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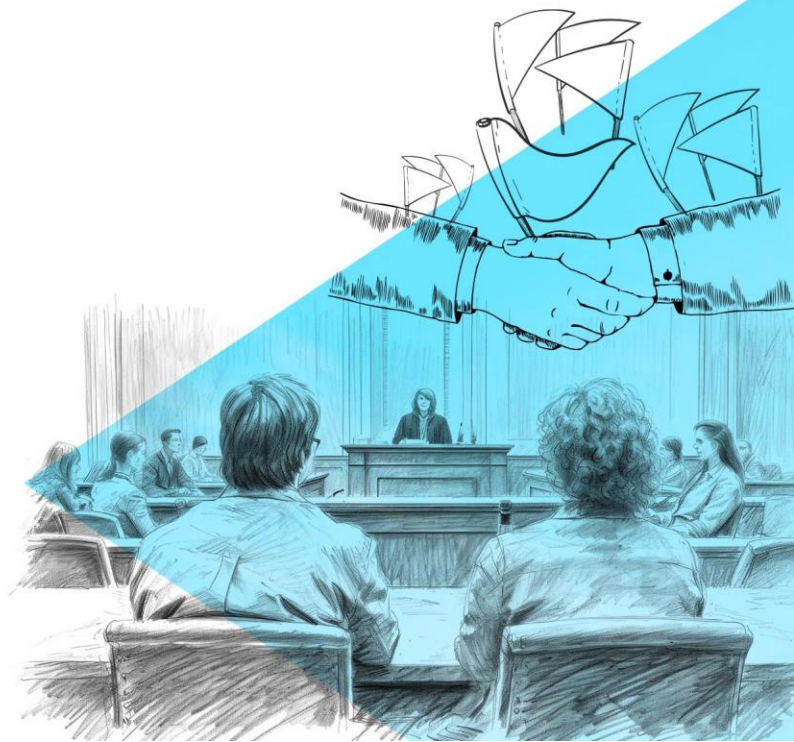


Future-Proofing Pakistan's Foreign Policy in an Evolving Geopolitical Context

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Working Paper



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Abstract

Situated in the heart of South Asia and central to significant economic corridors, Pakistan's ambition to enhance regional connectivity and integration is contingent upon a foreign policy that adeptly navigates ever-evolving geopolitical dynamics. These include the Sino-US rivalry, instability in Afghanistan, India's aggressive posture, and the emerging Iran-Saudi Arabia pact. This Working Paper aims to provide an analytical overview of how Pakistan can strategically guide its foreign policy in response to these dynamics. Utilising both primary and secondary qualitative data collection methods, the study explores viable strategies for Pakistan to effectively manage its relations with both its immediate neighbours and predominant global powers, specifically the United States and China.

Keywords: Geopolitical Order, Foreign Policy, Sino-US Rivalry, India, Afghanistan, Iran, South Asia, Middle East.



1. Introduction

Regional geopolitics plays a significant role in shaping the foreign policy of any country. Gerard Toal defines geopolitics as, 'discourse about world politics with a particular emphasis on state competition and the geographical dimension of power'.¹ It enables countries to effectively manage their external relations with immediate neighbours and nearby states amid shifting strategic environment and evolving alliances. On the other hand, a state's foreign policy, a crucial component of its national policy, pertains to external relations² and serves as the primary instrument for formulating public policy to protect national interests. To effectively develop foreign policy, states must understand, analyse, and adapt to the evolving geopolitical landscape around them.

Located at the crossroads of Central Asia and South Asia, Pakistan is bordered by four countries: India to the east, China to the north, and Afghanistan and Iran to the west. This pivotal strategic location makes Pakistan a significant player in the geopolitical order and for the peace and stability of its neighbouring region.³ Although Pakistan's strategic geographical location is often viewed as an asset, it has also exposed the country to the repercussions of events beyond its control. This reality has deeply influenced Pakistan's foreign policy decision-making, necessitating a more reactive approach in response to external pressures, rather than allowing for proactive strategies.⁴

According to former Foreign Secretary Shamshad Ahmad, the volatile geopolitical scenario and hostile neighbours are two of the most vital determinants of Pakistan's foreign policy in the region.⁵ Since its inception, the relationship between Pakistan and its neighbours has experienced various ups and downs.

¹ Leonhardt van Efferink, "The Definition of Geopolitics - the Classical, French and Critical Traditions," *Exploring Geopolitics*, June 14, 2020, https://exploringgeopolitics.org/publication_efferink_van_leonhardt_the_definition_of_geopolitics_classical_french_critical/.

² Kent B. Huzen, "Framework for Understanding: Geopolitics and Foreign Policy," 2019, 16, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335728400_FRAMEWORK_FOR_UNDERSTANDING_GEO POLITICS_AND_FOREIGN_POLICY.

³ H. Kreft, "The Geopolitical Importance of Pakistan: A Country Caught Between the Threat of Talibanisation and the Return to Democracy," *Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy* (2008): 1-5.

⁴ Syed Ali Zia Jaffery, "Pakistan's Foreign Policy Under Imran Khan," in *Pakistan's Foreign Policy Contemporary Developments and Dynamics*, ed. Ghulam Ali (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2023), 18.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.



In fact, Pakistan has espoused a foreign policy in South Asia which is primarily focused on countering existential threats from India, tackling the territorial and strategic turbulence with Afghanistan and engaging other neighbours to balance Indian monopoly in the region.⁶ Even today, in the context of contemporary international relations, hostility in the regions neighbouring Pakistan is fuelled by tensions between states, such as the Sino-Indian rift and US-China competition.⁷ These strategic contests and great power rivalries present both challenges and opportunities for Pakistan.

For Pakistan, historical disputes with India, including unresolved issues and treaty violations, as well as India's ambitions to become a regional hegemon, have contributed to a security dilemma and heightened tensions in the region. This strained relationship between the two nuclear-armed neighbours has led to limited opportunities for bilateral cooperation and collective growth. Additionally, it has increased the likelihood of an arms race and border conflicts. In the light of the current scenario, the historical turbulence with India has been coupled with great power competition between the US and China, eventually compelling Pakistan to steer through these challenges.

The scope of this research is confined to Pakistan's neighbouring area in the Asia-Pacific region. It will examine the evolving relationships with its four neighbours - Iran, India, China, and Afghanistan - and highlight the major power rivalry unfolding between China and the US in the region. The study covers significant regional developments that occurred from April 2023 to June 2024.

The first half of the paper focuses on the current geopolitical realities that Pakistan is facing in its neighbouring region. The second half highlights the potential foreign policy trajectory that Pakistan could employ in the near future. This section contains responses from subject experts pertaining to interview questions posed to them on the prospective foreign policy options for Pakistan.

⁶ Ryan Bashir, "Domestic Politics and Structural Constraints: Pakistan and its South Asian Neighbours", in *Routledge Handbook of the International Relations of South Asia*, ed. Sumit Ganguly and Frank O'Donnell (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2022), 275.

⁷ Zafar Khan, "The Effects of US-China Competing Strategies in Asia-Pacific on India and Pakistan Rivalry in the South Asian Region," *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 7, no. 4 (July 1, 2021): 888-906.



1.1. Methodology

This research undertook the qualitative research method. Data was collected from both primary and secondary sources. For primary sources, five unstructured interviews were conducted with practitioners and individuals from the diverse and relevant fields of academia, research, and diplomacy. In this context, the primary data was collected by employing convenient and purposive sampling methods. For secondary sources, books, journal articles, newspaper articles, and dissertations were consulted.

