

Cinematic Horizontal Leverage: Visual Narratives and India–China Strategic Competition in the Indo-Pacific.

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Abstract

Cinema is increasingly recognized as an important site for the production of geopolitical meaning. Previous scholarships have focused mainly on popular geopolitics, nationalism, soft power, collective memory, and strategic narratives in film, while relatively little has been written on the ways in which strategic meanings produced in a given geopolitical context can become relevant elsewhere, off-screen. The present article aims to solve this problem by introducing the concept of cinematic horizontal leverage. Cinematic horizontal leverage is defined as the creation of transferrable ideational resources presented in cinematic images of conflict, sovereignty, and national power. With a comparative qualitative textual and visual analysis, the article analyses four films: *Haqeeqat* (1964), *Uri: The Surgical Strike* (2019), *Operation Red Sea* (2018), and *The Battle at Lake Changjin* (2021). The study reveals unique, yet transferable stories of sovereign action, strategic agency, military prowess, geographical expansion, sacrifice, and endurance. It argues that what moves across geopolitical contexts is not the conflict itself but the strategic meaning derived from its cinematic representation. The article adds a new framework for understanding the spatial mobility of geopolitical meaning, by combining widely-used geopolitical concepts with strategic-narrative scholarship and the cross-theatre logic of strategic competition. It argues that cinema has the power to affect the broader ideational context of strategic competition by making geographically localized experiences of conflict meaningful in the context of broader geopolitical and national identity understandings of national power....

Keywords: Cinematic horizontal leverage, strategic narratives, India–China relations, geopolitical cinema, Indo-Pacific.

Introduction

The rivalry between India and China is not confined to one theater. While the unresolved Himalayan border dispute is the immediate flash point for military tensions, their competitive relationship extends to the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea, and the broader Indo-Pacific (Brewster, 2018; Pardesi, 2021; Schottli, 2026). This geographical dispersion poses an important question: if conflict, sovereignty, and national power are conceived in the narratives of various theatres, do they become relevant outside their respective geographical contexts? This article addresses that question through cinema.

The film is a significant geopolitical place of meaning-making. Popular geopolitics shows how geopolitical ideas can be created outside official documents and elite strategic discourse, in popular cultural forms (Dodds, 2008, 2019). Cinema has the power to make complicated political realities engaging, moving stories about threat, sacrifice, heroism and national purpose (Carter & Dodds, 2014). In this way it helps to build up understandings of territory, nationhood, danger, and the outside other (Dittmer & Dodds, 2008). This literature explicitly links the relevance of film to geopolitics and International Relations.

This is especially true to India and China, where the cinema has time and again approached the themes of war, territorial issues, historical memory, and military force. For instance, it is well illustrated in the Uberoi's (2011) analysis of *Haqeeqat* (1964), that how the Indian war film was linked with territoriality and its construction of mistrust towards China. The same military attributes, concepts of national defence, sacrifice and strategic reach have been similarly portrayed in more recent Indian and Chinese security films. The existing scholarship offers

some helpful frameworks for analysis of such representations in terms of popular geopolitics, nationalism, collective memory, soft power, and strategic narratives (Dodds, 2008; Miskimmon et al., 2013). But there is a clear spatial question here – how can strategic meanings created by a cinematic depiction of one conflict become significant beyond the geopolitical stage represented on the screen?

This article tackles this question by elaborating on the notion of cinematic horizontal leverage. The idea is that the conflict, the sovereignty and the national power are presented in films and that such ideational resources can be transferred from one geopolitical theatre to another, in the sense that strategic meanings found in one place and time in one film come to have meaning beyond the immediate location in which they are depicted. It is about strategic movement and not about military movement. Hence, a local war can be escalated to a national one of identity, threat, determination, capability, or geopolitical intent.

The article asks: How can conflict, sovereignty and national power be reworked into strategic meanings that gain significance beyond the context of their immediate geopolitical situation in Indian and Chinese film narratives, and how can it be theorized as cinematic horizontal leverage?

The study attempts to answer this question by undertaking a comparative qualitative analysis of four films: *Haqeeqat* (1964), *Uri: The Surgical Strike* (2019), *Operation Red Sea* (2018), and *The Battle at Lake Changjin* (2021). The films are set in different historical and security contexts, but share one analytical element: each is a story that recasts a particular security or conflict experience in a larger national identity, sovereignty, capability, or strategic purpose.

