



**Political Instability in South Asia, Regional Security Threats, and Great-Power  
 Involvement in the Indo-Pacific**

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**Abstract**

*Political instability remains one of the most enduring features of South Asia's political landscape. Across the region—particularly in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Afghanistan—periodic governance crises, contested elections, civil–military tensions, polarization, and weak institutional capacity have repeatedly challenged state authority. These domestic conditions do not stay confined within borders. Instead, instability shapes how states perceive threats, how they allocate security resources, and behave toward neighbors. In a region already burdened by unresolved territorial disputes, ethnic and religious cleavages, and uneven economic development, internal instability often magnifies interstate mistrust and encourages securitized responses.*

*At the same time, the Indo-Pacific has emerged as a major arena of strategic competition, connecting the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean through vital sea lanes, energy routes, and trade corridors. Great powers—especially the United States and China, along with regional powers such as India, Japan, and Australia—have elevated South Asia's relevance due to its geostrategic location, population size, market potential, and proximity to chokepoints like the Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Malacca. Political instability in South Asia creates security dilemmas and governance gaps that outside powers interpret as both risks (terrorism spillover, nuclear escalation, maritime disruption) and opportunities (ports, basing access, defense partnerships, economic leverage, and diplomatic influence).*

*This study explains the chain linking political instability (as an independent variable) to regional security threats (as an intervening condition) and to great-power involvement (as a dependent outcome). Theoretically grounded in neorealism, balance of power theory, and regional security complex theory, the study argues that instability weakens state capacity and predictability, increases internal conflict and cross-border tension, and makes the regional order more contested—conditions that invite external balancing and strategic engagement. Using qualitative content analysis of secondary sources, the study finds that domestic instability contributes to insurgency, terrorism, border incidents, humanitarian crises, and economic fragility, all of which incentivize major powers to deepen influence through infrastructure investment, military cooperation, arms transfers, diplomatic mediation, and competing regional initiatives. The central conclusion is that South Asia's internal political instability is not only a domestic governance issue; it is a strategic variable shaping security outcomes and intensifying Indo-Pacific geopolitics.*

**Keywords**

Political Instability; South Asia; Regional Security; Indo-Pacific; Great Power Competition; Geopolitics; Balance of Power; Neorealism; Strategic Influence

## **Introduction**

South Asia is among the world's most strategically significant yet politically volatile regions. Home to nearly a quarter of humanity, it includes nuclear-armed rivals (India and Pakistan), a historically conflict-ridden Afghanistan, and several states that have experienced recurring cycles of political unrest, mass protests, constitutional crises, or military–civil tensions. The region's politics are shaped by deep historical legacies: colonial-era borders, contested nation-building projects, uneven development, identity politics, and the challenge of constructing stable institutions in societies marked by diversity and inequality.

Political instability in South Asia takes multiple forms. It can be visible in frequent changes of government, coalition breakdowns, contested elections, or the weakening of constitutional norms. It can also appear as chronic legitimacy crises, where citizens do not trust institutions, and political competition becomes zero-sum. In some cases, instability becomes violent, producing insurgencies, terrorism, communal riots, or separatist movements. Even when violence is not constant, instability often reduces governance quality: policies become short-term, reforms are delayed, corruption increases, and state capacity to provide security and services becomes uneven. These internal weaknesses matter for regional security because South Asian states share borders, ethnic groups, rivers, migration routes, and economic linkages. Instability in one country—such as Afghanistan—can trigger refugee flows, militant movement, and arms trafficking that affect multiple neighbors.

The Indo-Pacific context makes these dynamics more geopolitically consequential. The Indo-Pacific is not merely a geographic label; it reflects the growing strategic integration of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, driven by trade interdependence, naval modernization, and competition over rules and influence. Great powers focus on the Indo-Pacific because control of sea lanes, port access, and strategic partnerships increasingly shape global power distribution. South Asia sits at the crossroads of this system. Its ports, islands, and maritime approaches are valuable for commercial shipping and military logistics. Therefore, when South Asian states experience instability, great powers face incentives to respond—whether to secure their interests, prevent rivals from gaining influence, or manage risks such as terrorism, piracy, and nuclear escalation.

This article explores the nexus between political instability in South Asia and the security problems that it generates, emphasizing how these problems draw external powers deeper into regional affairs. The central argument is that instability reduces state capacity and predictability, intensifies security dilemmas, and produces strategic “openings” that great powers can exploit through economic, political, and military engagement. As power competition in the Indo-Pacific intensifies, South Asia becomes both a battleground of influence and a source of security externalities.

## **Research Problem**

The core research problem is to explain how domestic political instability becomes a regional security issue and why this regional insecurity attracts the strategic involvement of great powers in the Indo-Pacific.

This problem exists because internal instability rarely remains purely internal in South Asia. Several structural features turn domestic crises into regional threats:

### **1. Proximity and Interdependence**

South Asian states are geographically close, share long borders, and have populations living near frontier regions. Instability easily spills across borders through migration, militant networks, criminal trafficking, or border incidents. For example, instability and governance collapse in Afghanistan have historically produced refugee flows and safe havens that affected Pakistan, Iran, and Central/South Asia more broadly.