The technique of thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, which was drawn from the interviews. Considering the ethical considerations for the research, the respondents were referred to as R1, R2, R3, R4, and R5, etc. Table 1 provides details regarding the occupation of the respondents and the employed mode of interview:

Table 1: Respondents and Mode of Interview

Name	Occupation	Mode of Interview
R1	Former Ambassador	WhatsApp Call
R2	Deputy Director of Pakistani Think Tank	Written Feedback & Audio Messages
R3	Lecturer	WhatsApp Call
R4	Researcher	Written Feedback
R5	Author/Researcher	Written Feedback

Source: Author's own.



2. Regional Geopolitical Realities and Implications for Pakistan's Foreign Policy

The geopolitics of South Asia, especially pertaining to Pakistan's neighbouring countries has changed significantly over the last two decades. In addition to the heightened interests of major powers, the shifting stances of regional states, driven by their evolving concerns, have rendered the geopolitical landscape around Pakistan increasingly complex and competitive.⁸

The neighbouring region is characterised by tensions between the US and China, the evolving situation in Afghanistan under Taliban rule, India's aggressive posture, and Iran-Saudi rapprochement.

Figure 1: Overview of Geopolitical Order in Pakistan's Neighbouring Region



Source: Author's compilation of geopolitical realities based on review of literature.

2.1. Sino-US Competition

The advent of the 21st Century marked a significant shift in global focus from Europe to Asia, primarily due to the rise of China as a potential superpower alongside the US. China's ascent as a major power and its contestation with the US over the norms and values governing the international order have intensified the great power competition in the global political arena. Subsequently, the US National Defence Strategy of 2022 places a major focus on deterring China in a sustained manner.⁹ This competition,

⁸ Nasir Ali, "Geopolitics in South Asia and Foreign Policy of Pakistan: An Analysis of Challenges and Opportunities in "Stress and Strain" Framework," *Journal of Indian Studies* 8, no. 1 (2022): 91-102.

⁹ C. Todd Lopez, "DOD Releases National Defense Strategy, Missile Defense, Nuclear Posture Reviews," *U.S. Department of Defense*, October 27, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3202438/dod-releases-national-defense-strategy-missile-defense-nuclear-posture->

fueled by factors such as trade tensions and geostrategic competition, has also become a central feature of the current geopolitical order. The competitive strategies of both nations, including the US' advocacy for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific Region and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), underscore the deep-seated tension and competition that have shaped regional dynamics for years.¹⁰ Additionally, in the past years, the US has shown its scepticism towards the BRI and its flagship project China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The US has alleged the lack of transparency surrounding CPEC and involvement of state-owned Chinese firms in its bidding process.¹¹

There are some other significant points of contention between the US and China. There is strife on navigation in the South China Sea,¹² discontent on the Taiwan issue, with China having reservations about US's potential support for the island's independence,¹³ and tariff-induced trade war.¹⁴ Furthermore, in its bid to offset and contain China, the US has opened various avenues of cooperation with India. Salient aspects of the Indo-US partnership include defence cooperation, trade agreements, energy cooperation, educational and cultural exchanges, counterterrorism and intelligence sharing, healthcare and biomedical research etc. The US has also initiated various technology transfer programmes along with other pacts with India under its 'Indo-Pacific Strategy'.¹⁵ The US's strategic tilt toward India is primarily driven by its goal to counterbalance China's influence in the Asia-Pacific region, preventing China from dominating the area unchallenged. This dynamic of Sino-US rivalry significantly affects the regional balance of power. Furthermore, the US's consistent strategic

reviews/#:~:text=The%202022%20National%20Defense%20Strategy,and%20partners%20on%20shared%20objectives.

¹⁰ Filippo Boni, "The US-China Rivalry in South Asia and Pakistan's Hedging Dilemma," *European University Institute*, 2021, https://oro.open.ac.uk/81535/1/Boni_US_China_Pakistan.pdf.

¹¹ Furqan Khan, "The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Understanding American and Pakistani Perceptions," *The Carter Centre*, September 9, 2021, <https://uscnpm.org/2021/09/09/cpec-american-and-pakistani-perceptions/>.

¹² "China, US in War of Words over South China Sea Navigation," *Al Jazeera*, March 24, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/24/china-us-militaries-in-war-of-words-over-south-china-sea-access>.

¹³ David Brown, "China and Taiwan: A Really Simple Guide," *BBC*, April 6, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-59900139>.

¹⁴ Yukon Huang and Genevieve Slosberg, "What Exactly Does Washington Want from its Trade War with Beijing?" *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, April 11, 2023 <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/04/11/what-exactly-does-washington-want-from-its-trade-war-with-beijing-pub-89503>

¹⁵ Antoine Levesques, "US-India Defence and Technology Cooperation," *International Institute of Strategic Studies*, July 23, 2023, <https://www.iiss.org/en/online-analysis/online-analysis/2023/07/us-india-defence-and-technology-cooperation/>.



support has emboldened India's stance, which in turn has heightened tensions between India and Pakistan. This complex interplay of relationships underscores the interconnected nature of regional security dynamics.

In a quest to revive the estranged bilateral relationship between the two countries, United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited China in June 2023¹⁶ being the first highest US official to visit the country since 2019. Since then, various diplomatic engagements and reciprocal visits have taken place,¹⁷ including Secretary Blinken's visit in April 2024. However, given the extent of the trust deficit, it would be very naïve to expect an unprecedented revival of the relationship between these two countries especially ahead of the US Presidential election in 2024.¹⁸

2.1.1. Implications for Pakistan

These contesting relationship dynamics between the two powers casts visible implications for various regional states, including Pakistan.

Pakistan has been navigating its foreign policy between these two countries since the Cold War. The country joined the US-led defence pacts — Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) — aimed at countering the Soviet Union at the onset of the Cold War and also assisted the US in fighting against the USSR in Afghanistan. But during 1979 to 1989, it also received significant arms from China.¹⁹

In the current geopolitical landscape, Pakistan's ability to maintain a 'Cold War' style balancing act between major states is hindered by its tilt towards China, as evidenced by CPEC initiated in 2015. CPEC has now progressed into its second phase 'CPEC 2.0', which is focused on a more holistic development approach.²⁰ This partnership has firmly positioned Pakistan as a key player in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).²¹ In fact, over the past few years, Pakistan's strategic importance for the US has declined

¹⁶ "Baby Steps for Blinken as He Tries to Revive US-China Ties," *Al Jazeera*, June 19, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/19/blinken-makes-baby-steps-to-revive-us-china-ties>.

¹⁷ Jia Qingguo, "China-US Relations See Weak rebound in 2023," *East Asia Forum*, January 20, 2024, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/01/20/china-us-relations-see-weak-rebound-in-2023/>.

¹⁸ Anushka Saxena, "Blinken's China Visit: Has Rapprochement Run Its Course?" *Diplomat*, April 30, 2024, <https://the-diplomat.com/2024/04/blinkens-china-visit-has-rapprochement-run-its-course/>.

¹⁹ Boni, "The US-China Rivalry in South Asia and Pakistan's Hedging Dilemma."

²⁰ Khalid Waled, "CPEC 2.0," *News International*, February 7, 2024, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1155207-cpec-2-0>.

