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PAKISTAN'S FOREIGN POLICY (2018–2026): CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES, STRATEGIC SHIFTS, AND EMERGING TRENDS

Naveed Hussain Mangi[*1], Umais Ahmed[2], Dr. Haseeb Jan Saduzai[3]

[*1]*MS Scholar, Department of International Relations, University of Karachi,*
[2]*MA, Department of International Relations, University of Karachi,*
[3]*Doctor of Business Administration, Departement - Ezhire Technologies, Dubai, Swiss School of Management, Dubai, UAE.*

[*1]naveeedhussain.05l@gmail.com, [2]akumais123@gmail.com, [3]haseebjansaduzai@gmail.com

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Corresponding Author: *
Naveed Hussain Mangi

Abstract

Pakistan's foreign policy during 2018–2026 has undergone significant strategic shifts in response to changing regional and global geopolitical dynamics. This period was marked by political transitions, economic challenges, intensifying great-power competition, evolving relations with the United States and China, tensions with India, developments in Afghanistan, and growing engagement with the Middle East and Central Asian states. The study examines the major challenges, opportunities, strategic shifts, and emerging trends that shaped Pakistan's foreign policy during this period. It argues that Pakistan increasingly sought to balance its strategic partnership with China with efforts to maintain constructive relations with the United States and other international partners. Economic diplomacy, regional connectivity, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), geo-economics, and multilateral engagement became increasingly important components of foreign-policy thinking. At the same time, security concerns, economic dependence, regional instability, diplomatic pressures, and changing global power structures created significant constraints. The study concludes that Pakistan's foreign policy has gradually moved toward a more pragmatic, diversified, and geo-economics orientation, although its success depends on domestic political stability, economic resilience, strategic consistency, and effective regional diplomacy

1. Introduction

Pakistan's foreign policy has historically been shaped by its geographical location, security concerns, economic interests, domestic political developments, and relations with major regional and global powers. Since independence, Pakistan has sought to protect its territorial sovereignty, strengthen national security, promote economic development, and maintain strategic partnerships with influential states. Its foreign-policy priorities have also been influenced by its position at the intersection of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. During the twenty-first century, however, changes in the international system have increasingly required Pakistan to

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adjust its traditional security-oriented approach toward economic diplomacy, regional connectivity, and diversified international partnerships (Hussain, 2016)

The period from 2018 to 2026 represents an important phase in the evolution of Pakistan's foreign policy because it witnessed substantial domestic and international changes. The political transition following the 2018 general elections, the government led by Imran Khan, the change of government in 2022, and subsequent political developments influenced Pakistan's external relations. At the international level, the intensification of United States–China strategic competition, the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, tensions between India and Pakistan, and changing dynamics in the Middle East created new diplomatic challenges. Consequently, Pakistan was required to pursue a foreign policy that could protect its strategic interests while responding to a rapidly changing international environment (International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS, 2024).One of the most significant developments during this period was the growing importance of China in Pakistan's foreign-policy calculations. Pakistan and China have maintained a close strategic partnership for decades, but the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), launched as a major component of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), expanded the relationship into infrastructure, energy, transportation, investment, and regional connectivity. CPEC strengthened the economic dimension of bilateral relations and encouraged Pakistan to emphasize geo-economics' alongside traditional geopolitics. This development also increased Pakistan's strategic importance within China's broader regional connectivity agenda (Roobi, S, 2026).

