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PAKISTAN'S FOREIGN POLICY SINCE INDEPENDENCE: HISTORICAL EVOLUTION AND CONTEMPORARY STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

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Abstract

This article analyses the historical evolution of Pakistan's foreign policy from 1947 to 2026 and identifies the strategic priorities that organise Islamabad's conduct in a fragmenting, multipolar order. It argues that policy has been organised around stable core interests, territorial integrity against a conventionally superior India, a Kashmir settlement, Islamic solidarity, external assistance, and great-power management, whose ranking and instruments have changed more than the interests themselves. The study, using historical-analytical comparison and process tracing on some turning points, reconstructs three periods, the formative years of survival, alignment and war; the period of nuclear deterrence, Afghanistan and the war on terror; and the contemporary period after the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, withdrawal of the Americans from Afghanistan in 2021 and the National Security Policy of 2022. It finds that the proclaimed shift from geopolitics to geo-economics is a real but incomplete recasting. The triple alignment with the two great powers, China and the United States, and the Gulf has widened the scope for diplomacy but fiscal fragility, civil-military imbalance, the stand-off with India in May 2025, and a hostile Afghan border have limited the potential of geography, to be converted into influence. Pakistan is emerging as a 'hinge' or 'multi-aligned' middle power with limited possibilities due to unresolved neighbourhood conflicts and economic dependency.

INTRODUCTION

Foreign policy is one of the most analysed and most contentious areas of South Asian international politics since 14 August 1947. The new state was born in an environment of partition, mass displacement, disputed borders and material shortages, and forced to engage in diplomacy as means of survival and not as an idle assertion of surplus power. Muhammad Ali Jinnah in his broadcast of 15 August 1947, stated that the goal of Pakistan must be peace within and peace without; that Pakistan has no aggressive designs against any country; that Pakistan stands by the United Nations Charter (Jinnah, 1947; Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). The first declaration of good will has never been officially retracted. However, its history of wars with India, association with the United States, strategic partnership with China, involvement in Afghanistan, Nuclearization and a constant need to find patrons and balancers reveals a vast difference between rhetoric and practice, and a persistent and structural disconnect.

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(Burke and Ziring, 1990; Sattar, 2017; Pande, 2011) We'll explore that disconnect in this article. It maps the foreign policy trajectory of Pakistan since independence till today and reveals the "strategic agenda" that guides Islamabad's foreign policy today in an increasingly multipolar and fragmenting world.

The central claim advanced here is that Pakistan's foreign policy has been organised around a relatively stable set of core interests whose ranking and instruments have changed more than the interests themselves. Those interests have been the preservation of territorial integrity and political independence against a conventionally superior India; the pursuit of a satisfactory settlement of the Kashmir dispute; the cultivation of Islamic solidarity as both identity and diplomatic resource; the acquisition of external economic and military assistance; and the management of relations with great powers in such a way as to maximize autonomy while remaining dependent upon them (Sattar, 2017; Cohen, 2004; Hussain, 2025). What has changed is the international system in which these interests must be pursued: from early bipolarity, through unipolar American primacy after 1991, into the present condition of intensified Sino-American competition, a more assertive India, a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, and a Gulf order in which energy, capital and security guarantees are being redistributed. The National Security Policy of 2022 attempted to recast this inheritance by placing economic security at the centre of comprehensive national security and by endorsing a doctrine of cooperative geo-economics and no-camp politics (Government of Pakistan, 2022; Yusuf, 2022). Subsequent events, including the limited India-Pakistan military crisis of May 2025, the transactional thaw with Washington, the deepening of the China relationship, the Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement with Saudi Arabia, and recurrent friction with Kabul, have shown both the ambition and the constraints of that recasting (Yusuf, 2026; Congressional Research Service, 2025).

