



RESEARCH PAPER

**Pakistan's Foreign Policy in the Context of Regional Dynamics:
Challenges and Opportunities**

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the foreign policy of Pakistan in the changing dynamics of the region by considering the existing issues and new opportunities for the country. Pakistan's geographical position between South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East affects the priorities in its foreign policy relations. Past conflicts, security threats, and economic dependency are the factors that shape the foreign policy of the country. The research utilizes a qualitative methodology, with the use of secondary data sources, policies, and regional cases for analysis. The findings of the research show that the country is constrained from being more influential in the region due to conflicts with India, uncertain situation in Afghanistan, and lack of cooperation with Iran. However, the economic cooperation with China via CPEC increases the country's influence. Pakistan needs to work for balanced diplomacy and increase regional economic integration while emphasizing dialogue in order to achieve stability.

KEYWORDS Pakistan, China, CPEC

Introduction

The foreign policy of Pakistan reflects the national interests and security considerations of the state. Being located strategically at the crossroads of different continents makes it highly important geopolitically. The country shares borders with four other nations – namely, India, China, Afghanistan, and Iran, thus positioning itself among the most significant geopolitical entities in South Asia (Bibi, et al., 2023). It can be said that Pakistan is located at the intersection of three continents – South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. For a long time, the foreign policy of Pakistan was determined by a variety of factors, including security and strategic concerns, domestic political issues, economic imperatives, and power rivalry within the region as well as worldwide. Presently, rapid changes occurring on the regional scene make it necessary for the country to reconsider its foreign policy (Muzaffar & Khan, 2021).

As a result of the changing nature of alliances worldwide, the rising of China as a power in the international system, the political instability in Afghanistan, and changing roles of India in regional politics, the geopolitical environment of Pakistan has become more and more complex. The relationships between Pakistan and its neighboring countries, specifically with India and Afghanistan, play a crucial role in determining the foreign policy priorities of Pakistan. Historical issues of dispute between Pakistan and India, including the territorial dispute over Kashmir, as well as the problems of national security related to the threat of terrorism and the border protection issues, pose serious foreign policy challenges for Pakistan (Masood, et. al.2019; Muzaffar et al. 2019). Equally

important is the role that the issues of political instability and security play in the context of Pakistan's relationship with its neighbor, Afghanistan. On the other hand, Pakistan tries to pursue an equilibrium foreign policy in its relation with the rest of the major powers of the world, including China, the United States, Russia, and the Muslim world (Khan & Adnan, 2024; Masood, et. al.2020).

The aspect of economic diplomacy has increasingly been seen as an integral part of the foreign policy of Pakistan during the last few decades. Due to economic problems, shortages in energy supply, trade deficits, and the requirement for sustainable development, the government of Pakistan has been compelled to pay heed towards regional economic and connectivity endeavors. One of the major examples in this regard includes the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor within the context of China's 'Belt and Road' project that is considered vital for Pakistan in transforming itself into a geo-economic entity that will connect various regions together. The foreign policy of Pakistan is undergoing transformation from the realm of security to economic diplomacy (Nawaz, Mohsin, & Naeem, 2024).

The relevance of this study lies in the fact that it tries to analyze Pakistan's foreign policy amid the fast-changing political and economic circumstances in the region as well as internationally. As a multipolar international order is emerging, there will be even greater need for Pakistan to devise its foreign policy in order to safeguard its security and foster economic development, in addition to promoting peace in the region. This is why Pakistan's foreign policy must succeed in meeting all the new threats that will emerge in the coming years while also benefiting from the new opportunities available to it.

The reason behind carrying out this research is due to the increasing necessity of studying not only the security aspects of foreign policy of Pakistan but also the economic diplomacy of Pakistan. Considering the changing regional dynamics, it becomes imperative for Pakistan to adopt a flexible and balanced foreign policy approach so as to protect the interests of the country. The aim of this research is to examine the issues faced by Pakistan along with exploring the means through which Pakistan could become strong in the regional and international environment. The internal as well as external factors are essential in understanding the behavior of Pakistan's foreign policy in the contemporary era (Hamid & Aquil, 2023).