### **2. Unresolved Disputes and Mistrust**

India–Pakistan tensions over Kashmir, border disputes involving India and China (with South Asian implications), and other territorial and water-related issues mean that crises can rapidly become securitized. When governments face domestic legitimacy challenges, leaders may adopt nationalist rhetoric or hardline postures to consolidate support—raising the risk of interstate confrontation.

### **3. Weak Institutions and Civil–military Imbalances**

In parts of South Asia, institutions may not reliably manage political competition. When civilian authority is contested or weak, security policies may become inconsistent. Civil–military tensions can change threat perceptions and policy priorities, increasing uncertainty for neighbors and external powers.

#### **4. Maritime and Economic Vulnerabilities**

South Asia's sea lanes are critical to Indo-Pacific trade and energy flows. Political crises that weaken governance can affect port security, investment stability, and the safety of maritime infrastructure. Economic instability can also deepen dependence on external financing, increasing susceptibility to great-power leverage.

Given these features, the research problem is not simply that instability is "bad"; it is that instability changes the regional distribution of risks and opportunities. It can create security vacuums, increase the attractiveness of external support, and provide justification for great powers to expand presence—sometimes under the language of counterterrorism, humanitarian support, development assistance, or maritime security cooperation.

#### **Research Objectives**

This study has two main objectives:

##### **1. To analyze the impact of political instability on regional security in South Asia.**

This includes mapping the pathways through which domestic instability generates security threats: internal violence, border tensions, terrorism, refugee flows, economic stress, and maritime insecurity.

##### **2. To examine how security challenges arising from instability attract strategic engagement by major powers in the Indo-Pacific.**

This includes analyzing the motivations and methods of external powers: alliance-building, military presence, arms diplomacy, port investments, infrastructure projects, and diplomatic mediation.

#### **Research Questions**

##### **1. How does political instability in South Asia generate regional security threats?**

This question focuses on causal mechanisms: how governance weaknesses, polarization, insurgencies, or legitimacy crises translate into cross-border security risks.

##### **2. In what ways do these security threats encourage the involvement of major powers in the Indo-Pacific?**

This question focuses on strategic behavior: why and how external actors respond to instability, and how competition among them intensifies.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

To explain the relationship among instability, security threats, and great-power involvement, this study draws on neorealism, balance-of-power theory, and regional security complex theory. Together, these frameworks help explain why insecurity spreads, why states seek power and protection, and why outside powers treat regional instability as strategically important.

#### **Neorealism (Structural Realism)**

Neorealism, associated with Kenneth Waltz, argues that the international system is anarchic—there is no central authority to guarantee security. States, therefore, prioritize survival, power, and relative advantage. From this view, political instability is strategically significant because it affects a state's capabilities and reliability.

In South Asia, political instability can reduce a state's capacity to police territory, manage borders, and maintain a stable external policy. Weak capacity creates vulnerability: other states may fear spillover threats, and external powers may see an opportunity to gain leverage through assistance or partnerships. Neorealism also explains why great powers would be drawn in: instability in a strategically located region can shift balances, create openings for rivals, or threaten key trade routes. Even if great powers claim humanitarian motives, neo-realists emphasize that the underlying driver is security and influence in a competitive system.

In addition, neorealism highlights the importance of relative gains. If one great power expands its economic footprint or military access in a South Asian state during a crisis, rivals may interpret this as a threat and respond with countermeasures—deepening competition.

#### **Balance of Power Theory**

Balance of power theory suggests that states seek to prevent any single actor from dominating a region. When instability weakens states or creates political openings, external powers may move in to secure influence. Other powers then respond to restore balance.

In South Asia and the Indo-Pacific, this balancing logic is visible in:

- the competition for strategic partnerships (e.g., defense cooperation, intelligence sharing);

- infrastructure and port projects (as potential dual-use assets);
- naval deployments and maritime exercises; and
- diplomatic engagement in regional institutions.

If one power gains a foothold—whether through economic dependency, basing access, or strategic alignment—others may increase engagement with rival states, accelerating polarization of the regional environment.

### **Regional Security Complex Theory**

Barry Buzan’s regional security complex theory argues that security is clustered regionally because threats travel more easily over short distances. Neighboring states are bound by patterns of amity and enmity, and by transnational issues such as migration and insurgency.

South Asia functions as a security complex because:

- conflicts and crises often have cross-border implications;
- states interpret each other’s domestic events as security signals; and
- external powers interact with the region through these interconnected threats.

This framework helps explain why instability in one state—Afghanistan, for example—affects the security calculations of multiple actors and can lead to external involvement.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual model is:

Political Instability → Regional Security Challenges → Great Power Involvement

#### **Independent Variable: Political Instability**

Political instability includes:

- government turnover and constitutional crises,
- elite polarization and mass protests,
- civil–military tensions,
- corruption and weak rule of law,
- insurgency, separatism, and terrorism,
- legitimacy crises and contested elections.

#### **Intervening Variable: Regional Security Challenges**

Instability produces regional security challenges such as:

- cross-border militancy and terrorism,
- border clashes and escalation risks,
- arms trafficking and organized crime,
- refugee flows and humanitarian crises,
- economic disruption and trade insecurity,
- maritime insecurity and threats to sea lanes.