The article makes three contributions. It first presents the concept of horizontal leverage as a cinematic framework for describing the mobility of strategic meaning in cinematic representation. Second, it introduces popular geopolitics and strategic-narrative scholarship into strategic interaction across the theatre. Third, it explores the visual and narrative aspects of India-China strategic competition in addition to the traditional focus on material power, diplomacy and security policy.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework: From Popular Geopolitics to Cinematic Horizontal Leverage

Cinema, popular geopolitics, and strategic narratives

Popular geopolitics shows that geopolitical knowledge is not only created and disseminated through official policy, diplomatic communication and strategic institutions, but also through popular cultural forms. Film is especially important because it is a medium of narration and depiction that is used to make political ideas understandable through the depiction of conflict, territory, threat, heroism and national identity. Geopolitical complexity can be structured in cinematic texts in terms of differences between the national Self and the external Other, to security and insecurity, and to legitimate and illegitimate uses of power (Carter & Dodds, 2014; Dodds, 2008).

This is especially true of war and security films. Videos that show conflict can create wider understandings of the country, their enemies and the political implications of military action (Power, 2007).

Popular-geopolitical approaches, however, are mainly concerned with explaining the representation and construction of geopolitical meanings. They are less interested in the possibility of meanings created by the portrayal of one conflict gaining resonance beyond the geopolitical stage on screen.

The second theoretical underpinning comes from strategic-narrative scholarship. Political meaning is created through strategic narratives, which include structuring around identity, political actors, international order, and appropriate forms of action (Miskimmon et al., 2013). When applied to the moving image, it helps to explain how images of conflict can help to develop larger pictures of national purpose, military power, external danger, and legitimate action. However, neither popular geopolitics nor strategic-narrative scholarship directly discusses the spatial movement of strategic meaning across geopolitical settings. This gap is the starting point for the concept that is developed here.

From cross-theatre strategic interaction to cinematic horizontal leverage

A strategic analogy can be found in the literature on “horizontal escalation” and “cross domain strategic interaction.” Horizontal escalation refers to the spread of conflict beyond the theatre of operations, and cross-domain scholarship looks at strategic interaction between operational domains (Fitzsimmons, 2019; Gartzke & Lindsay, 2019). More broadly, this literature shows that strategic actions and their implications do not need to be localized geographically or operationally and can have an impact on signalling, perceptions of resolve and strategic calculations in other places (Gannon, 2022; Lindsay & Gartzke, 2020).

The present article does not equate cinema with military escalation or deterrence. It, however, takes the underlying spatial logic that strategic relevance does not have to be geographically localized. What can traverse across contexts in cinematic representation is not military force, but strategic meaning. A border clash could create a narrative of national sovereignty; an overseas military effort could construct an image of national reach and operational capability.

Based on this premise, the definition of Cinematic Horizontal Leverage is:

The creation of transferable ideational resources by means of cinematic representations of conflict, sovereignty and national power, with strategic meanings that emerge from one geopolitical theatre but gain resonance beyond the immediate space depicted on the screen.

The concept has three stages. Cinema is first a source theatre, for example a border conflict, military operation, foreign intervention, a historical war. Second, this experience is told through a strategic narrative, in which there are representations of threat, sovereignty, sacrifice, military capability, endurance and national purpose. Third, the narrative produces transferable ideational resources as it makes available, outside the original theatre, more general propositions regarding national identity and power.

The analytical question thus becomes not only "how does cinema represent a conflict or an adversary," but "how does cinema represent a conflict or an adversary that creates strategic meanings that go beyond its immediate geopolitical context? This is one way to distinguish the representation of geopolitical reality from the larger relevance that strategic meaning can gain, the horizontal leverage of the film.

The idea also differs from soft-power. Soft power, according to Nye (2004), is based mainly on influencing others through attraction and not through force or monetary compensation. Instead, Cinematic horizontal leverage is about the transferability of strategic meaning. A story of sacrifice, a story of revenge, a story of military skill or endurance can be important without necessarily being appealing; it is important because of the meanings it can trigger in the discourse of sovereignty, threat, capability, and national purpose.

Cinematic horizontal leverage, therefore, is an analytical space that lies between popular geopolitics and strategic studies. Popular geopolitics is a way of explaining how cinema creates geopolitical imaginaries, strategic-narrative scholarship is a way of explaining how narratives organize political meaning, and research on horizontal escalation and cross-domain interaction is a way of demonstrating that strategic consequences do not necessarily stay within a single setting (Fitzsimmons, 2019; Gannon, 2022; Gartzke & Lindsay, 2019). These understandings can be used to consider the potential for cinematic stories to produce strategic meanings that are relevant in broader geopolitics.