Literature Review

The foreign policy of Pakistan has evolved keeping in view the security environment, economic interests, and power balance in the world. The theory proposed that due to the strategic position of Pakistan in South Asia, its foreign policy becomes highly contingent upon the relationship with neighbors and the outside world (Shahzad & Javaid, 2020). Security issues, especially India tensions and unrest in Afghanistan, keep on dominating the diplomatic agenda of Pakistan. It is further argued by researchers that the foreign policy of Pakistan has always been dominated by security issues because of regional conflicts (Muzaffar et al. 2021; Khan & Alvi, 2026).

In recent times, economic diplomacy has become an important factor in the foreign policy of Pakistan. CPEC is considered a big development project that has helped Pakistan to enhance its strategic relations with China and has provided new avenues for trade and development (Rahim, et al., 2018; Khizar & Ahmad, 2022). According to studies, the shift towards geo-economics and regional integration as part of Pakistan's

foreign policy agenda due to the impact of CPEC has been observed (Rizvi & Khan, 2023; Shah, et al., 2020). Nonetheless, political instability, governance issues, debt problems, and security threats among others remain to impact the realization of these agendas (Fazal & Khan, 2023).

It is also contended that the evolving global order and increasing influence of China and India in the U.S., respectively, have added new diplomatic complications for Pakistan. Within the context of a multipolar global order, it becomes imperative for Pakistan to maintain a foreign policy stance that takes into account both security concerns and economic diplomacy (Shahzad & Javaid, 2020). It is widely acknowledged that there exists a need for Pakistan to enhance its economic diplomacy efforts, foster positive regional relations, and address emerging non-traditional challenges, such as cyber security and climate change (Muzaffar, et al., 2018; Khizar & Ahmad, 2022).

The involvement of Pakistan in regional and international organizations for the purpose of fostering collaboration, peace, and economic development is another significant element in its foreign policy strategy. The country has been involved in organizations such as the SCO, OIC, and the UN to boost its diplomatic credentials and form regional partnerships. According to experts, regional and international organizations have enabled Pakistan to foster economic ties, resolve regional security issues, and develop its international reputation (Rizvi & Khan, 2023).

Moreover, Pakistan's increasing emphasis on connectivity with Central Asia, the Middle East, and China represents its move towards geo-economic diplomacy. But according to analysts, political unrest, economic reliance, and inconsistencies in foreign policies also hinder Pakistan from maximizing its potential through these avenues (Fazal & Khan, 2023).

Material and Methods

The current study adopts the qualitative approach to research. The current research is based on sources such as academic articles, books, reports, and studies.

Results and Discussions

Historical Conflicts and Pakistan's Foreign Policy Orientation

Foreign policy of Pakistan has been greatly influenced by the security concerns of the past. Security-oriented foreign policy of the country was developed as a result of continuous clashes with India, the Cold War alliance politics, war in Afghanistan, and international power play in general. It is because of its past experiences that Pakistan developed its security-oriented foreign policy.

Kashmir Dispute and Security-Based Foreign Policy

The Kashmir dispute was one of the foremost issues that shaped the foreign policy approach of Pakistan. With the division of British India in 1947, there arose a territorial dispute between India and Pakistan over the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, resulting in the outbreak of war between the two countries in 1948. As far as Pakistan is concerned, Kashmir holds great significance due to its predominantly Muslim population and geographic location. "The ongoing dispute made the relations hostile for both countries" and also highlighted the importance of military capabilities of Pakistan (Majid & Hussain, 2016).