The article proceeds as follows. After a review of the principal scholarly literature, a statement of the research problem, a specification of objectives and questions, and an account of method, three analytical sections reconstruct the policy record. The first, The Formative Years: Survival, Alignment and War, examines the decades from independence through the 1971 war, the Simla settlement and the Afghan war of the 1980s, when the India-centric security paradigm was institutionalised and the first great-power alignments were struck. The second, Nuclear Deterrence, Afghanistan and the War on Terror, follows the policy through nuclearisation, the unipolar 1990s, and the two decades of the global war on terror, during which Pakistan oscillated between indispensable frontline ally and sanctioned pariah. The third, Contemporary Strategic Priorities, analyses the period after the launch of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, the 2021 American withdrawal from Afghanistan, the 2022 National Security Policy, and the diplomatic and military developments of 2025 and 2026. The conclusion argues that Pakistan has become a hinge or multi-aligned middle power whose room for maneuver is real but whose structural vulnerabilities, economic fragility, civil-military imbalance and unresolved neighbourhood disputes continue to truncate the conversion of geography into influence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a vast amount of work in the scholarly literature on Pakistan's foreign policy, which is divided, and is structured around limited number of recurring debates. The first generation of historical surveys were composed by diplomat-scholars and area specialists and laid the empirical foundations. The classic narrative of the first four decades is still S. M. Burke's Pakistan's Foreign Policy: An Historical Analysis, co-authored by Lawrence Ziring, where the search for security, the disappointment with Western alliances and the switch towards China and the Muslim world are emphasized (Burke and Ziring, 1990). Abdul Sattar, the former foreign secretary, has authored the most popular official history of Pakistan which claimed that the decisions were made on strategic compulsion and not on

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ideological whim of the decision makers and the critics were insensitive to the gravity of Indian threat and the scarcity of Pakistan's own resources (Sattar, 2017). The works are essential for chronology and also for understanding elite thinking, but they tend to ignore the domestic distribution of power which has enabled the military to have a commanding voice in foreign affairs (Rizvi, 2000; Siddiqa, 2007).

Another set of research places India in the middle of this explanation. Aparna Pande in her book Explaining Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Escaping India argues that every major alignment, from SEATO to CENTO, China partnership to the nuclear programme, makes perfect sense as Pakistan's effort to get rid of India's demographic, economic and military shadow (Pande, 2011). C. Christine Fair is even more critical, suggesting that the Pakistan Army has a revisionist strategic culture, that it has consistently employed irregular proxies, and that it is unlikely to be able to accept a status quo based on Indian preponderance (Fair, 2014). In The Idea of Pakistan and some related writings, Stephen Cohen places foreign policy in the unfinished nature of national identity and the army's self-assurance as the protector of its identity (Cohen, 2004). These India-centric stories reflect a truth about the structure of Pakistani threat perception: no other relationship has been so successful in structuring it. A weakness of their policies is that they tend to focus on any single aspect, and this could lead to the neglect of the independent importance of religious identity, economic need, Afghan geography and the opportunity offered by great-power competition (Hussain, 2025; Ahmar, 2023).

Literature stressing civil-military relations, and the sociology of the national security state, is a third literature. In his multiple writings, Husain Haqqani has contended that Western Pakistanis' elites have consistently sold the country to extra-regional patrons with the proceeds of the sales being diverted to delaying domestic reform, leading to a pattern of "magnificent delusions" in the relationship with the United States (Haqqani, 2013; Haqqani, 2018). The studies of military business, army's political role by Ayesha Siddiqa and Hasan-Askari Rizvi and the more recent works on ontological security and elite narrative have all led to the conclusion that foreign policy is not only a reaction to external threats but at the same time an internal means of reproducing military predominance (Siddiqa 2007; Rizvi 2000; Aslam 2026). The most recent and systematic articulation of this view is Wali Aslam's study Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Security, State and Society, which asserts that the binary of foreign policy has been presented as an existential threat to justify disproportionately large security expenditure at the cost of many in Pakistan who still live in poverty (Aslam, 2026). This school is important to understand why policy has been so impervious to civilian reorientation but at times it tends to minimize actual external constraints and the agency of civilian leaders like Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who himself pushed Nuclearization and Islamic diplomacy.

A fourth body of work concerns particular relationships and issue-areas. On China, a substantial literature traces the evolution from the 1963 boundary agreement and the 1965 wartime alignment to the all-weather strategic cooperative partnership and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (Small, 2015; Ali, 2022). On the United States, congressional, think-tank and memoir literature documents a cyclical pattern of intense engagement and bitter estrangement, organised around Cold War containment, the anti-Soviet Afghan war, nuclear non-proliferation, and post-2001 counterterrorism (Kux, 2001; Congressional Research Service, 2023; Haqqani, 2013). On Afghanistan, scholars have reconstructed the doctrine of strategic depth, the support for the mujahedeen and later the Taliban, and the costly blowback of militancy, refugees and border insecurity (Rashid, 2008; Abbas, 2014; Tajbakhsh, 2025). On nuclear policy, Feroz Hassan Khan and others have shown how a programme conceived as insurance against Indian conventional superiority became the organising fact of South Asian deterrence (Khan, 2012). On geo-economics, Moeed Yusuf and colleagues have articulated the official case

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for a pivot from geopolitics to connectivity, trade and investment (Yusuf, 2022; Yusuf and Akhtar, 2023; Yusuf, 2026).

