolitical formation where colonial boundary-making, contemporary security practices, and eschatological imaginaries intersect.

For Asia-Pacific security scholarship, this study carries important implications. It suggests that prevailing frameworks—largely oriented toward maritime competition and interstate deterrence—remain incomplete without sustained attention to landward frontiers and the non-state actors who contest sovereignty through both violence and meaning-making. Recognizing the Afghan–Pakistan border as an integral component of the Asia-Pacific security ecology reframes Afghanistan from a peripheral case to a structurally embedded node within regional conflict dynamics.

Ultimately, the article argues that understanding the Asia-Pacific requires moving beyond ships and sea lanes to engage seriously with borderlands, belief systems, and the mythic geographies that animate violence across landward interfaces.

Reference

Agnew, J. (2006). Religion and geopolitics. *Geopolitics, 11*(2), 183–191. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650040600598619

Akhtar, Z. (2016). Pushton Tribes, Frontier Regulations, and Conflict Resolution*, Peace Review*, 28:2, 230-237, DOI:10.1080/10402659.2016.1166791

Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). (2025). *Aggregated Data on Asia-Pacific (up to 16 August 2025)* [Dataset]. ACLED. https://acleddata.com/aggregated/aggregated-data-asia-pacific

Barfield, T. J. (2010). *Afghanistan: A cultural and political history*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.

Barnes, T. J., & Minca, C. (2012). Nazi spatial theory: The dark geographies of Carl Schmitt and Walter Christaller. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers, 103*(3), 669–687. https://doi.org/10.1080/00045608.2011.653732

Barzegarzadeh Zarandi, M., & Noorali, H. (2025). Imaginary geographies of religious terrorism: ISIS's popular culture. *Critical Studies on Terrorism, 18*(2), 577–601. https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2025.2484061

Bassin, M., & Aksenov, K. E. (2006). Mackinder and the Heartland Theory in Post-Soviet Geopolitical Discourse. *Geopolitics*, 11(1), 99–118. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650040500524129

Beattie, H. (2011). Negotiations with the Tribes of Waziristan 1849–1914—The British Experience, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 39:4, 571-587, DOI: 10.1080/03086534.2011.615597

Bengtsson, M. (2016). How to plan and perform a qualitative study using content analysis. *NursingPlus Open, 2*, 8–14.

Berg, B. L. (2001). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences*. Allyn and Bacon.

Berger, D. L. (1994). The Nazi concept of "Volksdeutsche" and the exacerbation of anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe. *Journal of Contemporary History, 29*, 569–582.

Brandom, R. B. (2008). *Between saying & doing: Towards an analytic pragmatism*. Oxford University Press.

Campbell, D. T., & Fiske, D. W. (1959). Convergent and discriminant validation by the multitrait–multimethod matrix. *Psychological Bulletin, 56*(2), 81–105. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0046016

Castan Pinos, J. (2020). The Islamic State as the Epitome of the Terrorist Parastate. *Nationalities Papers*, 48(1), 116–129. doi:10.1017/nps.2019.63

Collier, P., Hoeffler, A., & Sambanis, N. (2005). The Collier–Hoeffler model of civil war onset and the case study project research design. In P. Collier & N. Sambanis (Eds.), *Understanding civil war: Evidence and analysis: Volume 1. Africa*(pp. 1–33). World Bank.

Center for Strategic and International Studies, CSIS. (2018). Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K). *Center for Strategic and International Studies*. Retrieved from https://www.csis.org/programs/former-programs/warfare-irregular-threats-and-terrorism-program-archives/terrorism-backgrounders/islamic

Darré, R. (1930). *Neuadel aus Blut und Boden* [New nobility from blood and soil]. J. S. Lehmanns Verlag.

Dijkink, G. (2006). When Geopolitics and Religion Fuse: A Historical Perspective. Geopolitics, 11(2), 192–208. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650040600598403

Dolman, E. C. (2012). New frontiers, old realities. *Strategic Studies Quarterly, 6*(1), 78–96. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26270791

Dressler, J., & Forsberg, C. (2009). *The Quetta Shura Taliban in southern Afghanistan: Organization, operations, and shadow governance*. Institute for the Study of War. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep07874

Elden, S. (2012). Reading Schmitt geopolitically: Nomos, territory and Großraum. In S. Legg (Ed.), *Spatiality, sovereignty and Carl Schmitt* (pp. 91–105). Routledge.