Indo-Pak Wars and Strategic Thought

The Indo-Pak wars of 1965 and 1971 added fuel to the fire of Pakistan's security fears. While the former cemented in Pakistan's belief of an existential threat from India, the latter led to the dismemberment of East Pakistan as well as the emergence of Bangladesh, significantly impacting Pakistan's strategic thought process. Both wars instilled a sense of territorial integrity and military modernization within Pakistan's foreign policy decisions. The Kargil episode of 1999 was another such instance where territorial differences between both states had a profound impact on their strategic thought process (Shah & Ali, 2021).

Relations between Pakistan and the USA during the Cold War Era

Another important factor relating to Pakistan's foreign policy during the Cold War was its alliance with the United States during that time. Fearing the presence of India as well as the USSR in the area, Pakistan became an active participant of Western alliances such as SEATO and CENTO in the 1950s. Pakistan's alliance with the United States was based on the need for defense and not any other reason. Support from America helped Pakistan strengthen its defense mechanisms and position as an important frontline state against communism (Leake, 2013). In a similar vein, state that the relationship between the USA and Pakistan had a considerable impact on the foreign policy of the latter (Sunawar & Coutto, 2015).

Relations with China Post-Sino Indian War

After the Sino Indian War in 1962, relations with China grew ever more significant. The reason is because Pakistan saw China as an important strategic balancing force against the growing threat posed by India. "The Sino Indian war provided a propitious environment for the establishment of robust Pakistan-China relations on matters relating to Kashmir and other regional security challenges (Zaman & Khan, 2023)." Through this alliance with China, a strategic bond was established between the two nations, which has remained steadfast to this day.

The Afghan Conflict and Regional Security Dynamics

The Afghan conflict also had an important bearing on Pakistan's foreign policy formulation. When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, Pakistan was one of America's close allies that helped Afghan resistance forces against the invading forces. The involvement raised Pakistan's geopolitical significance but at the same time, increased its security vulnerabilities in the form of militancy, refugee problems, and borders' volatility. After America invaded Afghanistan in 2001, Pakistan's security interests were still pertinent to its policies regarding Afghanistan (Muzaffar et al. 2021a)

Strategic Alliances and Foreign Policy Behavior

Pakistan's foreign policy behavior has always been influenced by strategic alliances. Regardless of whether the alliance has been with the United States during the Cold War or with China at present, strategic alliances have been used by Pakistan as a means of balancing out its regional adversaries. It emphasizes that border disputes and geopolitical tensions have continuously affected Pakistan's foreign policy perspective (Kreutzmann, 2008).

Security Strategy and Geopolitics: China-Pakistan Relations in Regional Conflicts

Sino-Pakistani relations form one of the oldest strategic alliances in South Asia. Following the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two nations in 1951, they established strong political, military, and economic collaboration through the pursuit of their mutual interest and security within the region. Past wars, geopolitical rivalry, and regional instability have played an important role in molding this strategic alliance. Ultimately, the Sino-Pakistani alliance emerged as a strategic alliance which impacts regional conflicts, geopolitics, and security in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific region.

History and Development of the Relationship between China and Pakistan

The establishment of the relationship between China and Pakistan was established in the Cold War era where both nations had a common interest in having a strategic partnership to safeguard themselves from possible external threats. Initially, Pakistan was closely associated with America whereas China was isolated politically following its communist revolution in 1949. The changes in regional dynamics slowly paved the way for closer ties between the two nations. Trust was built by the two nations through diplomacy, border arrangements, and security concerns mainly regarding Indian regional power (Jacob, 2010).

In 1962, there was a war between China and India that played a vital role in shaping Sino-Pakistani relations. After the war, Pakistan started viewing China as a valuable power that could help Pakistan balance India strategically. The study reveals that the competition between China and India had provided a conducive environment for strengthening their bilateral ties.