The framework is to help in comparative analysis of above mentioned four movies. The study is not about comparing similar conflicts, but rather about a process common to them: the way in which different source theatres are turned into strategic narratives that create larger network of ideational resources on national power and geopolitical identity.

3. Methodology and Case Selection

The comparative qualitative textual and visual analysis is used in this study, which is based on four films as mentioned earlier. The strategy draws on popular geopolitics and strategic-narrative analysis, and connects to cinema as a space of political and geopolitical construction of meaning, as opposed to simply reflecting it (Carter & Dodds, 2014; Dodds, 2008; Miskimmon et al., 2013). The use of qualitative analysis of cinematic texts is especially suitable for examining the ways in which meanings are constructed around political identity, geopolitical space and international relations (Carter & Dodds, 2014; Power, 2007).

A theoretically-informed case-selection strategy was employed to select the cases. Though each is a unique historical and geopolitical context, they are analytically similar as each creates a larger story out of a given experience of conflict or security, reflecting a particular national identity, sovereignty, threat or power. It is not to compare the conflicts in history, but to look at the representational process by which geographically located events create broader strategic meanings. This approach is consistent with purposive qualitative sampling, which involves selecting cases for specific reasons other than representativeness of the sample, but because they are especially informative in the study of a given analytical phenomenon (Palinkas et al., 2013).

Haqeeqat is the direct link of strategic competition between India and China. The backdrop of the film is the 1962 India-China War and ties the ground conflict to the sacrificing for the country and the building of an external enemy. Uberoi's (2011) study of the film shows how vital it is to the understanding of how Indian war film, territoriality, and the post-1962 development of mistrust towards China are connected. *Uri: The Surgical Strike*, on the other hand, comes out of the Kashmir security narrative and brings focus on the attitude of retaliation, operational capability and military determination. The Indian cases together make it possible to explore the production of narratives of territorial sovereignty and strategic agency in various security experiences.

Contrasting geopolitical contexts are provided in the Chinese cases. *Operation Red Sea* focuses on a Chinese military action in an overseas security environment, highlighting protection of Chinese nationals, military mobility, and operational capability outside of China's borders. The present study places *Operation Red Sea* in the context of the rise of Chinese blockbuster films that symbolized Chinese self-confidence and linked film spectacle with the global imagination of a new China (Zhang, 2020). Specifically, recent studies have classified the film into a Chinese film "citizen evacuation" tradition and connected the overseas location to the protection of Chinese nationals and interests as China's presence in the world grows (Gao, 2026). *The Battle at Lake Changjin* revisits the Korean War, and builds up the nation's strength through historical remembrance, sacrifice, endurance and resistance under material asymmetry. Kotowski's (2024) work directly supports the analysis of the film in

terms of the politics of Korean War memory and its role in the current Chinese war film. The two films tie together the memory of history and the contemporary image of military strength with the wider image of China's geopolitical identity.

The comparative corpus is thus historically and geographically varied and yet analytically coherent. Five analytical categories are used for each case:

Spatial imagination- the film's construction of homeland, border, battlefield, foreign territory, strategic space.

Strategic Other- how adversaries and external threats are represented.

Sovereignty and legitimacy- how military action and national interests are justified.

Military power and resolve- the nature of sacrifice, capability, discipline, technology, mobility or endurance.

Narrative transfer- the broader strategic meaning created from the representation that goes beyond the immediate conflict shown.

The first four are concerned with the wider issues of popular geopolitics and strategic-narrative analysis, including geopolitical space, identity, threat, political legitimacy and national purpose (Dodds, 2008, 2019; Miskimmon et al., 2013). The fifth category, narrative transfer, is the original analytical application of the concept of cinematic horizontal leverage in the article.

The fifth category is important for the comparative analysis as it reveals the process by which a geographically specific security experience is translated into a wider security message about a nation's power or geopolitical identity. An argument about a border dispute might create a story of a sovereign act, a foreign deployment might build a sense of strategic scope. The analysis thus transcends the question of what a film is to the more general strategic propositions that are articulated via representation.

