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The Spatiality of Enduring Rivalry: A Critical Geopolitical and Hydro-Political Analysis of India-Pakistan Territorial Dynamics

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Abstract

This paper examines the geopolitical landscape of the India-Pakistan conflict through a geographic lens. Since the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, the geographic contiguity of the two nations has been a primary driver of sustained friction. By analyzing key territorial disputes (Jammu & Kashmir, Sir Creek) and resource allocation mechanisms (Indus Water Treaty), this paper highlights how physical geography dictates state behavior and strategic posturing. Finally, it explores potential resolution mechanisms, emphasizing geoeconomic integration and eco-peacebuilding as viable pathways to regional stability through advanced academic paradigms.

Keywords: India-Pakistan relations; Critical Geopolitics; Hydro-Hegemony; Kashmir; Sir Creek; Indus Water Treaty; CPEC

1. INTRODUCTION & THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The traditional analysis of India-Pakistan relations often falls into the trap of classical realism, viewing the conflict merely as a quest for military dominance. However, a rigorous geographical inquiry must employ Critical Geopolitics (Gearóid Ó Tuathail's framework) to deconstruct how "space" is socially constructed, militarized, and contested. We must analyze this rivalry through three dimensions of geopolitics:

Practical Geopolitics: How state actors spatialize foreign policy (e.g., India's 'Neighbourhood First' vs. Pakistan's 'Strategic Depth' doctrine).

Formal Geopolitics: The academic and strategic discourse that frames the other nation as a perpetual territorial threat.

Structural Geopolitics: The global geopolitical shifts—such as the transition from a unipolar world to a fragmented multipolar setup (US-India Major Defense Partnership vs. Sino-Pakistan All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership)—that dictate regional spatial dynamics.

The Radcliffe Line of 1947 was not just a border; it was an act of **Cartographic Violence**. By bisecting contiguous ecological zones, watersheds, and cultural landscapes, it created what political geographers call an *"Incomplete Spatial Fix,"* ensuring that post-colonial state-building would be inherently conflictual.

2. GEOPOLITICAL CONFLICT ZONES: THE TERRITORIAL IMPERATIVE

2.1 The Kashmir Conundrum: Volumetric Sovereignty and High-Altitude Military Geography

To understand Kashmir at a doctoral level, we must move past two-dimensional maps and adopt Stuart Elden's concept of **"Volumetric Sovereignty"**—which analyzes territory not just as area, but in terms of height (airspace/mountain peaks) and depth (subterranean resources/water tables).

- **The Siachen-Saltoro Axis:** The occupation of the Saltoro Ridge by India since Operation Meghdoot (1984) is a masterclass in Orographic Warfare (fighting in mountainous terrain). From a spatial perspective, India controls the Glacio-Strategic Heights. This prevents the physical convergence of Pakistani forces from the west and Chinese forces

from the Shaksgam Valley (ceded by Pakistan to China in 1963) in the east.

- **Territorialization of the Line of Control (LoC):**

The LoC has transformed from a fluid ceasefire line into a highly technologized, fenced, and surveilled "Hard Border." Using GIS and satellite imagery, researchers observe how the construction of India's Anti-Infiltration Obstacle System (AIOS) has altered the local spatial economy, cutting off trans-border pastoralists (like the Gujjars and Bakarwals) from their traditional alpine pastures (Margs), leading to involuntary sedentarization.

2.2 Sir Creek: Fluid Borders and Cartographic Indeterminacy

The Sir Creek dispute cannot be resolved by standard terrestrial laws because it deals with an **Amphibious Space**—a dynamic, shifting marshland in the Rann of Kutch.

- **The Thalweg Principle vs. Historical Maps:** Pakistan relies on Paragraph 9 and 10 of the 1914 Bombay Government Resolution, which places the boundary on the eastern bank of the creek. India uses international maritime law, specifically the Thalweg Principle, which dictates that boundaries in navigable waterways must follow the deepest continuous channel.
- **Geomorphological Instability:** The core academic problem here is Avulsion—the rapid abandonment of a river channel and the formation of a new one due to tectonic shifts or heavy monsoons. Because the channel shifts physically, a fixed cartographic line on a paper map becomes obsolete in reality.
- **The Geoeconomic Prize:** This is a zero-sum game for maritime spaces. The shifting of the mouth of Sir Creek by just a few kilometers radically alters the baseline from which the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) is calculated in the Arabian Sea, impacting access to the potentially hydrocarbon-rich Indus Fan.