At the same time, Pakistan's relationship with the United States remained complex. The bilateral relationship has historically included cooperation in security and counterterrorism, but it has also experienced periods of disagreement and strategic divergence. During 2018–2026, relations were affected by differences over Afghanistan, counterterrorism, Pakistan's relations with China, and broader U.S.–China competition. Nevertheless, economic, educational, diplomatic, and security interests continued to provide areas for engagement. Pakistan therefore attempted to avoid excessive dependence on a single major power and pursued a more balanced approach in its relations with Washington, Beijing, Moscow, and other international actors (U.S. Department of State, 2024).Relations with India remained another major challenge for Pakistan's foreign policy throughout the period under examination. The Kashmir dispute, cross-border tensions, military competition, and disagreements over regional security continued to constrain prospects for sustained bilateral cooperation. The Indian government's decision in August 2019 to revoke the special constitutional status of Jammu and Kashmir significantly increased diplomatic tensions between the two countries. Pakistan responded by raising the Kashmir issue at international forums and emphasizing the importance of a peaceful resolution in accordance with relevant international commitments (United Nations Security Council, 2019). Afghanistan also remained central to Pakistan's foreign-policy agenda. Pakistan shares a long border with Afghanistan and has important security, economic, demographic, and historical links with its western neighbor.

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 and the return of the Taliban to power transformed the regional security environment. Pakistan initially emphasized diplomatic engagement with the new Afghan authorities and supported efforts to promote peace and stability. However, security concerns, particularly those associated with cross-border militancy, refugee pressures, and disputes concerning border management, subsequently created significant difficulties in bilateral relations (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, 2022; International Crisis Group, 2023). Economic constraints increasingly became an important factor in Pakistan's foreign policy during 2018–2026. Balance-of-payments pressures, inflation, external debt,

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energy requirements, and dependence on international financial institutions limited Pakistan's diplomatic choices. These challenges encouraged policymakers to give greater attention to economic diplomacy, foreign investment, trade, tourism, regional connectivity, and overseas Pakistani contributions. The increasing emphasis on geo-economics' reflected the understanding that economic stability is closely connected with national security and international influence (International Monetary Fund, 2024).

Pakistan also expanded its engagement with countries and organizations beyond its traditional strategic partners. Relations with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Turkiye, Iran, Russia, and Central Asian states became increasingly important. Pakistan sought to strengthen trade, investment, energy cooperation, defense relations, and diplomatic support through these partnerships. Its participation in multilateral organizations, including the United Nations, Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and other regional forums, provided opportunities to advance its diplomatic objectives. This diversification can be understood as an attempt to increase Pakistan's strategic autonomy in an increasingly competitive international system (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, 2024).Another important emerging trend was Pakistan's increasing focus on regional connectivity and economic integration. Its geographical position provides potential opportunities for linking South Asia with Central Asia, China, the Middle East, and other regions. Projects associated with CPEC, Gwadar, transportation networks, energy cooperation, and trade corridors have strengthened the argument that Pakistan can transform its geographical location into an economic and strategic advantage. However, achieving these opportunities requires political stability, improved governance, infrastructure development, security, and consistent foreign-policy implementation (World Bank, 2022).

The Pakistan's foreign policy from 2018 to 2026 demonstrates a gradual movement from a predominantly security-centered orientation toward a more diversified and geo-economics approach. Nevertheless, traditional security concerns—including tensions with India, instability in Afghanistan, terrorism, and great-power competition—continue to influence foreign-policy decision-making. The period also demonstrates that Pakistan's external behavior cannot be understood independently of domestic political stability and economic conditions. Therefore, examining the challenges, opportunities, strategic shifts, and emerging trends of Pakistan's foreign policy during 2018–2026 is essential for understanding the country's changing position in regional and global politics. This study analyzes these developments and evaluates the extent to which Pakistan has been able to balance strategic partnerships, economic interests, national security requirements, and its pursuit of greater diplomatic autonomy.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine the evolution of Pakistan's foreign policy between 2018 and 2026. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study focuses on understanding diplomatic developments, strategic decisions, foreign-policy challenges, opportunities, and emerging trends rather than measuring these phenomena statistically. The approach enables the researcher to interpret Pakistan's foreign-policy behavior within its regional and international political context.