#### **Dependent Variable: Great Power Involvement**

Great power involvement may take forms including:

- military cooperation (training, exercises, basing logistics),
- strategic partnerships and alliances,
- arms transfers and defense technology deals,
- economic initiatives (loans, infrastructure, trade agreements),
- diplomatic mediation or crisis management,
- information influence, soft power, and institutional engagement.

The key claim is that instability is not automatically a “magnet” for great powers; it becomes so when instability creates security risks or strategic opportunities that affect the balance of influence in the Indo-Pacific.

### **Literature Review**

Existing scholarship generally supports the idea that domestic instability in strategically located regions has international consequences, especially when great powers compete.

#### **1. Buzan (1991) and Regional Spillover**

Buzan’s work emphasizes that security threats are interconnected within regions. Domestic unrest can change the regional threat environment by generating cross-border effects such as refugees, militant movements, and economic shocks.

**2. Waltz (1979) and systemic pressures**

Waltz's neorealism explains why states and great powers respond to weakness and uncertainty. Instability reduces a state's capacity and can shift the local balance. Other actors adapt accordingly—often in ways that intensify competition.

**3. Strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific**

Authors like Robert Kaplan emphasize the importance of maritime geography and sea lanes in global power. As the Indo-Pacific becomes central, South Asia's location in the Indian Ocean—and its proximity to chokepoints—makes it crucial for external powers.

**4. India's Regional Posture and Strategic Environment**

C. Raja Mohan and other scholars highlight India's dual role: a South Asian state deeply affected by regional instability and also a growing Indo-Pacific power seeking influence and security partnerships. India's strategies often involve managing neighbors while countering external influence.

**5. China's Expanding Footprint**

Scholars such as David Brewster focus on how China expands influence through economic and strategic initiatives, including infrastructure and port development. In contexts of instability and financial crisis, such initiatives can become more attractive to domestic elites, potentially increasing strategic dependency.

**6. Political Instability and Security Outcomes**

Work by Sumit Ganguly and others examines how instability increases the likelihood of internal violence, terrorism, and strained civil–military relations, all of which can have cross-border implications.

Overall, the literature implies that South Asia's instability and Indo-Pacific power competition are mutually reinforcing: insecurity opens doors to external involvement, and external involvement can intensify domestic polarization and rivalry dynamics.

**Research Methodology**

This study uses a qualitative approach because political instability and security dynamics involve complex causal pathways that are not easily captured by a single quantitative indicator.

**Research Approach**

A qualitative approach allows deeper interpretation of:

- how instability affects policy choices,
- how regional actors perceive threats,
- how external powers frame involvement.

**Research Design**

The study adopts an analytical and descriptive design:

- descriptive, to map patterns of instability and security challenges;
- analytical, to explain causal links and strategic behavior.

**Data Collection**

Secondary sources include:

- peer-reviewed articles on South Asian politics and security,
- books on international relations and Indo-Pacific strategy,
- policy reports by think tanks and strategic institutions,
- official statements and strategic documents when relevant.

**Data Analysis**

Qualitative content analysis identifies themes such as:

- state capacity and governance breakdown,
- insurgency and terrorism narratives,
- border and maritime security concerns,
- strategic competition framing by great powers.

**Findings and Analysis**

**Political Instability in South Asia: Patterns and Drivers**

Political instability in South Asia is persistent because it emerges from both domestic structural conditions and historical legacies. Key drivers include:

**1. Weak Institutionalization of Political Competition**

In many contexts, political competition can become personalized and confrontational rather than rules-based. When institutions such as courts, electoral bodies, or parliaments are perceived as partisan, losing sides may reject outcomes, triggering protest cycles and governance paralysis.

**2. Civil–military Relations and Security-state Dynamics**

In some states, military and intelligence institutions have historically played major roles in politics. When civilian governments are weak or contested, security institutions may gain greater autonomy, which can create unpredictability in external policy and reduce trust among neighbors.

**3. Identity Politics and Social Polarization**

Ethnic, sectarian, linguistic, and regional identities shape political mobilization. Polarization can fuel violence and increase the risk of radicalization, especially when combined with economic stress and weak governance.

**4. Economic Fragility and Governance Legitimacy**

Inflation, unemployment, debt crises, and inequality can trigger mass protests and reduce government legitimacy. Economic shocks weaken states’ ability to fund security and social services, creating openings for extremist recruitment and criminal networks.

**5. Insurgency and Terrorism**

Afghanistan’s long conflict, Pakistan’s militancy challenges, and localized insurgencies elsewhere show how violence can become a persistent feature when the state lacks effective control or when external factors sustain conflict networks.

These drivers do not operate in isolation. Often, economic crises deepen polarization, polarization undermines institutions, institutional weakness increases security gaps, and security gaps intensify violence—creating a cycle of instability.

**How Instability Produces Regional Security Threats**

Political instability creates regional security threats through several mechanisms.