²¹ Ibid.



due to the latter and two additional factors: the US's increased alignment with India and changes in its Afghan policy. The lack of constructive bilateral engagement between the US and Pakistan, particularly evident after the fall of Kabul, highlights this shift.²² Furthermore, the US's lack of acknowledgement of Pakistan's security concerns related to India, along with Pakistan's absence in the US strategic strategy of 2022, further underscores a growing rift between the two sides.

The extent of the current Sino-US competition, combined with Pakistan's diminishing strategic relevance to the US, places Pakistan in a challenging position, leaving it with limited options for formulating a balanced foreign policy.²³

2.2. Aggressive Indian Posture

India's assertive stance in the region is primarily driven by its role in countering China, which aligns with the US' strategy of offshore balancing. The US's 'National Security Strategy' of 2022 underscores this approach, positioning India as a counterbalance to China's growing influence in the region.²⁴

India's engagement in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and major defence-related bilateral engagements with the US, including technology transfers, signify a strengthened Indo-US relationship.²⁵ This was further enhanced during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's state visit to Washington in June 2023,²⁶ which boosted ongoing efforts²⁷ to deepen bilateral ties. The commitment to continue collaboration

²² Madiha Afzal, "The Biden Administration's Two-Track Pakistan Policy Misses the Mark," *Brookings Institution*, March 22, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-biden-administrations-two-track-pakistan-policy-misses-the-mark/>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ The White House, *National Security Strategy*, report (Washington, D.C.: The White House, 2022), 23, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

²⁵ Brad Lendon, "US and India to Boost Defense and Technology Cooperation as China Threat Grows," *CNN*, February 1, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/02/01/asia/us-india-defense-technology-cooperation-intl-hnk/index.html>.

²⁶ Charmaine Jacob, "U.S.-India Relations enter a New Chapter and Could Unlock even more Tech and Defense Deals," *CNBC*, June 23, 2023, <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/06/23/us-india-relations-new-chapter-unlocks-more-tech-and-defense-deals.html>.

²⁷ Farwa Amir and Akriti Vasudeva Kalyankar, "Historic Feats and Enduring Debates: U.S.-India Relations in 2023," *Diplomat*, December 29, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/12/historic-feats-and-enduring-debates-u-s-india-relations-in-2023/>.



in high-tech areas was reaffirmed during the US National Security Advisor's visit to India in June 2024, marking a significant interaction in the BJP's third term.²⁸

However, it remains to be seen to what extent India would oppose China if the confrontation between the US and China intensifies in the near future. In the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, New Delhi has maintained a neutral position as part of its independent foreign policy.²⁹

The current geopolitical order in the region has been characterised by India's aggressive and emboldened posture, driven by its pro-US stance against China, economic prowess, and its role as the net security provider for Washington in the IOR. This position has allowed India to evade major Western backlash over its Hindutva-driven national policies that suppress Muslims and other minority groups. Furthermore, India's hegemonic tendencies towards smaller neighbouring states may be further nurtured due to its significant regional positioning between the two global powers, the US and China, potentially exacerbating regional volatility.

2.2.1. Implications for Pakistan

Pakistan and India have been in a state of strategic contention since 1947, having fought several wars and endured various crises. Furthermore, after both countries became nuclear-armed, the dynamics of their relationship became even more complex. In the context of the current scenario, the major implication of the regional strategic competition between the great powers would be on Indo-Pakistan relations, resulting in an increased security dilemma. This could potentially lead to an arms race, further proliferating regional instability.³⁰

The display of hostility by India towards Pakistan has intensified under Prime Minister Modi, who is now in his third term, albeit at the helm of a coalition government.³¹ This

²⁸ "India and US vow to Boost Defense, Trade Ties in First High-Level US Visit since Modi's Election Win," *AP News*, June 18, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/india-us-defense-trade-ties-modi-sullivan1dbf84fac5d18c5d3c674420aff3834>.

²⁹ Ashley J. Tellis, "What Is in Our Interest: India and the Ukraine War," *Carnegie Endowment to International Peace*, April 25, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/04/25/what-is-in-our-interest-india-and-ukraine-war-pub-86961>.

³⁰ Zafar Khan, "The Effects of US-China Competing Strategies in Asia-Pacific on India and Pakistan rivalry in the South Asian Region," *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 7, no. 4 (2022): 888-906.

³¹ "India's Narendra Modi Sworn in as Country's Prime Minister for a Third Term," *Al Jazeera*, June 9, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/6/9/indias-narendra-modi-sworn-in-as-countrys-prime-minister-for-a-third->



underscored its readiness to address economic technicalities and critical human rights conditions.³⁵

After being excluded from the first meeting (May 2023) and boycotting the second one (February 2024), the Taliban are now participating in the third UN-led Doha meeting of special envoys in June 2024. These interactions will strategise the global community's engagement with the Afghan Taliban.³⁶ This presents the Taliban with a critical opportunity to demonstrate their diplomatic acumen. Over-inclination towards or extreme disillusionment from regional states and stakeholders could significantly influence Afghanistan's regional and international standing under Taliban rule.³⁷ However, the Taliban must also seize the opportunity to establish at least active bilateral engagement with the US, as the prospect of their broader international recognition may hinge on this.

Currently, Afghanistan is grappling with a severe humanitarian crisis, with two-thirds of the population facing food insecurity and approximately 875,000 children suffering from malnutrition.³⁸ The situation was exacerbated by an earthquake in early October 2023.³⁹ This dire context underscores the responsibility of regional states and the international community to manage engagements with the Taliban on humanitarian issues, despite the de-facto government's rigid stance on women's rights and inclusivity.⁴⁰

In addition to resolving the humanitarian crisis, the Taliban face dual challenges: an internal power struggle⁴¹ and the task of countering attacks by the Islamic State of

³⁵ "Taliban, US hold First Official Talks since Afghanistan Takeover," *Al Jazeera*, August 1, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/1/taliban-us-hold-first-official-talks-since-afghanistan-takeover>.

³⁶ Tahir Khan, "Analysis: What Promise do Doha talks hold for Afghanistan?," *Dawn*, June 24, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1841523/analysis-what-promise-do-doha-talks-hold-for-afghanistan>.

³⁷ Thomas, *Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy*.

³⁸ Patricia Gossman, "Hard Choices in Afghanistan's Humanitarian Crisis," *Human Rights Watch*, May 15, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/05/15/hard-choices-afghanistans-humanitarian-crisis#:~:text=Afghanistan%20has%20largely%20disappeared%20from,girls%20remain%20most%20at%20risk>.

³⁹ Massod Saifullah, "Afghan Earthquake Response Exposes Taliban's Inability," *Deutsche Welle News*, October 20, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/afghan-earthquake-response-exposes-talibans-inability/a-67161995>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ahmad Ali, "Faith and Faction: Internal Conflicts among Afghan Taliban," *Pakistan Institute for Parliamentary Services*, June 7, 2023, <https://www.pakpips.com/article/7681>.



Khorasan (IS-K) on their territory.⁴² These multifaceted issues require a balanced approach to both internal governance and international diplomacy, as any failure in these areas could further destabilise the region and undermine the Taliban's efforts to gain broader recognition.