Security and Defense Cooperation

Security and defense cooperation continue to be important factors in the relationship between China and Pakistan. The two nations have worked closely in the areas of military development, arms production, intelligence exchange, and defense strategy. The collaboration moved from conventional diplomacy to a broader strategic alliance driven by shared geopolitical goals (Small, 2015). China has supplied Pakistan with military technology, aircraft, missiles, and defense installations, while Pakistan has helped China achieve its strategic goals in South Asia and the Islamic world.

The connection has further been strengthened by conducting military drills and counterterrorism operations. Regional terror activities and instability post the September 11 attacks raised the strategic value of bilateral security cooperation for both parties. For China, terrorist groups were seen as a threat in Xinjiang, whereas Pakistan grappled with internal security challenges due to terrorism and regional instability (Duchâtel, 2010).

CPEC and Geopolitics in the Region

CPEC is considered an important event both in bilateral relations and geopolitics of the region. As one of the key projects of China's BRI, CPEC intends to link China's western area with the Arabian Sea via infrastructure, energy, and trade projects in Pakistan. CPEC has increased economic interdependence between China and Pakistan while increasing China's strategic access to the Indian Ocean (Kakar, 2020).

Nonetheless, CPEC has also escalated geopolitical rivalries within the region. For example, India is against the plan since it traverses territories that are contested in Gilgit-Baltistan. Furthermore, the US has shown its apprehensions about the increased Chinese influence in the region through economic engagements and infrastructure development initiatives. Thus, CPEC has turned out to be a double-edged sword for Pakistan, serving as both an economic and geopolitical tool.

Regional Conflicts and Strategic Issues

China-Pakistan ties have been affected significantly by regional conflicts between India, Afghanistan, and other world powers. India views China-Pakistan strategic alliance as a means to control its regional influence, hence escalating tensions in South Asia. Territorial issues and strategic rivalry still remain dominant aspects affecting triangular relations between China, Pakistan, and India.

Moreover, Afghanistan continues to play an important role in bilateral security calculus. Political instability, terrorism, and militant activity across the border have been factors impacting the region for decades now. "Security from terrorism, economic stability, and any outside interference were matters of grave concern for both the states (Gul & Ahmad, 2020)." Therefore, the two countries have developed joint security policies in the region.

Civil-Military Relations and Foreign Policy: Pakistan's Role in the Muslim World

For the past few decades, since gaining independence from India in 1947, Pakistan's foreign policy has largely been shaped by civil-military dynamics. This is because the country's military has been involved in deciding security policies and conducting diplomacy with the Muslim states. Over the years, owing to continuous political instability and intervention by the military in the affairs of the state, the army emerged as an important player in the foreign policy arena.

Historical Development of Civil-Military Relations

In Pakistan, civil-military relations developed amidst an unstable political climate due to ineffective democratic practices and increasing security issues. Almost immediately after gaining independence, Pakistan was engaged in disagreements with India over Kashmir, thereby enhancing the role of the armed forces in politics. The political instability and security problems facilitated the military's involvement in decision-making and diplomatic activities (Rizvi H.-A. , 2010).

Military regimes led by Ayub Khan, Zia-ul-Haq, and Pervez Musharraf entrenched the role of military in foreign policy. In this case, military commanders played a pivotal role in formulating strategies for foreign policy with regard to strategic alliances, diplomatic relations, and relations with the Muslim world. Imbalances between civil and military leaders usually led to low civilian control of foreign policy decisions (Tariq & Yaseen, 2019).

Influence of Military on Foreign Policy Decision Making

For long, the military has played an important role in formulating foreign policies in relation to other countries, such as India, Afghanistan, and others, as well as Pakistan's nuclear policy and alliance. Pakistan's foreign policy was formulated based on its

perception of security challenges in the region. Therefore, the military was actively involved in diplomacy (Ahmed, 2012).

The foreign policy pursued by Pakistan towards Afghanistan is an example of the impact that the military institution has had on foreign policy formulation. The military institution has been influenced by the issues of security along the borders, stability in the region, and the presence of India in Afghanistan. Likewise, the role played by Pakistan in the Kashmir dispute is linked to the military institution.