Fettweis, C. J. (2000). Sir Halford Mackinder, geopolitics, and policymaking in the 21st century. *Parameters, 30*(2), 62–74. https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.1974

Flick, U. (2018). *Doing triangulation and mixed methods*. SAGE. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529716634

Gambhir, H. (2015). ISIS's global strategy: A wargame (Middle East Security Report No. 28). Institute for the Study of War.

Giustozzi, A. (2018). *The Islamic State in Khorasan*. London: C. Hurst & Co. (Publishers) Ltd. ISBN 9781849049641.

Gray, C. (2004). In defence of the Heartland: Sir Halford Mackinder and his critics a hundred years on. *Comparative Strategy, 23*(1), 9–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/01495930490274454

Gul, I. (2008). Afghanistan imbroglio: Implications for Pakistan's tribal areas. *Policy Perspectives, 5*(2), 67–85. http://www.jstor.org/stable/42909534

Hilali, A. Z. (2013). Contemporary geopolitics of FATA: An analysis of the Afghanistan–Pakistan border region. *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies, 26*(4), 595–638. https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2013.844502

Hu, Z., & Lu, D. (2016). Re-interpretation of the classical geopolitical theories in a critical geopolitical perspective. *Journal of Geographical Sciences, 26*(12), 1769–1784. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11442-016-1357-1

Jick, T. D. (1979). Mixing qualitative and quantitative methods: Triangulation in action. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 24*(4), 602–611. https://doi.org/10.2307/2392366

Kalyvas, S. N. (2006). *The logic of violence in civil war*. Cambridge University Press.

Kapur, S. P. (2007). *Dangerous deterrent: Nuclear weapons proliferation and conflict in South Asia*. Stanford University Press.
Laitin, D. (2002). Comparative politics: The state of the subdiscipline. In I. Katznelson & H. V. Milner (Eds.), *Political science: The state of the discipline* (pp. 630–659). W. W. Norton.
Macdonald, S., Maravanyika, N., Nezri, D., Parry, E., & Thomas, K. (2018). Online jihadist magazines and the "religious terrorism" thesis. Critical Studies on Terrorism, 11(3), 537–550. https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2018.1471098
Mackinder, H. J. (2004a). *Democratic ideals and reality: A study in the politics of reconstruction.* National Defense University Press.
Mackinder, H. J. (2004b). The geographical pivot of history (1904). *The Geographical Journal*, 170(4), 298–321.
Mahan, A. T. (2004). *The influence of sea power upon history (1890)*. Digital Antiquaria.
Meinig, D. W. (1956). Heartland and Rimland in Eurasian history. *The Western Political Quarterly, 9*(3), 553–569. https://doi.org/10.2307/444454
Minca, C., & Rowan, R. (2014). The question of space in Carl Schmitt. *Progress in Human Geography, 39*(3), 268–289. https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132513517989
Miiller, J. W. (2003). *A dangerous mind: Carl Schmitt in postwar European thought*. Yale University Press.
Mohammad Jawad, A. (2020). Dynamics of protest mobilization and rapid demobilization in post-2001 Afghanistan: Facing Enlightening Movement. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences,* 14(8), 564–577.
Müller, M. (2008). Reconsidering the concept of discourse for the field of critical geopolitics: Towards discourse as language and practice. *Political Geography, 27*(3), 322–338. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2007.12.003
Musselwhite, M. H. (2016). *ISIS & eschatology: Apocalyptic motivations behind the formation and development of the Islamic State* (Master's thesis). Western Kentucky University. http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/theses/1611
O'Shea, J. (2016). ISIS: The role of ideology and eschatology in the Islamic State. *The Pardee Periodical Journal of Global Affairs, 1*(2), 51–65.
Ó Tuathail, G. (1996). *Critical geopolitics: The politics of writing global space*. Routledge.
Park, J. (2023, September 11). Rethinking geopolitics: Geography as an aid to statecraft. *Texas National Security Review, 6*(4), 79–100. http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/48843
Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice*. SAGE.
Petit, D. N. (2015). *Eschatology in the ISIS narrative* [Master's thesis, University of Texas at Austin].
Qureshi, S. M. M. (1966). Pakhtunistan: The frontier dispute between Afghanistan and Pakistan. *Pacific Affairs, 39*(1/2), 99–114. https://doi.org/10.2307/2755184
Rais, R. B. (2017). Geopolitics on the Pakistan–Afghanistan borderland: An overview of different historical phases. *Geopolitics, 24*(2), 284–307. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2017.1359546
Raza, S. S., & Shapiro, M. J. (2019). Introduction: Politics on border – Critical reflections on the Pakistan–Afghanistan borderland. *Geopolitics, 24*(2), 277–283. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2019.1571487
Schlôgel, K. (2003). *Leggere il tempo nello spazio* [Read time through space]. Mondadori.