**A) Spillover of militancy and transnational networks**

When states cannot fully control territory, militant groups exploit ungoverned spaces. Borders in South Asia are often mountainous, porous, or heavily populated, making cross-border movement difficult to prevent completely. Militancy can therefore become transnational:

- groups find sanctuaries across borders,
- financing networks operate through informal economies,
- ideological movements circulate through media and diaspora links.

Even if a state is not directly supporting militancy, internal weakness can still allow non-state actors to operate.

**B) Border tensions and escalation risks**

Domestic instability can increase the probability of border incidents:

- leaders may adopt hardline postures to gain domestic legitimacy;
- security forces may act more aggressively under uncertainty;
- misinformation during crises can trigger public pressure for retaliation.

In a nuclearized environment (India–Pakistan), even limited incidents create high escalation anxiety, which draws attention from external powers concerned about crisis stability.

**C) Refugee flows and humanitarian insecurity**

Instability, especially violent conflict, produces displacement. Refugee flows strain host communities, create political tension, and sometimes become securitized. Humanitarian crises can also attract external involvement through aid missions or international diplomacy, which can carry strategic implications.

**D) Economic insecurity and strategic vulnerability**

Political instability weakens investor confidence, disrupts trade, and increases reliance on external loans. Economic fragility becomes a security problem when it:

- undermines social cohesion,
- reduces state capacity to fund security institutions,
- increases dependency on foreign financing.

Dependency can translate into strategic influence: creditors and donors may shape policy decisions, port access, or diplomatic alignment.

**E) Maritime security threats**

South Asia's proximity to major sea lanes means instability can have maritime impacts:

- insecure ports and coastal governance gaps,
- piracy risks in broader Indian Ocean spaces,
- vulnerabilities of undersea cables and energy infrastructure.

Because Indo-Pacific strategies heavily emphasize maritime stability, great powers interpret maritime vulnerabilities as requiring deeper engagement.

**Country-Level Pathways: How Instability Turns into Regional Security Problems**

Political instability is a broad concept, so it is useful to break it down into country-level pathways—because each South Asian state contributes to regional insecurity in distinct ways. The purpose here is not to label any state as “the problem,” but to show how different domestic crises create specific kinds of security spillovers that shape Indo-Pacific geopolitics.

**Pakistan: Civil–Military Tensions, Political Polarization, Militancy, and Crisis Instability**

Pakistan's political instability has often been linked to recurring civil–military tensions, fluctuating civilian legitimacy, and intense political polarization. These conditions matter for regional security in at least four ways:

**1. Strategic Unpredictability**

When governments change frequently or face legitimacy challenges, external policy can become inconsistent. Neighbors and external powers may struggle to interpret whether policy changes represent a lasting shift or short-term survival tactics. This unpredictability increases the risk of misperception—especially in a region where crises have escalated quickly in the past.

**2. Space for Militant and Extremist Networks**

Domestic political instability can weaken governance and law enforcement capacity in certain regions. Where state authority is uneven, non-state actors can exploit gaps. Even if the state attempts counterterrorism operations, the ability to sustain policy consistency and social stabilization is reduced during political turmoil. The regional effect is heightened threat perception in neighboring states, particularly India, which often interprets militant incidents through a national-security lens.

**3. Nuclear Escalation Anxiety**

Pakistan's strategic environment includes nuclear deterrence. During political crises, external powers become concerned about command-and-control stability, crisis decision-making, and the possibility that conventional incidents could escalate. Even if nuclear security remains robust, the perception of risk alone attracts diplomatic attention and crisis-management pressure from major powers.

**4. Economic Vulnerability and External Leverage**

Political instability often coincides with economic stress, debt pressures, and reduced investor confidence. This can increase reliance on external financial support—creating opportunities for outside powers to expand influence via loans, infrastructure, and security cooperation. In the Indo-Pacific context, Pakistan's strategic location makes it relevant for connectivity projects, port access, and broader competition over the Indian Ocean's western approaches.

Overall, Pakistan illustrates the study's conceptual chain: political instability reduces institutional coherence, creates security concerns (militancy, crisis instability), and increases the incentives for external actors to engage through a combination of security partnerships and economic statecraft.

**Afghanistan: Governance Collapse, Insurgency, Refugees, and Transnational Security Externalities**

Afghanistan is a central case for understanding regional spillover because prolonged conflict and governance breakdown have repeatedly produced cross-border effects:

**1. Refugee Flows and Humanitarian Pressure**

Afghan displacement has historically affected Pakistan, Iran, and beyond. Large refugee populations create economic pressures, political tensions, and security concerns in host states. They can also become politicized domestically, generating nationalist or exclusionary discourse that strains bilateral relations.

**2. Safe havens and Militant Mobility**

Where governance is weak, armed groups can operate more freely. Even when states attempt to control borders, militant mobility is difficult to contain. This creates persistent security

externalities: neighbors increase border militarization, security spending, and surveillance—often at the cost of development priorities.

### **3. Illicit Economies and Criminal Networks**

Conflict environments often produce illicit trade networks (arms trafficking, narcotics, smuggling), which fund armed groups and criminal enterprises. These networks undermine state capacity in the wider region, corrupt institutions, and intensify violence.