2.3.1. Implications for Pakistan

Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan has been fraught with challenges since its inception, beginning with the latter's opposition to Pakistan's admission to the United Nations.⁴³ A longstanding issue has been the legitimacy of the 2,670 km long Durand Line, established by the British, which Pakistan recognises as an international border, but Afghanistan does not.⁴⁴ Additionally, the refugee situation has been a persistent aspect of Pak-Afghan relations. Since the Soviet invasion in 1979, which led to the first significant influx of around one million refugees, Pakistan has hosted millions of Afghan refugees.⁴⁵

Hence, the dynamics in Afghanistan under Taliban rule carry substantial implications for Pakistan. The Taliban's takeover of Kabul in 2021 was perceived by many international commentators as a strategic victory for Pakistan. However, the subsequent years have seen fluctuating relations, primarily centred around border security and counterterrorism efforts. Notably, border clashes in 2022 led to Pakistani casualties and the temporary closure of the Chaman border.⁴⁶ In July 2023, amid rising TTP activities in Pakistan, Pakistan's Special Representative on Afghanistan, engaged in talks with Afghan ministers. During these discussions, Afghan authorities reiterated their commitment to preventing cross-border attacks, referencing a 'fatwa' issued by Taliban's supreme leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada, which declared such attacks as 'haram'.⁴⁷

⁴² Michael Kugelman, "How Dangerous is the Islamic State-Khorasan?" *Foreign Affairs*, March 23, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/23/afghanistan-islamic-state-khorasan-centcom-warning-threat/>.

⁴³ Bashir, "Domestic Politics and Structural Constraints: Pakistan and its South Asian Neighbours," 280.

⁴⁴ Sachin Khunte, "The Durand Line Impasse: The Two Talibans and Pakistan," *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-durand-line-impasse-the-two-talibans-and-pakistan/>.

⁴⁵ Refworld, "Afghanistan-Pakistan: Timeline of Afghan Displacements into Pakistan," Accessed January 26, 2024, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4f4cd0702.html>.

⁴⁶ Zahid Hussain, "Trouble on the Western Frontier," *Dawn*, December 14, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1726252>.

⁴⁷ Ayaz Gul, "Afghan Taliban Chief Deems Cross-Border Attacks on Pakistan Forbidden," *Voice of America*, August 6, 2023,



Although the Afghan interim government has continuously stated that it would not allow its soil to be used for any terror activities, certain elements in the Taliban government have extended support towards the banned terrorist outfit (TTP) and its various affiliates. Relations reached a crisis point after Pakistan's intelligence-based anti-terrorism operation in the border region of Afghanistan in the early hours of 18 March 2024 - two days after the terrorist attack in Mir Ali, North Waziristan, in which seven Pakistani soldiers were martyred, including two officers.⁴⁸ This kinetic measure was taken amidst brewing tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan over several months which also affected cross-border trade due to the closure of the Torkham and Chamman border crossings. There have been repeated instances of Islamabad conveying to the Afghan Taliban the severity of terrorism emanating mainly from TTP and other related banned outfits that enjoy considerable liberty to operate from Afghanistan.⁴⁹

Since 2021 (after the US withdrawal), Pakistan has witnessed an emboldened posture of TTP,⁵⁰ manifested through the upsurge in militant attacks. According to the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS), in 2023 alone, around 645 militant attacks occurred in Pakistan, causing the deaths of over 938 people.⁵¹ Another report by Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies (PIPS) documented that 78 percent of attacks were carried out by TTP, which also accounted for 82 percent of the casualties. Moreover, 2023 was the deadliest year in a decade for the military and police force,⁵² where they collectively lost more than 500 personnel. Around 93 percent of the attacks occurred in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and Balochistan - provinces bordering Afghanistan.⁵³ According to Pakistani officials, facilitation in the form of material and

<https://www.voanews.com/a/afghan-taliban-chief-deems-cross-border-attacks-on-pakistan-forbidden-/7213760.html>.

⁴⁸ Ajwa Hijazi, "The Conundrum of TTP in Pak-Afghan Relations," *Centre for Aerospace & Security Studies*, April 18, 2024, <https://casstt.com/the-conundrum-of-ttp-in-pak-afghan-relations/>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Asad Ullah Khan, "TTP's Safe Haven in Afghanistan," *Centre for Aerospace & Security Studies*, May 18, 2022, <https://casstt.com/ttps-safe-haven-in-afghanistan/>.

⁵¹ Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies, *2023 Ends With 70 Increase in Militant Attacks, 81% Rise in Deaths: PICSS Report*, <https://www.picss.net/featured/2023-ends-with-70-increase-in-militant-attacks-81-rise-in-deaths-picss-report/>.

⁵² Hijazi, "The Conundrum of TTP in Pak-Afghan Relations."

⁵³ Abid Hussain, "What Explains the Dramatic Rise in Armed Attacks in Pakistan?" *Al Jazeera*, December 21, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/21/what-explains-the-dramatic-rise-in-armed-attacks-in-pakistan>.



logistic support provided by certain elements of the ruling Afghan Taliban has led to TTP carrying out cross-border terrorist attacks from sanctuaries in Afghanistan.⁵⁴

Bilateral relations have also been exacerbated by Pakistan's ultimatum to illegal immigrants,⁵⁵ predominantly affecting 1.73 million Afghans.⁵⁶ This decision is part of a broader strategy to repatriate undocumented refugees amid ongoing security issues in Afghanistan. As of October 2023, many voluntarily returned, but Islamabad's stance has introduced new tensions with Kabul, further straining the already delicate relationship.⁵⁷

Additionally, the Afghan Taliban face internal challenges from the National Resistance Front (NRF) and the Islamic State (IS), with IS notably active in attacks against the Taliban. The NRF, along with the Afghanistan Freedom Front, has also intensified their assaults.⁵⁸ While the Taliban claim to have the situation under control, the potential for these conflicts to escalate into a civil war could have serious spillover effects in Pakistan, threatening its internal security.

2.4. Iran's Regional Influence Amidst Reconciliation with Saudi Arabia

Over the years, Iran's geopolitical standing in the region has been notably influenced by its rivalry with the US and other major world powers, including Saudi Arabia. This rivalry fostered bloc politics within the region, aligning states with either pro-US or pro-Iranian camps in the context of US-Iran antagonism, and creating pro-KSA and pro-Iran blocs due to the Saudi-Iran discord. However, regional dynamics are undergoing a significant transformation, facilitated by China's mediation, which has

⁵⁴ Hijazi, "The Conundrum of TTP in Pak-Afghan Relations."

⁵⁵ Sarah Zaman, "Hosting Afghans a Huge Burden, Pakistani President Says," *Voice of America*, November 16, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/hosting-afghans-a-huge-burden-pakistani-president-says/7357939.html>.

⁵⁶ Asif Shehzad, "Pakistan Orders Illegal Immigrants, including 1.73 mln Afghans, to Leave," *Reuters*, October 3, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistan-orders-all-illegal-immigrants-leave-after-suicide-bombings-2023-10-03/>.

⁵⁷ Abid Hussain, "Why is Pakistan Planning to Deport Undocumented Afghans?" *Al Jazeera*, October 6, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/6/why-is-pakistan-deporting-undocumented-afghans>.

⁵⁸ Akmal Dawi, "Afghan Insurgent Groups Step Up Attacks, Political Campaign Against Taliban," *Voice of America*, December 5, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/afghan-insurgent-groups-step-up-attacks-political-campaign-against-taliban-/7386099.html>.



ushered in a rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran,⁵⁹ thereby paving the way for regional integration.

The relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which deteriorated sharply following Saudi Arabia's execution of a Saudi Shia cleric⁶⁰ - sparking violent protests in Iran, including the burning of the Saudi consulate in Mashhad⁶¹ - has shown signs of recovery. This revitalisation of diplomatic ties marks a pivotal shift in the geopolitical landscape, positioning Iran as a key player not only in its immediate neighbourhood with Pakistan but also across the Middle East, where its proxy conflicts with Saudi Arabia have deeply affected Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen.⁶² The renewed dialogue between Saudi Arabia and Iran holds the potential to bridge their longstanding differences. Moreover, this development illustrates a reduction in American influence in the region, juxtaposed against the rise of Chinese diplomatic engagement and soft power. This evolving scenario suggests a more integrated and cooperative regional future, contingent on sustained diplomatic efforts between the historically adversarial nations.

Furthermore, Iran's regional influence is poised to increase, particularly in light of its expanding trade agreements and the 25-year strategic cooperation agreement with China. This partnership underscores a significant deepening of ties between the two nations. Notably, bilateral trade between Iran and China surpassed the USD 6.5 billion mark in the first quarter of 2023⁶³ and Beijing extended BRI investment in Iran by 150%,⁶⁴ demonstrating the economic benefits and strengthened relations resulting from this strategic alliance. Such developments not only enhance Iran's economic standing but also bolster its geopolitical leverage within the region.

⁵⁹ Mehran Haghiriyan and Jacopo Scita, "The Broader Context Behind China's Mediation Between Iran and Saudi Arabia," *Diplomat*, March 14, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/03/the-broader-context-behind-chinas-mediation-between-iran-and-saudi-arabia/>.

⁶⁰ "Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr: Saudi Arabia Executes Top Shia Cleric," *BBC*, January 2, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35213244>.

⁶¹ "Iranian Protesters Storm Saudi Embassy in Tehran," *Deutsche Welle*, January 3, 2016, <https://www.dw.com/en/iranian-protesters-storm-saudi-embassy-in-tehran/a-18955846>.

⁶² Mersiha Gadzo, "Changing Global Order: China's Hand in the Iran-Saudi Deal," *Al Jazeera*, March 11, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/11/changing-global-order-china-restores-ties-with-iran-and-saudi>.

⁶³ "Iran-China Trade Exceeds \$6.5 Billion in H1 2023," *Tehran Times*, June 21, 2023, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/486015/Iran-China-trade-exceeds-6-5-billion-in-H1-2023>.

⁶⁴ "China increases BRI Investments into Iran by 150%," *Silk Road Briefing*, May 29, 2023, <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2023/05/29/china-increases-bri-investments-into-iran-by-150/>.



Amidst various developments, the death of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in May 2024,⁶⁵ came at a time when Iran was at the cusp of various strategic alliances and economic partnerships in the region. However, according to analysts, any new leadership is unlikely to change its approach to geopolitical compulsions and regional ambitions due to the structure of Iranian governance which inherently limits the presidential role in shaping foreign policy decisions.⁶⁶

2.4.1. Implications for Pakistan

Iran, the first country to recognise Pakistan after its independence in 1947, shares several convergent interests with Pakistan, particularly in their joint stance on countering terrorism and their diplomatic closeness with China.

The reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran, facilitated by China, is poised to positively impact Pakistan's relations with Iran. Pakistan maintains a delicate balance in its relations with both Saudi Arabia and Iran, nations that are respectively seen as the centres of Sunni and Shia Islam. This religious context has historically intensified sectarian divisions within Pakistan, which have often been exploited by extremist groups. The rapprochement could lead to a significant reduction in sectarian tensions within Pakistan. By alleviating some of the religious and geopolitical pressures, this development holds the potential to stabilise internal dynamics and strengthen Pakistan's diplomatic ties with both regional powers.

Another significant benefit from improved relations could be in the realm of economic activity. Pakistan has the potential to enhance economic cooperation with Iran, as the current bilateral trade stands at USD 1.5 billion, which is well below the potential threshold of USD 5 billion.⁶⁷ Additionally, this diplomatic warming could facilitate the resolution of issues surrounding the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project. Due to international sanctions on Iran, the construction of Pakistan's segment of the pipeline

⁶⁵ Nadia Raghozinha, "Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi Killed in Helicopter Crash," *BBC*, May 20, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/live/world-middle-east-69035051/page/2>.

⁶⁶ Ray Takeyh, "President's Death in Crash Unlikely to Affect Iranian Policies" (paper, Expert Brief, Council on Foreign Relations, May 20, 2024), <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/presidents-death-crash-unlikely-affect-iranian-policies>; Virginia Pietromarchi, "Will Iran's Foreign Policy Change under A New President?," *Al Jazeera*, July 1, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/7/1/will-irans-foreign-policy-change-under-a-new-president>.

⁶⁷ Arhama Siddiq, "Pakistan-Iran Relations — Audentes Fortuna Iuvat," *Express Tribune*, April 1, 2023, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2409223/pakistan-iran-relations-audentes-fortuna-iuvat>.



has been delayed, leading Iran to demand a hefty penalty from Pakistan and set a completion deadline of September 2024.

As an energy-deficient country, Pakistan has had to rely on expensive imports, such as LNG (in 2021) and refined benzene and crude oil (worth USD 6.42 billion from Qatar in 2020).⁶⁸ The completion of the gas pipeline project could enable Pakistan to access cheaper LNG from Iran, offering a substantial economic advantage and contributing to the country's energy security. Many countries, including Russia,⁶⁹ China⁷⁰ and Türkiye,⁷¹ have navigated trade with Iran despite international sanctions. They have utilised alternate trade routes and banking channels, focused on the less sanctioned sectors along with the non-sanctioned goods. By exploring these alternative avenues and expanding trade in non-sanctioned goods, Pakistan can further its goals within the framework of geoeconomics. Such measures would not only bolster economic resilience but also strengthen its bilateral economic relationships, aligning with its broader regional interests.

In January 2024, military escalation occurred at the Pak-Iran border with Iran conducting airstrikes in Balochistan's Panjgur, targeting purported Jaish al-Adl bases.⁷² Within 48 hours, Pakistan retaliated with precision strikes on terrorist strongholds in Iran's Sistan-o-Baluchistan province. Subsequent diplomatic engagements between the two nations (including a visit of the Iranian Foreign Minister to Pakistan)⁷³ facilitated a de-escalation of tensions, reflecting a mutual commitment to resolving the conflict. To halt any future border tensions, it is necessary to devise a joint management framework for border security. Moreover, Pakistan can enhance border security with Iran by operationalising the Rapid Action Task Force, which was

⁶⁸ "Petroleum Sector of Pakistan and its Trade Dynamics," *Trade Development Authority of Pakistan (TDAP)*, Accessed January 30, 2024, <https://tdap.gov.pk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/13-Petroleum-Sector-of-Pakistan-and-its-Trade-Dynamics-1.pdf>.

⁶⁹ Emil Avdaliani, "All Smiles in the Russia-Iran Trade Bazaar," *Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA)*, January 17, 2024, <https://cepa.org/article/all-smiles-in-the-russia-iran-trade-bazaar/>.

⁷⁰ Muyu Xu, "Explainer: Iran's Expanding Oil Trade with Top Buyer China," *Reuters*, November 10, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/irans-expanding-oil-trade-with-top-buyer-china-2023-11-10/>.

⁷¹ Umud Shokri, "Turkey and Iran try to Find Common Ground Amid Complexities," *Iran International*, January 25, 2024, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202401252720>.