Scacco, A. (2010). *Who riots? Explaining individual participation in ethnic violence* (Doctoral dissertation). ProQuest Dissertations.
Sloan, G. (1999). Sir Halford J. Mackinder: The Heartland theory then and now. *Journal of Strategic Studies, 22*(2–3), 15–38. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402399908437752
Sprout, H. (1954). Geopolitical theories compared. *Naval War College Review, 6*(5), 19–36. http://www.jstor.org/stable/45104944
Spykman, N. J. (1944). *The geography of the peace*. Harcourt, Brace.
Sturm, T. (2013). The future of religious geopolitics: Towards a research and theory agenda. *Area, 45*(2), 134–140. https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12028
Strnad, V., & Hynek, N. (2020). ISIS's hybrid identity: a triangulated analysis of the Dabiq narrative. *Defence Studies*, 20(1), 82–100. https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2020.1720513
Su, P., & Huntington, H. P. (2021). Using critical geopolitical discourse to examine China's engagement in Arctic affairs. *Territory, Politics, Governance.* https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2021.1875035
Team GlobDef. (2012). "AfPak Hands" program pays dividends in Afghanistan, Pakistan. *Global Defence Archive*. https://www.globaldefence.net/archiv/defence-news/afpak-hands-program-pays-dividends-in-afghanistan-pakistan
Thaler, K. M. (2015). Mixed methods research in the study of political and social violence and conflict. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research, 11*(1), 59–76. https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689815585196
Tilly, C. (2004). *Contention and democracy in Europe, 1650-2000*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
UNAMA. (2016). *Special report: Attack on a peaceful demonstration in Kabul, 23 July 2016*. https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/23_july_suicide_attack_against_peaceful_demonstration_-_18_oct_2016.pdf
Varshney, A. (2002). *Ethnic conflict and civic life: Hindus and Muslims in India*. Yale University Press.
Vuving, A. L. (Ed.). (2020). Great power competition: Lessons from the past, implications for the future. In *Hindsight, insight, foresight: Thinking about security in the Indo-Pacific* (pp. 13–36). Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep26667.7
Weinstein, J. M. (2007). *Inside rebellion: The politics of insurgent violence*. Cambridge University Press.
Whiteside, C. (2016). "Lighting the Path: the Evolution of the Islamic State Media Enterprise (2003-2016)", *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism* – The Hague 7, no. 11. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.19165/2016.1.14
Wood, E. J. (2003). *Insurgent collective action and civil war in El Salvador*. Cambridge University Press.
Wood, G. (2015). What ISIS really wants. *The Atlantic*. http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2015/02/what-isis-really-wants/384980/
Wu, Z .(2018). Classical geopolitics, realism and the balance of power theory, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 41:6, 786-823, DOI: 10.1080/01402390.2017.1379398
Young Greven, R. (2014). *An analysis of state building: The relationship between Pashtun para-state institutions and political instability in Afghanistan* (Ph.D. thesis). University of South Florida.

Yousafzai, H. M., & Gohar, A. (2012). *Towards understanding Pukhtoon jirga*. Centre for Peace Building and Conflict Studies.

Zhang, Y., & Wildemuth, B. M. (2009). Qualitative analysis of content. In *Applications of social research methods to questions in information and library science* (pp. 308–319).