### **4. Great-power strategic competition through “stability narratives”**

External actors frequently frame Afghanistan-related engagement as “stabilization,” “counterterrorism,” or “humanitarian support.” However, under neorealism, these narratives also serve strategic ends: influence over transit routes, intelligence access, regional partnerships, and competition with rivals. Even after reduced direct involvement, the security consequences of Afghanistan continue to shape the calculations of the United States, China, Russia, and regional powers.

Afghanistan demonstrates how internal collapse can become a regional security complex issue in Buzan’s sense—threats are interconnected, and solutions require regional coordination, which is often difficult due to mistrust.

## **Sri Lanka: Political Crisis, Economic Shock, Port Geopolitics, and the Indian Ocean Arena**

Sri Lanka highlights a different pathway: instability driven by governance crisis and economic collapse rather than insurgency alone. This creates a strong link to Indo-Pacific maritime geopolitics.

### **1. Economic Crisis as a Security Problem**

When a state faces severe economic crisis, it can trigger public unrest, leadership turnover, and institutional strain. Economic fragility becomes a strategic issue because it increases dependence on external assistance. External financing can shape policy decisions, including port management, infrastructure ownership, and trade alignment.

### **2. Port and Logistics Relevance**

Sri Lanka sits near major Indian Ocean sea lanes. Ports and logistics infrastructure have both commercial and potential strategic value (dual-use concerns). In great-power competition, investment in ports is often interpreted through security lenses—especially by rival states that fear encirclement or surveillance.

### **3. India–China Balancing Pressure**

Sri Lanka’s domestic crisis can intensify balancing behavior: India may increase assistance to prevent strategic drift, while China may offer financing that strengthens its long-term influence. From a balance of power perspective, Sri Lanka becomes an arena where competing external support can reshape the local strategic environment.

Sri Lanka shows how “non-traditional” instability—economic breakdown—can still become a key mechanism pulling great powers into South Asian security dynamics.

## **Bangladesh: Political Polarization, Governance Challenges, and Strategic Competition Over Connectivity**

Bangladesh has experienced political polarization, periodic unrest, and governance challenges. While it has achieved notable development gains, instability risks can still produce security consequences:

### **1. Internal Unrest and Institutional Legitimacy**

Highly polarized politics can reduce the credibility of institutions, provoke cycles of protest, and create uncertainty about long-term policy continuity.

### **2. Cross-border Issues and Migration Pressures**

Bangladesh’s geography and population density make it sensitive to climate shocks and migration dynamics. Political instability can make it harder to manage border issues, trafficking, and humanitarian challenges (including refugee-related pressures).

### **3. Strategic Connectivity and Investment Competition**

Bangladesh is important for Indo-Pacific connectivity: infrastructure investment, manufacturing supply chains, and maritime access. External powers may engage through trade privileges, development finance, and strategic diplomacy. Instability can heighten competition as powers attempt to secure influence with whichever political actors appear most resilient.

Bangladesh illustrates that even where interstate conflict is not central, domestic stability still matters for regional security and great-power engagement, especially through economic and connectivity frameworks.

### **Nepal and Smaller States: Domestic Instability and the “Buffer State” Problem**

Smaller states in South Asia—such as Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives—face unique strategic pressures due to geography and power asymmetry.

#### **1. Nepal as a Strategic Buffer**

Nepal’s domestic political shifts and coalition instability can affect its foreign policy orientation. Because Nepal lies between India and China, even small changes in alignment can be interpreted as strategically meaningful. This often leads to external pressure, competing aid, and influence campaigns that can further complicate domestic politics.

#### **2. The Maldives and Maritime Positioning**

Island states and maritime micro-states can become strategically significant due to location near sea lanes and potential logistics access. Domestic political competition can therefore become intertwined with foreign policy choices and external patronage.

In balance of power terms, these states become sites where competition plays out indirectly—through aid, investment, party linkages, and diplomatic influence—rather than open military conflict.

#### **Mechanisms Linking Instability to Security Threats**

To expand your “Security Challenges” section into a more academic explanation, we can specify the mechanisms more clearly.

##### **The State-Capacity Mechanism**

Political instability reduces state capacity in three practical ways:

- Policy discontinuity: security and development policies change repeatedly, weakening long-term planning.
  - Institutional conflict: agencies compete rather than coordinate; courts, parliaments, and executives clash.
  - Resource diversion: governments spend more on crisis survival (patronage, emergency policing) than on reforms.
- Security consequence: gaps in governance allow insurgency, crime, and corruption to grow.

##### **The Diversionary and Nationalist Mobilization Mechanism**

When leaders face domestic legitimacy crises, they may:

- use nationalist rhetoric,
  - frame opponents as “anti-state,”
  - escalate external disputes to create unity.
- Security consequence: increased border tensions and reduced diplomatic space, raising escalation risks.

##### **The Non-State Actor Empowerment Mechanism**

Instability creates:

- ungoverned spaces,
  - weak policing,
  - social grievances (unemployment, injustice),
- which facilitate recruitment and operations by militant groups.

Security consequence: terrorism and cross-border militancy increase, causing regional distrust.