The Role of Pakistan in the Muslim Community

Since its inception, Pakistan has always strived to establish itself as a leading player in the Muslim community. Its relationship with Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, and the OIC is of prime importance in determining Pakistan's foreign policy direction. The common religion, economic ties, and military collaboration have made this possible.

Saudi Arabia has been among Pakistan's major allies strategically, offering economic and military aid during turbulent times. In addition, Pakistan has had close military ties with the Gulf countries due to defense and training programs. The relationship between Pakistan and Turkey has improved over time due to political, economic, and military cooperation.

The Pakistanis have always stood up for Muslim causes like Palestine and Kashmir in international platforms, especially in the Organization of Islamic Countries. Ideology and religion have played an important role in shaping Pakistan's rhetoric in their foreign policy, but the real diplomatic choices made were based on geopolitics (Chopra, 1993). The Pakistani support for Afghanistan in different conflicts is another example.

Alliances and Geopolitical Interests

The alliances formed by Pakistan with the US and China have greatly impacted the country's diplomatic relations in the Muslim world. In the context of the Cold War and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Pakistan emerged as an important ally of the US, receiving financial and military assistance in return for strategic collaboration. Such alliances enhanced the role of the army in foreign policy.

On the other hand, Pakistan established strong strategic ties with China in the domains of defense and economy. The construction of the Gwadar Port and other projects related to the cooperation between China and Pakistan improved the geopolitical standing of Pakistan while enhancing the strategic importance of its armed forces in formulating its foreign policy agenda (Boni, 2016).

Challenges and Opportunities in Pakistan's Foreign Policy

From the time of its creation in 1947, the foreign policy of Pakistan has been shaped by the dynamics of regional conflicts, geopolitical rivalries, economic imperatives, and shifts in the global balance of power. The geopolitical significance of Pakistan as a country located at the intersection of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East has grown significantly, but this geopolitical importance has also made Pakistan vulnerable to security and diplomatic dilemmas.

Historical Development of Foreign Policy in Pakistan

The foreign policy of Pakistan has been traditionally shaped by its security concerns arising from the conflict with India, the issue of Kashmir, and political instability in Afghanistan. During the Cold War period, Pakistan was strategically positioned alongside the US in military pacts like SEATO and CENTO to safeguard itself against possible dangers and obtain economic and military aid. The conclusion of the Cold War marked a critical shift for Pakistan's national security environment.

Pakistan also increased its diplomatic relations with China, other Islamic nations, and global bodies. Nevertheless, local disputes and domestic political uncertainty persisted in shaping foreign policies. Foreign policy in Pakistan in the current era is characterized by a shift from geopolitics to geoeconomics despite the prevalence of security issues (Mansoor & Khalid, 2024).

Challenges related to Security and Politics

Among the various challenges which Pakistani foreign policy faces, security instability within the region is one of the main ones. The relationship with India continues to be difficult due to many factors, such as border disputes, military rivalry, and Kashmir issue. In addition, insecurity in Afghanistan is another problem which affects Pakistani security issues due to terrorism, refugees, and militancy. Terrorism has hurt the reputation of Pakistan abroad.

In addition, internal political problems also affect Pakistan's foreign policy effectiveness. Political changes, economic difficulties, and other conflicts can affect policy continuity. Pakistan's political division and economic dependence make it impossible for it to follow its own foreign policy course (Mazhar & Goraya, 2013).

Relationships with Major Powers and the Muslim World

The foreign policy of Pakistan is significantly influenced by its relationships with major powers in the world. The relationship with the United States has been characterized by shifts between cooperation and hostility over issues like terrorism and Afghanistan. However, Pakistan's ties with China have improved significantly due to increased cooperation in areas such as military and economics.