Theoretical Framework: Neorealism

Neorealism, also known as Structural Realism, was developed by Kenneth N. Waltz (1979). The theory argues that the behavior of states is largely influenced by the structure of the international system, which is characterized by anarchy and the absence of a central authority. States therefore prioritize their survival, security, and national interests. This theory is relevant to Pakistan's foreign policy because its relations with major powers are strongly influenced by regional security concerns, changing global power structures, and

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competition among powerful states. Neorealism is particularly useful for understanding Pakistan's strategic relations with China, the United States, India, Afghanistan, and Russia during 2018–2026. Pakistan has sought to strengthen its strategic partnership with China while maintaining relations with the United States and other international actors. Its policies toward India and Afghanistan have also been influenced by security concerns and regional instability. From a neorealist perspective, these foreign-policy decisions reflect Pakistan's efforts to protect national security and improve its position within a changing distribution of international power (Giovacchini, et, al, 2024)

The theory is therefore adopted as the main theoretical framework for this study because it helps explain Pakistan's strategic shifts, security challenges, power balancing, alliances, and emerging foreign-policy trends during 2018–2026. It also provides a useful basis for analyzing how changes in the international system, particularly U.S.–China competition and regional geopolitical developments, have affected Pakistan's foreign-policy choices. However, economic diplomacy and CPEC also demonstrate the growing importance of economic interests, which can be examined as a complementary dimension alongside neorealist analysis.

Pakistan's Foreign Policy (2018–2026): Major Challenges

Regional Security and Geopolitical Instability

One of the major challenges for Pakistan's foreign policy during 2018–2026 has been the changing regional security environment. Tensions with India, instability in Afghanistan, terrorism, and increasing competition among major powers have placed significant pressure on Pakistan's diplomatic and strategic choices. The deteriorating security environment in the region has required Pakistan to balance national security interests with the need for diplomatic engagement and regional cooperation (Ihsan, et, al, 2026).

Pakistan–India Relations

Relations between Pakistan and India have remained one of the most difficult aspects of Pakistan's foreign policy. The Kashmir dispute, cross-border tensions, military competition, and political disagreements have limited opportunities for sustained bilateral cooperation. India's decision in August 2019 to change the constitutional status of Jammu and Kashmir further intensified diplomatic tensions. Pakistan has continued to raise the Kashmir issue at international forums while seeking a peaceful and negotiated resolution.

Afghanistan and Border Security

Developments in Afghanistan have presented another significant challenge. Following the withdrawal of U.S. forces and the Taliban's return to power in 2021, Pakistan faced new security and diplomatic challenges. Pakistan has sought constructive engagement with the Afghan authorities, but issues involving terrorism, border management, refugee movements, and cross-border militancy have complicated bilateral relations. Maintaining stability along the Pakistan–Afghanistan border has therefore remained an important foreign-policy priority.

Balancing Relations with China and the United States

Pakistan has faced the difficult task of maintaining its close strategic partnership with China while also preserving constructive relations with the United States. The intensifying U.S.–China strategic competition has reduced the space for countries such as Pakistan to pursue completely independent relationships with both powers. Pakistan has therefore attempted to follow a balanced and pragmatic approach that protects its economic and security interests without becoming excessively dependent on either major power.

Economic and Financial Constraints

Economic vulnerability has significantly affected Pakistan's foreign-policy choices during this period. High external debt, balance-of-payments pressures, inflation, energy

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requirements, and dependence on international financial assistance have restricted Pakistan's strategic autonomy. Economic difficulties have encouraged Islamabad to focus increasingly on economic diplomacy, foreign investment, trade, CPEC, and relations with Gulf countries and other economic partners.

Great-Power Competition and Terrorism and National Security

The growing competition among the United States, China, and Russia has created a complicated international environment for Pakistan. The Russia–Ukraine conflict, U.S.–China rivalry, and changing global alliances have required Pakistan to carefully manage its diplomatic relations. Pakistan has attempted to avoid becoming directly aligned with competing power blocs while promoting its national interests through strategic autonomy and multilateral diplomacy. The Terrorism and militancy continue to influence Pakistan's foreign-policy agenda. Security threats originating from regional instability have affected Pakistan's relations with neighboring states and international partners. Pakistan has also faced international pressure regarding counterterrorism and regional security. Consequently, counterterrorism cooperation, border security, and national security have remained important components of Pakistan's external relations.