##### **The Economic-Dependency Mechanism**

Economic crisis linked to instability increases dependence on:

- loans,
- infrastructure deals,
- emergency aid.

Security consequence: external actors gain leverage that can translate into strategic influence—changing the regional balance and prompting counter-balancing by rivals.

##### **The Maritime Vulnerability Mechanism**

Weak governance can affect:

- port security,
- coastal surveillance,
- protection of shipping routes.

Security consequence: great powers justify naval presence and maritime partnerships, increasing militarization of the Indian Ocean.

These mechanisms help connect your conceptual framework to observable outcomes and strengthen the “findings” section.

### **Great Power Engagement and Involvement: Why Instability Attracts External Powers**

Great powers become involved in South Asia not only because they “care” about stability in a humanitarian or normative sense, but because instability directly affects strategic interests in the wider Indo-Pacific. South Asia sits at the intersection of critical maritime routes, regional rivalries, and emerging connectivity corridors. When states experience political turbulence—such as governance breakdown, economic crisis, insurgency, or civil–military tensions—the resulting security vacuum and uncertainty can create risks (terrorism spillover, escalation, maritime disruption) and opportunities (access, influence, strategic alignment) for external powers. In neorealist terms, instability weakens state capacity and predictability, increasing vulnerability to external leverage; in balance-of-power terms, it produces competition as major powers attempt to prevent rivals from gaining a decisive foothold.

### **Why Great Powers Care: Strategic Interests in South Asia’s Instability**

Great powers are attracted to South Asia’s instability because the region influences several key strategic domains:

#### **1. Sea lanes and chokepoints**

The Indian Ocean links the Middle East, Africa, and East Asia, and carries significant global trade and energy flows. Disruption near key routes—through maritime insecurity, port instability, or regional conflict—creates incentives for great powers to increase naval presence, maritime partnerships, and access to logistics hubs.

#### **2. Alliance politics and regional balancing**

Great powers use partnerships to shape the regional balance of power. Political instability can make South Asian states more willing to accept external security assistance, financing, and diplomatic backing. However, this also raises the fear that rival powers will gain influence, triggering competitive engagement and counter-balancing.

#### **3. Crisis management and escalation control (especially nuclear risks)**

India–Pakistan crises and broader regional tensions have repeatedly drawn international attention. External powers intervene diplomatically not only to promote peace, but to prevent escalation that could destabilize the Indo-Pacific and threaten global security, including the risk of miscalculation under nuclear deterrence conditions.

#### **4. Economic corridors and strategic infrastructure**

Connectivity projects—ports, highways, rail links, pipelines, and digital infrastructure—shape long-term influence. In fragile political and economic environments, infrastructure financing becomes a tool of strategic positioning, allowing external powers to build durable leverage through debt, ownership arrangements, and operational control over logistics networks.

These strategic interests explain why instability becomes a “magnet” for external attention: it threatens high-value interests while simultaneously creating openings for influence.

### **The United States: Security Partnerships, Maritime Strategy, and Regional Balancing**

For the United States, the Indo-Pacific is central to maintaining a favorable balance of power. South Asia matters because:

- India is viewed as a key strategic partner in shaping the regional balance.
- terrorism and potential nuclear escalation risks threaten broader international security;
- sea lanes must remain open for global commerce, energy flows, and supply-chain stability.

As a result, political instability in South Asia can motivate the United States to:

- strengthen defense cooperation, intelligence sharing, and interoperability with partners;
- support capacity-building in counterterrorism and maritime domain awareness;
- engage diplomatically in crisis management during regional tensions;
- compete with rival influence in infrastructure standards, technology systems, and strategic connectivity initiatives.

Importantly, US involvement can be selective. At times, Washington may prioritize strategic partnerships and immediate security outcomes even when governance challenges persist in partner states—reflecting a neorealist logic in which interests and balance-of-power concerns often outweigh domestic political conditions.

### **China: BRI, Economic Statecraft, and Strategic Access**

China's engagement in South Asia is often associated with infrastructure development, trade corridors, and connectivity projects, especially through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Instability can create openings for China because:

- financially stressed states may welcome investment and loans quickly to address economic crises;
- domestic elites may prefer projects that deliver visible infrastructure outcomes and political legitimacy;
- strategic assets—such as ports, logistics routes, and industrial zones—can be developed under economic frameworks that may also carry long-term security implications.

BRI-linked projects in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh demonstrate how economic engagement can translate into strategic influence. In periods of crisis, refinancing, emergency support, and debt restructuring can increase dependency, reinforcing China's leverage. Even when projects are framed as commercial, rivals may interpret expanded port and logistics footprints as potential dual-use enablers, intensifying strategic anxiety and competitive counter-responses.

### **India: Regional Security Management, Regional Dominance Concerns, and Indo-Pacific Role**

India plays a dual role: it is both a South Asian state deeply affected by neighborhood instability and an emerging Indo-Pacific power seeking a larger strategic role. Political instability around India's borders affects:

- internal security, especially through cross-border militancy and trafficking networks;
- economic connectivity plans, including trade corridors and regional integration projects;
- India's aspiration to be a net security provider in the Indian Ocean.