⁷² "Timeline of Cross-Border Hostilities between Pakistan and Iran over the Last Decade," *Dawn*, January 19, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1806806/timeline-of-cross-border-hostilities-between-pakistan-and-iran-over-the-last-decade>.

⁷³ "Iranian FM in Pakistan to Mend Ties following Mutual Air Strikes," *Al Jazeera*, January 29, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/29/irans-top-diplomat-visits-pakistan-to-ease-tensions-after-joint-strikes>.



announced in 2019.⁷⁴ This initiative could curb smuggling activities and mitigate border skirmishes.

3. Future-Proofing Pakistan's Foreign Policy

A foreign policy that is sensitively attuned to the ongoing global and regional paradigm shifts can significantly elevate a country's stature both regionally and globally, opening pathways to economic, strategic, and political advancements. Conversely, a poorly formulated policy could isolate the country, limiting opportunities for regional and global engagement and pushing it towards isolation.

The preceding sections explored various drivers shaping the regional geopolitical landscape, highlighting a spectrum of challenges and opportunities for Pakistan. This section will outline potential foreign policy strategies that Pakistan should consider adopting in response to the current geopolitical dynamics affecting its neighbouring region. These strategies are derived from responses to specific country-specific queries posed to various subject experts discussed previously.

3.1. Pakistan's Foreign Policy Options Amidst Sino-US Competition

3.1.1. *Adopt a Balanced Approach*

The consensus among the respondents interviewed was that Pakistan should meticulously balance its relations with both superpowers rather than aligning exclusively with one. The need for a calculated foreign policy approach was underscored by the intensifying technological and economic competition between these powers, which is significantly impacting the region.

Respondent 2 emphasised the impracticality of favouring one state over another in today's globally interdependent landscape. He highlighted that the dynamics of the Cold War, where Pakistan aligned with one major power, cannot be replicated in the current context of Sino-US rivalry due to the shift from a tightly knit bipolar world to a more interconnected global scenario.

Respondent 3 pointed out that Pakistan's geographical position makes it impossible to remain detached from the Sino-US rivalry. As a nation aiming to capitalise on

⁷⁴ "Iran and Pakistan to Form Joint Rapid Reaction Force at Border – Rouhani," *Reuters*, April 22, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/pakistan-iran-border-force-idUSL5N2240WA>.



'gloeconomic opportunities' and enhance regional connectivity, Pakistan is inevitably affected by the escalating tensions between China and the US. He noted that while Pakistan has strong ties with China, it is also crucial to identify and develop areas of convergence with the US, given its status as Pakistan's largest export market.

Respondent 4 expressed concerns that while Pakistan aims to maintain a balanced foreign policy between the two powers, the reality of regional dynamics might compel Islamabad to take sides, making it challenging to sustain this balance.

Respondent 5 reiterated the risks associated with choosing one state over the other. He cautioned that such a decision could lead to significant economic and strategic consequences, which Pakistan is ill-equipped to handle.

Hence, the overall sentiment was that Pakistan should strive for equilibrium in its foreign relations to navigate the complexities of the Sino-US rivalry effectively.

3.1.2. Position Pakistan as a Strategic Opportunity

Respondent 1 provided a unique perspective, advocating for Pakistan to focus on capitalising on the competition between the great powers rather than being sidelined by it. He suggested that Pakistan should seize opportunities by investing in skill development and identifying niche areas where it can excel. This approach would enable Pakistan to leverage the economic opportunities arising from the US-China rivalry by offering its skilled workforce as a valuable resource in both regional and global markets. He quoted former Singaporean President S.R Nathan to illustrate this point: 'For a country to be noticed, you either have to be a great opportunity or you have to be a nuisance.'

In the context of the strategic competition between the US and China, it is crucial for Pakistan to adopt an assertive stance and position itself as an opportunity on the world stage. While Pakistan already benefits from a major joint economic venture with China, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), there is still substantial potential for further regional economic integration through investments in its human capital.

Echoing the thoughts of R1, it is also essential for Pakistan to attract more Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. In 2023, the government established the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC), which approved 28 projects for investment offers to Gulf countries, including the Diamer-



Bhasha Dam and mining operations in Chaghi, Balochistan.⁷⁵ The Council has initiated several measures, such as easing visa policies for Gulf businesses, to bolster investment. However, for these efforts to be successful and to attract increased investments from the GCC and other friendly nations, Pakistan must focus on internal institutional and economic reforms. These reforms will improve the business environment, making it more attractive for foreign investors and facilitating easier business operations.

3.1.3. *Employ Policy of Risk Mitigation and Multilateralism*

Respondent 2 emphasised the importance of Pakistan avoiding becoming a casualty of the ongoing Cold War-like rivalry between the US and China. He pointed out that Pakistan, situated in a region influenced by global geopolitical tensions, including South Asia and the Middle East, should implement a policy of 'Risk Mitigation' to protect its interests rather than being sidelined by major powers. To this end, Pakistan could increase its participation in multilateral forums such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).⁷⁶ Similarly, in an effort to enhance its diplomatic influence, Pakistan formally submitted a request to join BRICS - grouping of five emerging economies that includes Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, in November 2023.⁷⁷ Engagement in such forums is crucial for countries, regardless of whether they are considered 'middle powers', as it provides them with regional relevance. Respondent 2 also highlighted the significant role Pakistan played in facilitating the Saudi-Iran talks which substantially enhanced its soft power; and argued that projecting soft power is vital for changing the perception that Pakistan is often part of regional problems. Instead, Pakistan should strive to be seen as part of the solution, enhancing its image and influence on the international stage.

⁷⁵ Shahbaz Rana, "Pakistan Opens Gates for Gulf Investment," *Express Tribune*, July 29, 2023, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2428452/pakistan-opens-gates-for-gulf-investment>.

⁷⁶ Kashif Imran, "At SCO Foreign Ministers Moot, FM Dar highlights Pakistan's Location as Trade and Transit Hub," *Arab News*, May 21, 2024, <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/2514321/pakistan>.

⁷⁷ Abid Hussain, "Pakistan seeks BRICS Membership, Despite India Roadblock," *Al Jazeera*, November 24, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/24/pakistan-seeks-brics-membership-despite-india-roadblock#:~:text=Islamabad%2C%20Pakistan%20%E2%80%94%20Pakistan%20has%20for%20mally,bloc%20of%20the%20Global%20South>.



3.2. Prospective Foreign Policy Approaches to Counter India's Aggressive Posture

3.2.1. Strengthen Diplomatic Initiatives to Address the IIOJ&K Dispute

Respondent 1 categorically stated that Pakistan cannot afford to lose Jammu & Kashmir, citing its historical significance and territorial importance. He pointed out that at the time of independence, the principle that Muslim-majority states should join Pakistan was overlooked in the case of Kashmir. Given that Pakistan's prime water resources originate from this region, maintaining a cooperative relationship, especially concerning the Indus Waters Treaty, is crucial. He suggested that Pakistan should counter Indian rigidity by focusing on the mutual benefits of maintaining the treaty and fostering goodwill to ensure its continuation. Respondent 2 advocated for Pakistan to present its stance on IIOJ&K more effectively on humanitarian and legal grounds at global forums, rather than framing it primarily as a nuclear flashpoint. This approach would help in garnering international support by highlighting the issue's legal and human rights dimensions.