International Diplomatic Pressure and Political Instability and Policy Continuity

Pakistan has also faced diplomatic pressure concerning issues such as terrorism financing, human rights, democratic governance, and economic reforms. Maintaining a positive international image while protecting sovereignty and national interests has therefore been a continuing challenge. Pakistan has attempted to use multilateral institutions, including the United Nations, Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, and Shanghai Cooperation Organization, to strengthen its diplomatic position. Domestic political instability has created difficulties for the continuity and consistency of Pakistan's foreign policy. Changes in government, political polarization, institutional tensions, and economic uncertainty can influence foreign-policy priorities. Effective diplomacy requires stable institutions and consistent long-term strategies. Frequent political changes can therefore make it more difficult for Pakistan to communicate a clear and predictable foreign-policy direction to international partners (Masys, et, al, 2025).

Climate Change and Non-Traditional Security

Climate change has emerged as an increasingly important foreign-policy challenge for Pakistan. Floods, water shortages, rising temperatures, and environmental degradation have created economic and humanitarian pressures. Pakistan has increasingly highlighted climate justice and the need for international financial support for climate adaptation and loss and damage. Thus, climate diplomacy has become an emerging component of Pakistan's international engagement alongside traditional security concerns (Hassan, et, al, 2025).

Pakistan's Foreign Policy (2018–2026): Opportunities

Geo-economics Diplomacy

Pakistan has an important opportunity to strengthen geo-economics diplomacy by focusing on trade, investment, economic connectivity, and regional cooperation. Its strategic geographical position between South Asia, China, Central Asia, and the Middle East provides opportunities to develop trade corridors and attract foreign investment. A stronger emphasis on economic diplomacy can help Pakistan diversify its international partnerships and support sustainable economic development (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, 2022; World Bank, 2022). The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) provides significant opportunities for Pakistan's economic and foreign-policy objectives. Cooperation with China can contribute to infrastructure development, energy production, industrialization, transportation, and regional connectivity. Pakistan can further benefit from

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CPEC by promoting investment, developing special economic zones, and strengthening trade links with China and other regional economies (Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform, 2021; Small, 2022).

Regional Connectivity and Central Asia

Pakistan's location provides an opportunity to strengthen economic and diplomatic relations with Central Asian states. Improved transportation and trade connectivity can allow Pakistan to serve as a gateway for Central Asian countries to the Arabian Sea through its ports. Cooperation in energy, trade, transportation, tourism, and regional security can expand Pakistan's economic and diplomatic influence in the region (World Bank, 2022). Pakistan has an opportunity to diversify its foreign relations by maintaining constructive partnerships with China, the United States, Gulf countries, Türkiye, Russia, and Central Asian states. Diversification can reduce excessive dependence on any single international partner and provide Pakistan with greater strategic autonomy. Balanced diplomatic engagement can also help Pakistan respond more effectively to the changing international distribution of power (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, 2024).

Climate and Multilateral Diplomacy

Climate change provides Pakistan with an important opportunity to strengthen its multilateral diplomacy. Pakistan's vulnerability to floods, water scarcity, and other climate-related risks enables it to advocate internationally for climate finance, adaptation support, technology transfer, and loss-and-damage mechanisms. Active engagement with the United Nations and other international institutions can help Pakistan mobilize international support while enhancing its diplomatic profile (World Bank, 2022).

Pakistan's Foreign Policy (2018–2026): Strategic Shifts and Emerging Trends

Shift from Geopolitics toward Geo-economics

One of the major strategic shifts in Pakistan's foreign policy during 2018–2026 has been the increasing emphasis on geo-economics'. Alongside traditional security concerns, Pakistan has increasingly focused on trade, investment, regional connectivity, economic partnerships, and development. This shift reflects the growing recognition that economic stability and international economic engagement are essential components of national security and diplomatic influence (World Bank, 2022).