The CPEC project has become a great chance for Pakistan's economic growth and regional connectivity. This project increases facilities for conducting trade, energy generation, and provides strategic access to the region. The CPEC project has increased Pakistan's geopolitical significance and provided chances for regional economic integration. Nevertheless, questions related to dependency on debt, security risks, and rivalry between regions persist (Darabu & Daud, 2021).

Pakistan also continues to have good relations with the Muslim world via the OIC, in addition to individual states such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran. Pakistan benefits from trade, labor, and diplomacy via the Muslim world on various issues such as Palestine and Kashmir.

Opportunities and Current Challenges

Pakistan's membership in the SCO offers various opportunities within the changing multipolar world order. It can benefit from the advantages of regional

collaboration in terms of trade, security, and energy generation. Furthermore, geoeconomic diplomacy could prove to be another great opportunity for Pakistan due to its geographic location vis-à-vis Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia.

On the other hand, new issues like climate change, cyber diplomacy, and technology competition call for changes in policy too. Cyber diplomacy has emerged as an increasingly significant element of modern diplomacy, meaning that Pakistan needs to improve its cybersecurity, technology cooperation, and participation in global cyber diplomacy (Rehman & Wadood, 2025).

Issues related to environmental disasters like floods and water shortages have also impacted Pakistan's foreign policies. This means that the future direction of foreign policy must include environmental cooperation.

Conclusion

The history of Pakistan's foreign policy is linked to the fact that Pakistan has enjoyed a significant level of geostrategic importance due to its geographical location and geopolitical environment and has faced several difficulties due to the same reasons. In other words, since Pakistan lies at the juncture of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, it faces several problems related to regional instability, its economic dependence on external actors, and shifts in the international order of powers. As stated in this research work, Pakistan faces numerous difficulties in its foreign policy approach due to its unresolved dispute with India, an unstable Afghanistan after decades of civil war, and a shifting relationship with Iran and Persian Gulf countries.

In spite of all these problems, there are certain advantages for Pakistan that can contribute to enhancing its geopolitical profile in the region and around the world. For example, the development of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, expansion of regional connectivity initiatives, and the country's interaction with rising powers in the global arena can open up new economic and political possibilities for Pakistan. Nevertheless, the realization of these opportunities will depend on how successful the country is in pursuing an appropriate foreign policy.

In the contemporary international environment, an effective foreign policy demands strategic flexibility, constructive regional engagement, and stronger domestic institutions. Pakistan's future diplomatic success will largely depend on its ability to manage external pressures while addressing internal political and economic weaknesses. By promoting regional cooperation, economic stability, and diversified international partnerships, Pakistan can improve its global standing and adapt more effectively to the rapidly evolving regional and international order.

Policy Recommendations

Pakistan needs to develop a realistic foreign policy strategy in order to deal with all the complexities surrounding it in the regional environment. The following steps are suggested:

Foreign Policy Making: Institutional Approach

Foreign policy making should rely on professionalism, national debate, and long-range considerations. This can be done through reinforcing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, training diplomats, and avoiding military intervention in policy making.

Economic Diplomacy Must Come First

The key to successful diplomacy lies in having a sound economy. Pakistan needs to bolster its economic relations with neighboring countries and negotiate FTAs and foreign investments by improving its regulatory policies.

Regional Integration Must Be Strengthened

Pakistan must be part of cross-border initiatives like the TAPI pipeline, CASA-1000, and Trans-Afghan railway. It needs to develop Gwadar port and integrate it with Central Asian countries' trading routes.

The Path Ahead

Foreign policy is not about strategy alone anymore; instead, it is more and more about economics and humanity. Therefore, Pakistan needs to have a new kind of foreign policy which is dynamic and capable enough to cope up with changing alliances and circumstances. Through proper diplomacy and domestic policies, Pakistan can move from being a reactive state to a proactive state.

It is through such an approach that the country will be able to secure its interests because Pakistan should emerge as a strong and interconnected nation that gains respect due to its strategic value, commitment to regional stability, and diplomacy.

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