3. RESOURCE GEOPOLITICS: HYDRO-HEGEMONY IN THE INDUS BASIN

Applying Mark Zeitoun and Jeroen Warner's Theory of Hydro-Hegemony, the Indus Water Treaty (IWT) can be analyzed as a structural mechanism used by an upper-riparian state (India) and a lower-riparian state (Pakistan) to contest hydro-sovereignty.

Parameter	Upper Riparian (India)	Lower Riparian (Pakistan)	Geopolitical Implication
Structural Position	Controls physical inflow; geographical advantage.	Completely dependent on transboundary inflows.	Asymmetric vulnerability for Pakistan's agrarian core.
Legal Strategy	Asserts absolute territorial sovereignty (Harmon Doctrine) via run-of-the-river projects.	Asserts historical prior use and territorial integrity of water flows.	Continuous litigation at the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA).
Climatic Risk	Glacier retreat offers short-term surge but long-term depletion.	High vulnerability to extreme events (e.g., floods).	Securitization of climate data; refusal to share real-time hydrological models.

- **Securitization of the Kishanganga and Ratle Projects:** India's construction of run-of-the-river dams complies with the technical parameters of the IWT. However, Pakistan views these through the lens of "Water Weapons-grade Vulnerability." The geopolitical fear is not that India will permanently stop the water (which is topographically impossible), but that India gains Tactical Control—the ability to temporarily withhold or release water during critical agricultural cycles.
- **The Weaponization of the Treaty:** Post the 2016 Uri incident, India's strategic posture shifted ("Blood and water cannot flow together"), signaling a willingness to maximize its utilization of the Western Rivers within the legal limits of the treaty, moving the IWT from a technical arrangement to an active tool of coercive diplomacy.

4. THE GEOPOLITICS OF CONNECTIVITY: CPEC AND SPATIAL ENCIRCLEMENT

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) represents a massive Spatial Fix for China's "*Malacca Dilemma*," but for India and Pakistan, it redefines the geography of their conflict.

- **Geopolitical Invalidation of Sovereignty:** CPEC passes through Gilgit-Baltistan, a territory India claims as part of undivided Jammu & Kashmir. By building permanent infrastructure there, China has de facto legitimized Pakistan's territorial control, shifting the conflict from a bilateral dispute to a Trilateral Geopolitical Matrix.
- **Chabahar vs. Gwadar (A Tale of Two Nodes):** Geographers analyze this through Network Geopolitics. Gwadar gives China and Pakistan a

strategic node overlooking the Strait of Hormuz. In response, India's investment in Iran's Chabahar Port and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) is a spatial counter-strategy designed to bypass Pakistan's geography entirely to reach Central Asia.

5. PATH TO RESOLUTION: ADVANCED GEOPOLITICAL PARADIGMS

1. **Transboundary Enclaves and "Soft Sovereignty":** Moving away from rigid Westphalian borders toward the concept of "Borderlands as Spaces of Flow." This involves implementing institutional mechanisms where the LoC becomes a line of cooperation for ecological, medical, and tourism purposes, rendering the cartographic dispute secondary to human geography.
2. **The Indus Basin Commission 2.0 (Climate-Centric Adaptation):** The IWT must be amended to include "Climate Change Elasticity." Instead of fixed volumetric allocations of water, allocations must be based on a percentage of active annual glacial melt and real-time satellite data sharing, managed by a joint remote-sensing task force.
3. **The Siachen Transboundary Peace Park:** Applying IUCN's guidelines for Transboundary Protected Areas (TBPAs). Demilitarizing the Siachen glacier and converting it into an international high-altitude scientific research station for glacier melting patterns would allow both states a face-saving exit from an ecologically catastrophic and financially draining military deployment.

6. CONCLUSION

The India-Pakistan rivalry confirms that geography is not static; it is actively weaponized and contested. From the volumetric heights of the Siachen glacier to the fluid mudflats of Sir Creek, the conflict is a continuous struggle over resource control and spatial legitimacy. A PhD-level resolution acknowledges that military victory is a cartographic illusion. True stability will only be achieved when both states transition from a paradigm of defensive territoriality to one of **Ecological Regionalism**, where shared geographical vulnerabilities (such as Himalayan deglaciation) force cooperative co-existence.

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