Deepening Strategic Partnership with China

Pakistan's relationship with China has increasingly developed beyond traditional defense cooperation toward economic, technological, infrastructure, and connectivity cooperation. CPEC has remained a central component of this relationship and has strengthened China's importance in Pakistan's foreign-policy calculations. During 2018–2026, Pakistan continued to emphasize CPEC, industrial cooperation, energy projects, and regional connectivity as important elements of its long-term strategic partnership with China (Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform, 2021; Small, 2022).

Strategic Balancing among Major Powers

Another important trend has been Pakistan's effort to maintain balanced relations with competing major powers. Increasing U.S.–China rivalry has created a difficult environment for Pakistan, encouraging Islamabad to avoid complete dependence on either side. Pakistan has attempted to maintain its strategic partnership with China while continuing engagement with the United States, Russia, Türkiye, Gulf countries, and other international actors. This approach reflects an effort to preserve strategic autonomy in an increasingly multipolar international system.

Greater Regional and Multilateral Engagement

Pakistan has increasingly emphasized regional and multilateral diplomacy through institutions such as the United Nations, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and other international

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forums. Engagement with Central Asian states has also gained importance because of Pakistan's potential role as a regional trade and connectivity hub. This trend demonstrates Pakistan's attempt to expand its diplomatic relationships beyond traditional bilateral partnerships and strengthen its role in regional affairs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, 2024).

Emerging Importance of Non-Traditional Security

During 2018–2026, Pakistan's foreign-policy agenda increasingly incorporated non-traditional security issues**,** including climate change, water security, food security, energy security, and public health. Climate diplomacy became particularly important following severe climate-related disasters, encouraging Pakistan to seek international climate finance and support. This represents an expansion of foreign policy beyond conventional military and geopolitical concerns toward broader human and environmental security.

Emerging Trends in Pakistan's Foreign Policy (2018–2026)

Rise of Geo-economics Diplomacy

A major emerging trend in Pakistan's foreign policy is the growing emphasis on geo-economics'**.** Pakistan has increasingly focused on trade, investment, regional connectivity, economic cooperation, and attracting foreign investment. This approach seeks to complement traditional security-based diplomacy with economic objectives and to use Pakistan's geographical location as a source of strategic and economic advantage (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, 2022).

Expansion of CPEC and Economic Connectivity

China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has become an important element of Pakistan's external relations. Cooperation with China increasingly includes infrastructure, energy, industrial development, technology, and connectivity. Pakistan is seeking to move CPEC toward greater economic and industrial cooperation, making it an important instrument of both economic development and foreign policy (Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform, 2021; Small, 2022).

Strategic Diversification and Autonomy

Pakistan is increasingly pursuing diversified international partnerships rather than depending exclusively on one major power. While China remains a key strategic partner, Pakistan continues to engage with the United States, Russia, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Central Asian states. This diversification provides Pakistan with greater diplomatic flexibility and supports its pursuit of strategic autonomy in a changing multipolar international system.

Growing Engagement with Central Asia

Another emerging trend is Pakistan's increased diplomatic and economic engagement with Central Asian states. Pakistan seeks to develop trade routes, energy cooperation, transportation links, and regional connectivity with countries such as Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Pakistan's ports and geographical position provide opportunities to connect Central Asian economies with international markets (World Bank, 2022).

Climate Diplomacy

Climate diplomacy has become increasingly important in Pakistan's foreign-policy agenda. Pakistan's vulnerability to floods, water scarcity, rising temperatures, and other climate-related challenges has encouraged it to seek international climate finance, adaptation support, and technological assistance. Climate diplomacy has therefore emerged as an important area through which Pakistan engages with international institutions and developed countries.