A fifth and more recent literature examines Pakistan as a multi-aligned or hinge power in a fragmenting order. Studies of multidirectional balancing argue that Islamabad has moved from bandwagoning with a single patron toward simultaneous engagement with China, the United States, Russia, the Gulf states, Turkey and, where possible, Europe (Ali, 2022; Yusuf, 2026). Analyses of 2025 and 2026 diplomacy emphasize Pakistan's attempt to capitalize on a transactional American opening under President Trump, to deepen defence ties with Saudi Arabia and Turkey, to manage a still-unresolved relationship with the Taliban authorities in Kabul, and to test Chinese-origin military systems in the May 2025 crisis with India (Congressional Research Service, 2025; Clary, 2025). This literature is timely but necessarily provisional; many of the alignments it describes are recent, personalized and vulnerable to domestic political shock.

Taken together, the literature yields several points of consensus and several unresolved disputes. The consensus is that India has been the primary organising threat; that the military has been the dominant institutional actor; that alliances have been transactional rather than ideological; and that economic weakness has repeatedly converted strategic location into dependence rather than leverage. The disputes concern whether the India-centric paradigm is a rational response to a real threat or a self-serving military narrative; whether the China relationship is a genuine strategic partnership or a hierarchical clientage; whether the geo-economic pivot is a real doctrinal shift or a rhetorical overlay on unchanged security priorities; and whether multi-alignment is a viable grand strategy or an unstable improvisation. This article engages those disputes by reconstructing the historical record and by testing contemporary claims against the evidence of 2022 to 2026.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

However, the study of Pakistan's foreign policy still has three deficiencies, which are interrelated and are the object of this article. First, lots of the writing is either relationship-bound or period-bound. National Security Policy, America's pullout from Afghanistan, the growing Sino-American rivalry, the crisis with India (May 2025), and America's subsequent attempt to reset ties with Washington without severing China ties are all missing from histories that end in 2012 or 2016. Relationship studies that are limited to the United States and China or India do not capture the multi-polygonal and triangular nature of a policy that is always a balancing act. Second, the new doctrine of "geo-economics" has been more widely proclaimed than studied. Defence postures, nuclear modernization, Kashmir diplomacy and Afghan policy still suck up political oxygen and material resources in ways that don't sit well with a connectivity-first national security doctrine, even though such policies have been officially put forward as the new core of national security. Third, the domestic-external relation has yet been not enough included in the explanations of continuity. The literature vacillates between structural determinism and voluntarism in which a leader's personal will determines diplomatic options, without a clear understanding of how civil-military relations and fiscal crisis and identity politics limit that choice. The point, hence, is not to offer an integrated and historically sourced yet empirically updated account of the evolution of the foreign policy of Pakistan since independence, but to present an account of what the foreign policy priorities are, not what are proclaimed to be.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this study are as follows.

1. To analyze the historical evolution of Pakistan's foreign policy from 1947 to 2026 and to reconstruct the major phases of policy, distinguishing what was continuous from what was contingent.

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2. To evaluate the relative weight of the India-centric security paradigm, Islamic identity, economic dependence, and geography and great-power opportunity as drivers of choice, and to examine how fiscal fragility and the civil-military balance enable and constrain external strategy.
3. To assess the extent to which the 2022 National Security Policy and the subsequent diplomacy of multi-alignment constitute a genuine recasting of priorities rather than a tactical adjustment, and to identify the strategic priorities that organise Pakistan's conduct in a multipolar international system.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study is organised around the following research questions.

1. What have been the principal phases in the evolution of Pakistan's foreign policy since independence, and which interests and institutions have given those phases their coherence?
2. To what extent has the India relationship, including the Kashmir dispute, remained the organising axis of policy, and in what ways have relations with China, the United States, Afghanistan and the Muslim world modified or reproduced that axis?
3. How should the contemporary doctrine of geo-economics, comprehensive national security and no-camp politics be interpreted in light of actual diplomatic and military behavior between 2022 and 2026, and what does the record of multi-alignment imply for Pakistan's future as a middle or hinge power?