Therefore, India may respond through:

- diplomacy and neighborhood-first initiatives to stabilize relations and reduce external influence;
- security cooperation, intelligence coordination, and border management;
- maritime partnerships, naval modernization, and expanded Indian Ocean presence;
- strategic alignment with other powers when necessary to balance rival influence.

However, India's efforts can also generate balancing behavior by smaller neighbors, particularly if they fear dominance or loss of autonomy. This dynamic illustrates balance-of-power politics within South Asia itself: smaller states may hedge by diversifying partnerships and welcoming external involvement to offset perceived Indian pressure—further intensifying great-power competition.

### **Competitive Outcomes and the Feedback Loop: When External Involvement Deepens Instability**

A crucial point is that the relationship is not one-way. Instability attracts great powers, but great-power competition can also feed back into domestic instability in South Asian states. External involvement can sometimes worsen political fragility in several ways:

- External backing may encourage domestic elites to resist compromise, believing they can rely on foreign support;
- Competing aid and financing can fuel corruption, patronage networks, or uneven development, which undermines legitimacy;
- Information influence and political signaling by external actors can intensify polarization and deepen social divides.

As a result, great-power engagement can become both a response to instability and a contributor to it. This feedback loop helps explain why South Asia can remain persistently unstable even when external assistance is high: competing strategic agendas may undermine coherent state-building and increase the incentives for zero-sum domestic politics.

### **Discussion: Integrating the Findings with Theory (Stronger Theoretical Application)**

Your findings show a clear chain: domestic political instability weakens governance and security capacity, produces regional security challenges, and creates strategic openings that great powers exploit or respond to. This section strengthens the academic argument by explicitly connecting those observations to neorealism, balance of power theory, and regional security complex theory.

### **Neorealism and the “Instability–Vulnerability” Link**

Neorealism begins from the premise that the international system is anarchic, meaning no authority can reliably protect states. Survival and security are therefore primary goals. In this environment, political instability matters because it affects state capability and reliability—two central features in realist assessments of power.

#### **1. Instability Reduces State Capability**

When governments face protests, legitimacy crises, or institutional breakdown, they often struggle to maintain consistent policy, enforce borders, and sustain internal order. This weakens the state’s ability to manage threats. In realist terms, diminished capability invites pressure from external actors—either through coercion, opportunism, or “assistance” that comes with strategic expectations.

#### **2. Instability Increases Uncertainty for other States**

A politically unstable state is harder to predict. Neo-realists emphasize that uncertainty produces insecurity: neighbors and external powers cannot be sure whether the state will control militant groups, honor agreements, or avoid escalation in crises. This uncertainty increases the incentive for other actors to hedge through military readiness, alliances, or political influence efforts.

#### **3. Great Powers Engage because they compete for Relative Advantage**

From a neorealist perspective, even seemingly cooperative engagement (development finance, counterterrorism support, humanitarian assistance) occurs within competition. If the United States sees China’s deepening influence through infrastructure and strategic access, it interprets this as a change in relative power. Similarly, China interprets US partnership networks as containment. Instability accelerates this competition because weak or crisis-hit states become more “available” for external leverage.

In short, neorealism explains why instability becomes strategically meaningful: it reduces the ability of states to secure themselves and increases opportunities for external power projection.

### **Balance of Power: Instability as a Trigger for Balancing and Counter-Balancing**

Balance of power theory explains patterns of alignment and rivalry. Your findings can be framed as follows:

#### **1. Instability Alters the Regional Balance**

When a South Asian state becomes fragile, it may seek external support to stabilize the economy or address security threats. External support—loans, arms, intelligence, technology, port projects—can shift influence in favor of the supporting power.

#### **2. Rival Powers Respond**

If China gains influence in a strategically located state through connectivity projects and financing, the United States and India may respond by expanding their own partnerships, aid, and security cooperation. Conversely, if US/India ties expand strongly, China may intensify diplomatic and economic engagement with other regional states. This produces a balancing cycle.

#### **3. Smaller States also Balance**

Balance of power is not only a great-power process. Smaller South Asian states often hedge, seeking benefits from multiple external powers to avoid dependence. Domestic instability can make hedging more difficult because elites may become more dependent on whichever external actor provides rapid support, thereby intensifying internal polarization and external rivalry.

Thus, the balance of power theory helps explain why external involvement becomes competitive rather than purely stabilizing: each power wants to prevent the other from gaining decisive influence in a strategically important region.

### **Regional Security Complex Theory: Why Threats Spill Across Borders**

Regional security complex theory explains why South Asia’s instability produces regional insecurity rather than isolated domestic problems.

#### **1. Geographic Proximity Intensifies Interdependence**

Borders are closed, communities overlap, and security challenges travel easily. Militant movements, refugees, trafficking networks, and misinformation flows are all easier to transmit regionally than globally.

#### **2. Historical Rivalries Shape Threat Perception**

South Asia contains deep rivalries—particularly between India and Pakistan—that cause domestic political events to be interpreted through security frames. A domestic incident is rarely treated as purely domestic; it becomes part of a wider pattern of suspicion.