Pakistan's foreign policy during 2018–2026 has experienced significant changes in response to evolving regional and global political conditions. The period was characterized by political transitions, economic difficulties, and tensions with India, developments in

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Afghanistan, intensifying U.S.–China competition, and changing international power structures. These factors required Pakistan to continuously adjust its diplomatic priorities while protecting its national security and strategic interests. A major development during this period has been the increasing shift from a predominantly geopolitical and security-oriented approach toward geo-economics diplomacy. Pakistan has increasingly emphasized trade, investment, CPEC, regional connectivity, energy cooperation, and economic partnerships. The strategic relationship with China has remained particularly important, while Pakistan has simultaneously attempted to maintain constructive relations with the United States, Gulf countries, Russia, Türkiye, and Central Asian states.

Despite these opportunities, Pakistan continues to face serious challenges, including economic vulnerability, political instability, India–Pakistan tensions, terrorism, instability in Afghanistan, and competition among major powers. These challenges limit Pakistan's ability to pursue an entirely independent foreign policy. Domestic political stability, economic strength, institutional capacity, and policy continuity are therefore essential for translating foreign-policy objectives into practical outcomes.

Pakistan's foreign policy is increasingly characterized by strategic diversification, economic diplomacy, regional connectivity, multilateral engagement, and strategic autonomy. Emerging areas such as climate diplomacy, digital diplomacy, energy security, and regional economic cooperation are becoming increasingly important. Pakistan's future foreign-policy success will depend on its ability to balance traditional security interests with economic priorities and to transform its geographical and strategic position into sustainable economic and diplomatic advantages. Overall, the 2018–2026 period demonstrates Pakistan's gradual adaptation to a multipolar international system, with greater emphasis on pragmatic diplomacy and the pursuit of national interests.

Key Recommendations

Based on the analysis of Pakistan's Foreign Policy (2018–2026): Challenges, Opportunities, Strategic Shifts, and Emerging Trends, the following recommendations are proposed:

Strengthen Economic Diplomacy: Pakistan should prioritize trade, foreign investment, economic partnerships, and export promotion as central components of its foreign policy. Economic diplomacy can strengthen the country's international position and reduce dependence on external financial assistance.

Ensure Continuity in Foreign Policy: Pakistan should develop a consistent and long-term foreign-policy strategy that remains stable despite changes in political governments. Strong institutional coordination can improve policy implementation and international credibility.

Maintain Balanced Relations with Major Powers: Pakistan should continue its strategic partnership with China while maintaining constructive relations with the United States, Russia, Türkiye, and other major powers. A balanced approach can provide greater **strategic autonomy** and prevent excessive dependence on any single country.

Strengthen CPEC and Regional Connectivity: Pakistan should improve the implementation of CPEC by focusing on industrialization, special economic zones, energy, trade, and employment. Greater connectivity with Central Asia and the Middle East can help Pakistan transform its geographical location into an economic advantage.

Improve Relations with Neighboring Countries: Pakistan should pursue sustained diplomatic engagement with India and Afghanistan to reduce tensions and promote regional stability. Dialogue, confidence-building measures, border management, and economic cooperation should be prioritized wherever possible.

Strengthen Multilateral Diplomacy: Pakistan should increase its active participation in the United Nations, OIC, SCO, and other international forums. Multilateral diplomacy can help Pakistan build international support on issues such as Kashmir, climate change,

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terrorism, development, and economic cooperation.

Promote Climate Diplomacy: Pakistan should make climate change a permanent component of its foreign-policy agenda. It should actively seek international climate finance, technology transfer, adaptation assistance, and support for communities affected by climate-related disasters.

Enhance Regional Economic Cooperation: Pakistan should strengthen economic relations with Central Asian, Gulf, South Asian, and Southeast Asian countries. Greater trade and investment cooperation can diversify Pakistan's economic partners and create new markets for Pakistani exports.

Strengthen Digital and Public Diplomacy: Pakistan should make greater use of digital platforms to communicate its foreign-policy positions, promote tourism and culture, counter misinformation, and improve the country's international image. Professional public diplomacy can strengthen Pakistan's soft power.

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