The study is designed to be text-centred. It is an examination of the film narratives and visuals in the selected films, not of audience reception, the impact of the films on the commercial market, or the influence on policy, nor of changes in strategic behaviour. It aims to elucidate and contrast the geopolitical significance of the films and to explore how such significance fits into a wider geopolitical discourse of national power and strategic identity. The article does not therefore assert that movies have an immediate impact on foreign-policy behaviour or that viewers necessarily read the movies the same way.

This methodological limitation is significant. The primary reason for analyzing the horizontal leverage in the context of cinema here is to consider it as a representational and interpretive process rather than something that can be measured as a cause-effect relationship. The study explores the strategic messages embedded in the films and evaluates how these messages are either anchored to the original source theatre or offer more universal concepts regarding sovereignty, threat, capability, resolve, and national identity.

With this methodology, a shared analytical framework is used in four different geopolitical contexts. The Indian and Chinese cases are analysed in isolation in the following sections and then compared in terms of the meanings produced across the corpus.

4. Indian Cinematic Narratives: Threat, Sovereignty and Resolve

Indian security cinema has repeatedly transformed specific conflicts into a larger story of sovereignty, sacrifice and power of the nation. Both the films studied here have very different historical backgrounds, but neither is merely a reflection of what they portray. While *Haqeeqat* is a story of a war that was all about vulnerable territory and the act of giving up one's sovereignty, *Uri: The Surgical Strike* is one about the power of a nation to retaliate, operate with efficiency and exert control. As a pair, they provide two different cinematic enactments of Indian security.

***Haqeeqat*: Territorial Vulnerability and Sovereign Resolve**

Haqeeqat, a 1964 film by Chetan Anand, was released just after the India-China War in 1962, making it a significant film in Indian war cinema. Beyond the military context, it is important because it is a symbol of the country's vulnerability, sacrifice, and territorial commitment to the Himalayan frontier. The analysis of Uberoi (2011) finds *Haqeeqat* as a crucial cultural text that is linked to the conflict between India and China and to the territoriality, borders and the reproduction of public distrust of China.

The border in *Haqeeqat* is not just a place, it's a zone of feeling. Its distance and severity highlight the fragility of those who would defend it and its place in a broader national sense of territory. The battle, then, creates an external threat that is not limited to the battlefield. China is not only perceived as an imminent military threat but also as a part of the geopolitical imagination of insecurity stemming from threats to Indian sovereignty. This is aligned with Uberoi's (2011) view that the movie helped to reinforce a lasting impression of China as threatening and distrustful.

The film builds the justification for military action by means of defence and sacrifice. The moral dimension of sovereignty is achieved when soldiers are willing to suffer and die for territory. *Haqeeqat* is not primarily built around the idea of national power based on technological advantage or on decisive operational triumphs like later security cinema. Rather, in the story of the film, military might is equated mainly with courage, discipline, endurance and sacrifice in the face of vulnerability.

The overall story is therefore of a sovereign resolve. The 1962 war becomes a larger issue of territorial integrity and the value of sacrifice in national commitment to its defence. In this context, the movie transforms an experience that is fundamentally military into a catalogue of resistance to an outside pressure. This story is important not because it has replaced the immediate Himalayan conflict in its telling, but because it has shifted to an imaginative notion of sovereignty, territorial allegiance and national strength.

Uri: The Surgical Strike: Retaliation and Strategic Agency

Uri: The Surgical Strike is a stark counterpoint to the movie's conception of Indian security. The film is centred in the context of the Uri attack and the surgical strike conducted by the Indian Army, but it uses a more expansive nationalist narrative framework (Iyer & Das, 2024). Iyer and Das's analysis uncovers the way *Uri* portrays historical events in a specific ideological framework and how the film is embedded in a broader cinematic nationalist framework.

The movie follows a progression from injury to response; threat leads to planning and co-ordinating, military action, and retaliation. In this framework of storytelling, sovereignty is not just about protecting the land, but also about being able to act in the face of external challenges. This reading aligns with the analysis of Iyer and Das (2024) that *Uri* employs narrative techniques to structure the surgical strike and the historical events linked to it within a broader context of nationalism as an ideology.

The spatial imagination of the film is therefore different to *Haqeeqat*. The frontier is primarily seen as a weak space that needs to be defended in the earlier movie. In *Uri*, however, the space of security is an operational space where threats are detected, intelligence is activated and military force is thrown outside of the primary domain of the initial attack. Strategic agency is then linked to mobility, planning, coordination and ability to respond.