Respondent 4 stressed the urgent need for Pakistan to revamp its diplomatic efforts internationally. It is crucial for Pakistan to expose the Indian atrocities in IIOJ&K and to facilitate more frequent visits by international organisations and NGOs to Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) and Azad Kashmir. These visits could help highlight the stark differences in conditions on either side of the border, drawing international attention and support. Respondent 5 noted that given the aggressive posture of India's BJP government towards Pakistan, any engagement should be postponed until Pakistan can negotiate from a position of strength. This approach suggests a strategic pause in direct talks, focusing instead on strengthening Pakistan's diplomatic and strategic posture.

3.2.2. Prioritise Human Resource Development

Respondent 1 expressed the view that India's current strength derives from its status as a global opportunity, suggesting that the strategy to counter India's aggressive posture should involve becoming self-sufficient and focusing on human resource development rather than solely enhancing military capabilities.

According to R1, Pakistan should invest in projects that transform its human capital into a significant asset, making the country an attractive opportunity for global engagement. Such a focus not only builds a resilient and skilled workforce but also fosters a sense of ownership among the population. This inclusiveness is essential for



crafting a sustainable foreign policy strategy towards India, as it ensures public support for government initiatives, especially when the populace sees their own needs being met domestically. While R1 urged that moving away from a war-centric approach to nurturing and leveraging human resources was crucial; however, he accepted that it remained necessary for Pakistan to maintain a balance between ensuring national security and advancing economic objectives. Pakistan has valid concerns about India's aggressive and hegemonic behaviour, which fuels tensions between the two nations.

Despite these challenges, Pakistan has demonstrated maturity and a readiness to engage India on various issues, from arms control to mutual security. The country has kept diplomatic channels open, as evidenced by the Pakistan Foreign Minister's visit to India for the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Council of Foreign Ministers' meeting in May 2023.⁷⁸ However, India has not responded favourably to Pakistan's diplomatic gestures. The extent of India's engagement with Pakistan in multilateral forums such as the SCO (and BRICS) during Prime Minister Modi's third term remains to be seen.

To achieve the right balance between security needs and economic ambitions, Pakistan must adopt a multifaceted approach. This includes maintaining vigilance against any disruptive actions by India and continuing to expose Indian motives and actions on international forums. Furthermore, Pakistan should advocate for robust military Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) with India to reduce the risk of accidental escalations at the border. This balanced approach will enable Pakistan to safeguard its national interests and be recognised as a state promoting stability and cooperation in the region.

3.2.3. Pursue Sustained Diplomatic Engagement

Respondent 2 discussed the current deadlock in Indo-Pak relations, noting that despite India's reluctance to accept Pakistan's overtures for renewed dialogue, Pakistan must continue to advocate for diplomatic engagement. He highlighted the asymmetry in power and influence between the two nations, with India gaining traction on the international stage and being actively included in various multilateral ventures, while

⁷⁸ Ayaz Gul, "Pakistani Foreign Minister to Travel to India for SCO Meeting," *Voice of America*, April 20, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-foreign-minister-to-travel-to-india-for-sco-meeting-/7058698.html>.



Pakistan lags in this regard. Despite this disparity, R2 underlined the critical importance of Pakistan maintaining diplomatic efforts with India. The absence of dialogue, he warned, would likely lead to a vacuum, potentially giving India the opportunity to shape the narrative and influence regional dynamics to Pakistan's detriment. Engaging diplomatically is essential not only to attempt to balance this asymmetry but also to ensure that Pakistan's perspectives and interests are represented and considered in regional affairs.

3.2.4. Adopt Dual 'D' Approach: Development and Dialogue

Respondent 2 articulated the need for Pakistan to adopt a simultaneous approach of 'Development and Dialogue' - that this combination is what the global community is eager to engage with. He cautioned that if Pakistan remains entrenched in a security-focused discourse, it might be perceived as opting for a strategy akin to nuclear blackmail. There is a crucial need to cultivate democracy and peace practices domestically, with an emphasis on inclusivity. Such internal strengthening would provide a solid foundation for the government to engage more credibly with the international community and India, supported by legitimacy and public backing. In the same vein, Respondent 4 stressed the importance of addressing domestic challenges as ongoing struggles could persist without significant improvements in its economy and substantial investments in its population. He was of the view that the primary objective of Pakistan's foreign policy should be to focus inward because effective foreign engagement is designed to support and achieve domestic objectives. This perspective underscores the interconnectedness of domestic stability and international diplomacy, advocating for a robust internal development strategy as a precursor to successful external relations.

3.3. Managing Bilateral Relations with Afghanistan

3.3.1. Enhance Diplomatic Engagement

While discussing the historical tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan, Respondent 1 noted that confrontations between neighbours are a common aspect of global politics. He remarked that Pakistan's relationship with various Afghan governments have historically been short-lived, rarely remaining stable beyond three months. This, he suggested, illustrated that differences are normal, but the essence of effective diplomacy is in managing these differences adeptly. He predicted that Pakistan and Afghanistan were likely to continue experiencing divergent viewpoints.



Consequently, there is a crucial need for Pakistan to tailor its foreign policy with the understanding that diplomatic relations are complex and often nuanced, not reducible to simple equations. He highlighted that managing these relationships requires flexibility, understanding, and a calculated approach to diplomacy, suggesting that Pakistan must continuously adapt and refine its diplomatic policy to address the ongoing challenges and opportunities in its relations with Afghanistan.

3.3.2. Balance Security Concerns and Interests vis-à-vis Afghanistan

Respondent 2 advised on the need for Pakistan to establish clear strategic objectives regarding its engagement with Afghanistan. With the de-facto Taliban rule currently in place, Pakistan's primary concern should be to ensure that Afghan territory was not used as a base for hostile actions against it, particularly by groups like TTP. This necessitates a careful balancing of security concerns with broader interests in the region. He highlighted that Pakistan's interests lie in avoiding a two-front conflict from both its eastern and western borders. To mitigate this risk, Pakistan could leverage its diplomatic relations to ensure that the Taliban take concrete steps to prevent TTP from using Afghan soil to launch attacks against Pakistan. This approach would involve conditioning aspects of bilateral relations on the Taliban's cooperation in addressing security concerns, thereby aligning diplomatic engagement with Pakistan's national security priorities.

3.3.3. Push for an Inclusive Government in Afghanistan

Respondent 2 put emphasis on the importance of Pakistan, in collaboration with the international community, advocating for the establishment of an inclusive government in Afghanistan. This government should represent all ethnic groups, including Hazaras, Uzbeks, Tajiks, and others, to ensure a balanced and equitable political structure. By promoting inclusivity rather than solely supporting the Pashtun-dominated Taliban, Pakistan can significantly enhance its soft power on the global stage, demonstrating its commitment to a stable and diverse Afghan governance structure.

Moreover, this approach could provide a foundation for continued dialogue with Afghanistan, focusing on areas of mutual concern such as counterterrorism efforts. Particularly, addressing the threat posed by the Islamic State of Khorasan (IS-K) could serve as a critical point of convergence for both sides.



3.3.4. Establish Red Lines with the Afghan Taliban

Respondent 4 also focused on the necessity for Pakistan to establish clear boundaries with the Taliban regarding security concerns. He advocated for a firm stance on issues such as border fencing, which is crucial for Pakistan's national security and should not be compromised. Additionally, Pakistan must communicate unequivocally that the presence of anti-Pakistan elements on Afghan soil is unacceptable, and that Pakistan reserves the right to take kinetic action if necessary.