### **3. External powers become embedded in the Regional Security Complex**

When the United States, China, and others engage—through bases, port access, maritime deployments, or alliance-building—they become part of the region’s security dynamics. Their rivalry interacts with local rivalries, making the security complex denser and more difficult to stabilize.

This theory strengthens your argument that instability in one state can generate cross-border consequences and draw in external powers, because the region’s security problems are connected with neighbors.

#### **Policy Implications and Recommendations**

A strong academic paper should not only explain the problem; it should also outline implications for policymakers. Below are detailed recommendations that match the causal chain in your study.

#### **Strengthening Domestic Governance to Reduce Security Externalities**

Because political instability is the independent variable in your model, the first policy priority is domestic resilience:

##### **1. Institutional strengthening**

- ensure election administration credibility and transparency,
- reinforce judicial independence and constitutional order,
- improve civilian oversight and coordination of security institutions.

##### **2. Reducing polarization through political inclusion**

- create channels for opposition participation,
- support dialogue mechanisms during crisis periods,
- invest in local governance to reduce center–periphery tensions.

##### **3. Countering violent extremism with governance tools**

Security operations alone are insufficient. Effective prevention requires:

- education and employment programs,
- community-level conflict resolution,
- rule-of-law enforcement against financing networks,
- rehabilitation and reintegration efforts where appropriate.

These steps reduce the governance gaps that militants and criminal networks exploit.

#### **Regional Cooperation Mechanisms for Managing Spillovers**

Since your intervening variable is “regional security challenges,” the region needs mechanisms to prevent spillovers:

##### **1. Crisis communication and hotlines**

India–Pakistan escalation risks remain high in crises. Reliable communication channels reduce misperception and accidental escalation.

##### **2. Border management coordination**

Even limited cooperation on:

- border incident protocols,
  - cross-border crime and trafficking,
  - information sharing on public safety threats
- can reduce escalation incentives.

##### **3. Refugee and humanitarian coordination frameworks**

Refugee flows and humanitarian crises should be treated as regional security issues requiring burden-sharing, international support, and coordinated planning rather than unilateral securitized responses.

#### **Maritime Security Cooperation in the Indian Ocean**

Because the Indo-Pacific is heavily maritime, this is a major area where instability intersects with external involvement.

Policy priorities include:

- improving coast guard capacity and port security,
- maritime domain awareness (radar coverage, satellite integration),
- joint anti-piracy and search-and-rescue coordination,
- protection of undersea cables and critical maritime infrastructure.

Maritime cooperation can be a confidence-building measure, but it must be designed carefully so it does not appear as bloc politics that increases rivalry.

**Managing Great-Power Competition to Avoid “Security Dependency.”**

Your argument highlights that instability creates openings for great powers. The policy challenge is to gain benefits from external engagement without losing autonomy:

**1. Debt transparency and sustainable financing**

Infrastructure funding should be subject to transparent terms, public oversight, and long-term sustainability assessments to avoid crisis-driven dependency.

**2. Diversified partnerships**

Small and middle states can reduce vulnerability by diversifying economic and diplomatic relationships, preventing overreliance on a single great power.

**3. Strengthening regional institutions**

More robust regional platforms can reduce the need for external mediation, making solutions less hostage to great-power rivalry.

**Avoiding the “Feedback Loop”: External Competition Worsening Domestic Instability**

A key implication of your study is that involvement can worsen instability. Therefore:

- External actors should avoid backing factions in ways that intensify polarization,
- Aid and investment should be conditioned on governance safeguards,
- Information influence operations should be discouraged through norms and diplomatic pressure.

This reduces the risk that great-power competition becomes a driver of domestic instability.

**Conclusion**

Political instability in South Asia is not merely a domestic governance problem; it is a strategic driver of regional insecurity and a major factor shaping Indo-Pacific geopolitics. This study has shown that instability—manifested through governance crises, institutional weakness, polarization, insurgency, terrorism, and economic fragility—undermines state capacity and predictability. These domestic vulnerabilities generate regional security threats, including cross-border militancy, border incidents, refugee flows, economic disruption, and maritime risks.

Through the lens of neorealism, political instability increases vulnerability and invites external influence because power competition in an anarchic system rewards actors who can gain leverage in strategically important regions. Balance of power theory explains why great powers respond competitively: when one actor expands influence—through military partnerships, infrastructure finance, or strategic access—others counterbalance to prevent dominance. Regional security complex theory further clarifies why threats spill over in South Asia: proximity and historical rivalries create interdependent security dynamics, ensuring that domestic crises often become regional concerns.

The study concludes that political instability creates “strategic openings” for great powers to expand political, economic, and military involvement in the Indo-Pacific. While external engagement can sometimes provide stability and economic support, it can also intensify rivalry and feed back into domestic polarization, worsening instability. Therefore, long-term stability requires strengthening governance, developing regional cooperation mechanisms, improving crisis management, and managing external involvement through transparency and diversified partnerships.

Ultimately, understanding how political instability drives security threats and attracts great powers is essential for both scholars and policymakers. As the Indo-Pacific becomes more central to global power competition, South Asia’s internal political developments will increasingly influence the region’s security order and the trajectory of great-power rivalry.

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