The military power is manifested in intelligence, technology, planning, specialized capability and political-military coordination. The film's main thesis is not limited to the specific mission that it portrays, but rather that national power is linked to the ability to shift from injury to restraint to calibrated military force when faced with a security challenge. Retaliation thus becomes a cinematic demonstration of skill and determination. The representation must also be seen as a nationalist construction of reality, not as a neutral description of the strategic reality (Iyer & Das, 2024).

The resulting story is one of strategic agency. While the Kashmir security story is pertinent to the *Uri* narrative, it is also an attempt to build a larger picture of India as a state that can identify threats, coordinate institutions and take coordinated military action. This specific security event then is used as the foundation for a broader proposition about state capacity, military capability, and national resolve.

From Vulnerability to Agency

There is a stark difference between the two movies in how they're built with the notion of security. The two movies, therefore, have a significant difference in Indian cinematic constructions of security. *Haqeeqat* relates national strength with sacrifice in the event of territorial vulnerability while *Uri* relates with operational competence and proactive response. The former paints a picture of watchfulness and sovereign will, the latter emphasizes strategic agency and believable capability.

They are relatively significant in their ability to turn various security experiences into a larger narrative of national power. In *Haqeeqat*, it is a question of sovereignty, a question of sacrifice, a question of resistance to external pressure; in *Uri*, it is a question of the power of active strategic response of India. The idea that these films had a direct impact on foreign policy or audience actions is not necessary in either interpretation. Instead, however, following the methodology of this article, the analysis focuses on the strategic meanings that are made available in the films themselves.

This contrast is the first empirical demonstration of the "horizontal leverage" characteristic of cinema. The geographical space of the conflict represented by the source theatre is not the end of the story. *Haqeeqat* is a Himalayan border war, and *Uri* is a specific counterterrorism operation, both of which are part of a greater story of territorial vigilance and sovereign resolve, and strategic agency and the capacity for calibrated action. In both cases, geographically situated security experiences generate transferable ideational resources concerning how Indian national power, sovereignty, and resolve can be imagined.

5. Chinese Cinematic Narratives: Historical Memory and Strategic Reach

The Chinese cases offer a complementary view of the connection between cinematic representation and strategic meaning. The vulnerability and agency are central to the Indian films, whereas *Operation Red Sea* and *The Battle at Lake Changjin* focus on two aspects of Chinese geopolitical identity: the ability to exert State power over geographical distance and the capacity to endure sacrifice from outside pressure. They illustrate that the experience of both security in the past and in the present can be enlarged into a wider narrative of the nation's capability.

Operation Red Sea: Strategic Reach and Overseas Capability

Operation Red Sea is a 2018 film directed by Dante Lam and is related to the China's evacuation to overseas experience, especially the evacuation of Chinese nationals from Yemen in 2015. The film has been recently

categorized as one in a series of Chinese “citizen evacuation” films inspired by evacuation from war-torn countries and related to China's rising global economic engagement and increased protection of Chinese nationals and assets in foreign countries (Gao, 2026).

Its importance is that it has a very expansive geopolitical imagination. The film does not have a conventional border conflict story, but places Chinese military action in a distant security zone and develops national interest in terms of national security beyond China's immediate geographic border. Zhang (2020) describes *Operation Red Sea* as one of China's present-day blockbusters, which is not only commercial but also official and represents the “culture self-confidence” of a growing Chinese nation.

The strategic space of the film encompasses foreign space, the movement of sea and the protection of the citizens and interests abroad. National security is then not limited to the realm of the country. Distant instability (a threat to Chinese nationals or interests) becomes strategically important when it threatens to impact Chinese nationals and interests, and the ability to respond from a distance becomes a “film image of state capability.” Gao's (2026) analysis is especially relevant here, as it places *Operation Red Sea* in the context of Chinese film culture, international genre norms, and China's foreign policy concerns over its overseas citizens and interests.

The strategic Other is not represented by a traditional territorial opponent but by disorder, armed violence and instability. The framing allows China to portray its military action as protecting and stabilising. In the film's story, the legitimacy of force is based mainly on the protection of citizens and national interests, and military power is displayed by its mobility, technological capacity, special operations, and coordination in various operational areas. The big picture then is the strategic reach. The foreign environment is then used to depict the Chinese nation as an entity that has the power to function outside its own territory and defend its interests in another place. This interpretation is in keeping with Zhang's (2020) description of *Operation Red Sea* as an expression of the confidence that came with China's rise, and Gao's (2026) more specific understanding of this film and the formation of a Chinese national and global imaginary of state activity overseas.