However, establishing these red lines does not imply an antagonistic relationship with Afghanistan. Instead, Pakistan should simultaneously enhance the softer aspects of the Pak-Afghan relationship, particularly by boosting people-to-people contacts. Such engagement can help fill any potential vacuum in bilateral relations that could otherwise be exploited by regional adversaries like India.

Echoing this sentiment, Respondents 3 and 5 highlighted the importance of continuous engagement with Afghanistan's ruling regime, regardless of who holds power, to counteract Indian influence effectively. They also noted Pakistan's substantial investment in border fencing along the western front, stressing the importance of maintaining the integrity of this security measure despite challenges and provocations from the Afghan side. This balanced approach of firm security measures combined with increased cultural and social exchanges could help stabilise and strengthen Pak-Afghan relations.

3.4. Pakistan's Foreign Policy towards Iran amidst Recent Developments

3.4.1. Identify Points of Convergence with Iran

According to Respondent 1, Pakistan should look deeper into identifying and expanding points of convergence with Iran, such as their shared interest in combating terrorism. This collaboration could also aid in managing border turbulence, as the effective operation of a Mutual Rapid Response Force along the border would benefit both nations. Additionally, there are significant opportunities to enhance bilateral cooperation in the realms of energy and trade. He also noted that the recent rapprochement between KSA and Iran has alleviated Pakistan's dilemma of choosing sides between these key regional players. This development frees Pakistan to pursue a foreign policy that more directly aligns with its national interests and aspirations,



creating a more favourable environment for fostering bilateral relations with Iran without the complexities of regional rivalries.

3.4.2. Leverage the Economic Cooperation Organization

Respondent 2 suggested that Pakistan and Iran should utilise the platform of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) to enhance its vibrancy and functionality, especially now that Tayyip Erdoğan had begun his third term as Türkiye's leader. He proposed that the three countries - Pakistan, Turkey, and Iran - which share apprehensions about the current global order, can effectively collaborate within this multilateral framework. By doing so, they could advance their collective interests and strengthen their regional cooperation, capitalising on their shared goals and concerns within the broader international context.

3.4.3. Unlock Economic Opportunities

Respondent 3 highlighted that the recent reconciliatory developments between Iran and KSA, facilitated by China, open up significant investment opportunities for Pakistan not just from these countries but also potentially from others interested in the stability of the region. This could lead to enhanced economic collaboration and inflows of capital. Respondents 4 and 5 expanded on this point, noting that new economic initiatives starting in the Middle East could provide Pakistan with financial relief in a context where regional resistance to such investments is minimal. They reiterated the importance of regional integration as a primary focus for all parties involved. Given this momentum, they urged Pakistan to seize the moment and actively participate in these emerging economic opportunities to ensure it benefits from regional growth and cooperation.

Table 2 consists of the foreign policy options shared by the respondents in summarised form:



**Table 2: Geopolitical Realities and
Corresponding Foreign Policy Options for Pakistan**

Geopolitical Realities	Foreign Policy Options for Pakistan
<p><i>Sino-US Rivalry</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adopt a calculated foreign policy that strategically balances relationships with both the US and China. • Position itself as a valuable global player by investing in human resources, enabling the identification and capitalisation of opportunities for a prominent role in the evolving geopolitical landscape. • Implement a policy of risk mitigation to safeguard interests amid great power competition, involving active participation in regional multilateral forums like the SCO.
<p><i>India's Aggressive Posture</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure robust diplomatic efforts are maintained to actively pursue the Kashmir cause on legal and humanitarian grounds. • Focus on its citizens to instil a sense of national pride and support for the state's foreign policy, particularly towards India, by meeting their domestic needs and thus fostering a sustainable foreign policy plan. • Strive to keep diplomatic channels open with India, despite New Delhi's belligerent attitude, to prevent it from exploiting any absence of dialogue to its advantage, especially at the international level.
<p><i>Taliban-ruled Afghanistan</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue efforts to resolve long-standing contentions with Afghanistan through effective diplomacy. • Adapt strategic clarity in foreign policy towards Afghanistan to balance security concerns with broader interests. • Establish clear red lines/boundaries with Afghanistan regarding the use of its territory by groups like the TTP against Pakistan.
<p><i>Iran's Regional Standing amidst Rapprochement with KSA</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain points of convergence with Iran, particularly on issues of border security and counterterrorism efforts. • Capitalise on the untapped economic opportunities with Iran, especially in the wake of the Iran-KSA rapprochement, allowing Pakistan to pursue bilateral relations with both states without the constraints of bloc politics.

Source: Author's compilation based on interviews.



The respondents provided a range of foreign policy options that Pakistan could adopt, in light of the evolving regional order. A central theme highlighted in nearly all responses was the need for Pakistan to address its internal political and economic challenges. By stabilising its domestic situation, Pakistan would be better positioned to leverage its foreign policy tools and achieve its objectives within the region.

Ample academic research supports the notion that a country's internal dynamics are crucial for the formulation and execution of its foreign policy. Internal stability is essential for making foreign policy effective. Without a sound financial foundation and a strong internal standing of the national government, a country cannot demonstrate the strength of its foreign policy. In Pakistan's case, its current fragile economic condition and volatile political situation are imposing significant limitations on its foreign policy options. These limitations range from obstacles in attracting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) to being overlooked in major regional power alliances.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of Pakistan's foreign policy is intrinsically linked to domestic factors such as the education and skill level of its population, investment in Research and Development, and addressing structural weaknesses in the economy. These elements are crucial for supporting a results-driven and viable foreign policy.

4. Conclusion

Pakistan, by virtue of its strategic geographical location, is navigating through a period of significant paradigm shifts in its neighbouring region with states intensifying alliance formations and subsequent currents of regional integration. In response to this dynamic geopolitical landscape, marked by rapid transformations, it is imperative for Pakistan to align its foreign policy with respect to its neighbours and major powers in the region. This alignment is essential to ensure that Pakistan effectively adapts and remains relevant within the evolving regional order.

In light of the prevailing global dynamics, Pakistan must adopt a balanced approach towards the Sino-US rivalry, a calculated stance towards India, a reconciliatory yet firm posture towards Afghanistan, and a pragmatic approach to trade opportunities with Iran. However, a significant insight from this paper is the necessity for Pakistan to capitalise on its strategic position to enhance its standing on the global stage. This transformation requires addressing internal challenges and investing in its population. Positioned at a strategic crossroads, Pakistan has the potential to benefit significantly from the multilateral activities unfolding in its region. The rapid changes in the geopolitical landscape call for the adoption of a robust and adaptive foreign policy. In Pakistan's case, domestic political and economic instability directly influences the effectiveness of its foreign policy initiatives.

The foreign policy of a country shapes its relationships with the external world, including both neighbouring states and distant regional and global actors, while aligning with its national interests. However, the definition of national interest hinges on prioritising the welfare of its citizens. For Pakistan to establish a robust regional presence, it must address its political, economic, and social challenges. By focusing on human security and integrating non-traditional security threats into its mainstream



policy framework, Pakistan can create an environment conducive to a comprehensive foreign policy aimed at fostering goodwill and prosperity.

The successful implementation of the foreign policy options discussed in this paper is contingent upon Pakistan maintaining stable internal dynamics through effective governance, a robust sense of justice, and a thriving economy. It is from these internal strengths that Pakistan's foreign policy will draw its enduring power.





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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