The Battle at Lake Changjin: Historical Sacrifice and Strategic Endurance

The Battle at Lake Changjin takes a different route to build a nation's power. The movie, which was released in 2021, brings back the Korean War, and focuses on the idea of collective sacrifice, endurance and resistance. As Kotowski (2024) shows, the movie both draws on existing themes in Chinese collective memory of the Korean War and packages them up for a modern audience. His analysis places the film in the context of the political and cultural evolution of Korean War memory and offers a concrete foundation for the analysis of the film's representation of historical conflict as a source of contemporary national meaning.

The Korean theatre is historically specific but the film builds up a larger strategic identity through the representation of conflict. The foreign battlefield is a part of the historical story of the country, in which the pressure and military asymmetry are a challenge to the country's resistance. Material disadvantage does not automatically create a story of weakness, rather it creates the context in which sacrifice and endurance become significant as expressions of collective strength.

Resilience is the dominant attribute of military power, rather than technology. The lives of soldiers are difficult and the discipline and giving up of the group are seen as a source of strength. This focus aligns with Kotowski's (2024) observation that the movie taps into familiar themes entrenched in collective memory and connects them to the current political messaging.

The overall story is a tale of strategic endurance. The Korean War becomes not just a historical event, but a symbol of the Korean people's resilience and ability to accept significant sacrifices when faced with foreign pressure. The film makes history's sacrifice relevant to a wider geopolitical identity which is not only about material strength but about collective endurance, will and resistance.

From Strategic Endurance to Strategic Reach

Both films form complementary pictures of the Chinese national power. *The Battle at Lake Changjin* highlights the ability to endure and the *Operation Red Sea* highlights the ability to reach. One is based on past sacrifice and memory of the collective, the other on current operational capability, overseas security and geographical mobility. It is their relative significance in the construction of a national capability story which makes them important in comparison. The Korean battlefield embodies resilience and endurance, while the foreign evacuation environment evokes a sense of mobility and strategic reach. These two aspects help to create a cinematic image of China as a strong power that can withstand pressure and can function outside its own immediate space.

This is also the Chinese example of cinematic horizontal leverage. The theme of strategic meaning in *The Battle at Lake Changjin* is expanded beyond the historical Korean theatre, where sacrifice and endurance are broadened to a proposition of national resilience. An overseas security crisis, as in *Operation Red Sea*, also transcends its immediate context to suggest a broader proposition of how far China can extend its protection of citizens and interests. In both, the represented source theatre provides ideational resources that can be transferred in terms of national power, geopolitical identity, will and capability.

6. Narrative Transfer and Cinematic Horizontal Leverage

Each of the four films analyzed in this study is unique in historical era, location, and security situation. *Haqeeqat* is an outcome of the India-China War of 1962, Kashmir security scenario, Operation Red Sea from an overseas security scenario and The Battle at Lake Changjin from the Korean War. What they have in common is an analytical significance. Though, they both present a geographically-specific security experience as a broader narrative about national identity, sovereignty, threat, capability, or power.

This process can be explained in three stages:

Source Theatre → Strategic Narrative → Transferable Ideational Resource

The geographical and historical context is provided by the source theatre. Cinema is a means of transforming this into a strategic narrative, representing threat, sovereignty, sacrifice, military capability, endurance, mobility, or national purpose. When this representation makes reference to a larger statement about national identity or power, and its importance is not limited to the theatre in which it was created, then a transferable ideational resource arises.

Source theatre	Film	Strategic narrative	Transferable ideational resource
Sino-Indian border	<i>Haqeeqat</i>	Territorial vulnerability and sacrifice	Sovereign resolve
Kashmir security environment	<i>Uri: The Surgical Strike</i>	Retaliation and operational competence	Strategic agency
Overseas security environment	<i>Operation Red Sea</i>	Mobility and protection of interests abroad	Strategic reach
Korean War	<i>The Battle at Lake Changjin</i>	Sacrifice and resistance under pressure	Strategic endurance

A military conflict that began in 1950 in Korea was known as the Korean War. The main claim is that the battle is not what travels from one geopolitical context to another but rather its strategic significance, which is shaped by its cinematic presentation. The 1962 India–China War does not become a South China Sea War, the Korean War does not have a directly transferable military model. Instead, their images in film produce larger ideas about national strength: sovereignty is a matter of will; threats can be met with strategic action; national interests can be pursued beyond geographical boundaries; and material pressure can be resisted through joint endurance.

This argument is an expansion of popular-geopolitical analysis, and it draws attention to the spatial mobility of geopolitical meaning. Popular geopolitics has shown how cultural texts are involved in the construction and circulation of geopolitical imaginations (Dodds, 2008, 2019). This analysis questions the relevance of meanings created through the representations of geographical spaces and their ability to transcend the space they represent. The border can be a symbol of sovereignty, the overseas operation a proof of strategic reach, the historical battlefield an opportunity for imagining national resilience: cinema can do that.

Different configurations of this process are found in the Indian and Chinese cases. For the Indian corpus, *Haqeeqat* is a way of thinking about the vulnerability of territory as a story of sovereign will, while for *Uri* it is a consideration of a security crisis as a proposition of strategic agency. *The Battle at Lake Changjin* is about strategic endurance in the Chinese corpus, whereas *Operation Red Sea* is about strategic reach, in the sense of mobility across the sea and protection.

The comparison illustrates that horizontal leverage in the cinema is not necessarily based on similar national narratives. Sovereign resolve, strategic agency, strategic reach, and strategic endurance are all ideational resources, but each is more than just a property of the specific conflict or geographical context in which it was developed; each is a statement of something larger and more general about national power and geopolitical identity.

This is where the analytical value of cinematic horizontal leverage comes into play. It is a process in which geographically localized film images create strategic meanings that have implications that can reach geopolitical areas beyond the immediate context. The idea is about the transferability of strategic meaning, rather than the geographical movement of the military force. Cinema does not replace physical resources or military strength, rather it is part of the collection of ideas that enables one to imagine sovereignty, threat, capability, resolve and national purpose.

This is especially important for India–China strategic competition as it plays out in various geographies, and cannot be viewed through a single border or maritime theatre (Kiet et al., 2025). Experiences of one context can be woven into larger narratives of national power which are not conceptually limited to that context. It is therefore a more appropriate way of viewing cinematic horizontal leverage as an interpretive mechanism, and not as a direct causal influence.

In this regard, the concept points to a relationship between popular geopolitics and geographically distributed strategic competition. Popular culture can not only be a representation of geopolitics in a specific context, it can make strategic propositions, which are products of contextually limited experiences, accessible to broader geopolitical interpretation. While the source theatre is historically specific, meanings around sovereignty, agency, reach and endurance can transcend it.

This comparative finding connects all four cases, as the geographical specificity of the source experience is preserved, and the strategic meaning created by the cinematic representation is potentially transferable. That's what the main idea of the horizontal leverage in film is.

7. Conclusion

The article builds on the idea of cinematic horizontal leverage, which aims to offer an explanation of how cinema has turned geographically localized experiences of conflict into larger ones of national power and geopolitical identity. It shows that the meanings of war can be cinematic, that is, one that can be created by a film and that can extend beyond its geographical boundaries through a comparative analysis of four movies. These four cases yield different ideational resources: *Haqeeqat* develops the concept of sovereign resolve, *Uri* emphasizes strategic agency, *Operation Red Sea* is strategic reach, and *The Battle at Lake Changjin* is strategic endurance. These meanings are grounded in specific historical contexts, yet they are part of a more general assertion of national ability, identity and strategic intent.

The main contribution of the article has been to redirect the focus from the geographical location of the conflict of cinema to the broader mobility of the strategic meaning. The cinematic horizontal leverage offers a way to analyse the roles of representations of sovereignty, sacrifice, threat and capability in the production of geopolitical imaginaries outside their home theatres, to bring popular geopolitics into dialogue with the geographically dispersed nature of current strategic competition.

The limitations of the study are the text-centred methodology and corpus of four cases. It does not provide evidence of audience reception or a direct influence on policy and strategic behaviour, and these questions are left to future research.

However, the idea is much broader in its implications when it comes to the study of competition between India and China or other geographically distributed competition. If strategic competition is played out across several theatres, then cultural narratives also might produce meanings that are greater than their original contexts. Cinematic horizontal leverage thus provides a first approximation to the connections between the imaginative power of representation, strategic significance, and a form of geopolitical rivalry that is dispersed..

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