METHODOLOGY

The type of this study is qualitative, historical-analytical and interpretive. It does not lead to new primary archival discoveries but instead draws together official documents, elite statements, historical narratives and recent policy analyses to form a coherent narrative of evolution and of current priorities. The method adopted is the one of structured and focused comparison across periods as well as process tracing of key turning points: the alliance decisions of 1954 and 1955, the Sino-Indian war of 1962 and the boundary agreement of 1963, the 1965 and 1971 wars, the nuclear decision after 1974, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the 1998 tests, the post-2001 alignment, the launch of CPEC, the 2021 Afghan endgame, the 2022 National Security Policy, and the crises and openings of 2025 and 2026 (George and Bennett, 2005). For each turning point, the interplay between external shock, elite perception, institutional interests and available resources is analyzed.

The theoretical frame is eclectic by design. Classical and structural realism help to explain balancing against India, bandwagoning with extra-regional patrons, and the pursuit of nuclear deterrence under conditions of conventional inferiority (Waltz, 1979; Walt, 1987). Neoclassical realism is used to bring domestic institutions, especially the military and the foreign ministry, back into the explanation of why similarly situated states do not always choose similarly (Rose, 1998; Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, 2016). Constructivist and identity-based approaches are employed to take seriously the Islamic content of Pakistani statehood, the Kashmir dispute as more than territory, and the narratives of betrayal and brotherhood that have structured relations with Washington and Beijing (Wendt, 1999). The geo-economic literature supplies the vocabulary in which contemporary Pakistani elites themselves now speak (Luttwak, 1990; Yusuf and Akhtar, 2023). No single theory is treated as sufficient. The aim is explanatory adequacy rather than theoretical purity.

Sources include official Pakistani documents, notably the National Security Policy 2022-2026 and statements of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; the classic historical works of Burke and Ziring, Sattar, and related diplomat-memoirs; academic monographs and articles on civil-military relations, nuclear policy, Afghanistan and China; and recent analyses from the Belfer Center, the Congressional Research Service, the International Institute for Strategic Studies, the Stimson Center and South Asian research journals. Contemporary developments up to

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mid-2026 are treated with appropriate caution: journalistic and think-tank accounts are triangulated where possible, and claims that cannot be corroborated are presented as such. The study is limited by the secrecy that still surrounds nuclear command, intelligence operations and some aspects of China policy, and by the absence of declassified Pakistani archives for recent decades. These limits are acknowledged rather than disguised. The contribution lies in synthesis, periodisation, and the testing of the geo-economic thesis against the most recent record, not in the disclosure of previously unknown secrets.

The Formative Years: Survival, Alignment and War

The historical evolution of Pakistan's foreign policy in its first quarter-century is the story of a state that announced friendship with all and within a few years found itself inside the Western alliance system, at war with its principal neighbour, and in strategic conversation with China. The starting point is well known and still poorly absorbed in some popular accounts. Partition did not produce two successor states of comparable capacity. India inherited the larger share of industrial plant, military stores, administrative personnel and international recognition. Pakistan inherited the western and eastern wings separated by a thousand miles of Indian Territory, a disputed claim to the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, an unresolved share of cash balances and military equipment, and several million refugees (Jalal, 1990; Sattar, 2017). The first Kashmir war of 1947-48, the Indian occupation of Junagadh and the police action in Hyderabad, and New Delhi's delay in transferring Pakistan's share of assets created in the Pakistani elite a perception of existential threat that has never been fully exorcised (Burke and Ziring, 1990; Pande, 2011). Jinnah's early diplomacy sought United Nations membership, which was granted in September 1947, friendly relations with the Muslim world, of which Iran was the first to recognise the new state, and a working relationship with both the United States and the Soviet Union. Liaquat Ali Khan's decision to visit Washington rather than Moscow in 1950 is often read as the original sin of alignment. It is more accurately read as the product of a search for a balanced against India at a moment when the Soviet Union showed little interest in a Muslim state whose leadership was socially conservative and whose geography pointed toward the Gulf and the Indian Ocean rather than toward the Eurasian heartland (Kux, 2001; Ahmar, 2023).

The mid-1950s alliance decisions took institutional form that search. In 1954, Pakistan signed an agreement for Mutual Defence Assistance with the United States, and was also a member of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, and later Baghdad Pact, which after Iraqi withdrawal in 1959 became the Central Treaty Organization. These instruments provided Western tables, military equipment and training, as well as economic aid. They had no treaty against Indians. What Washington's legal and political interest was and wasn't: Containment of the Soviet Union and secondarily, of China, but not revision of the South Asian territorial status quo (McMahon, 1994; Kux, 2001). The difference between the two had been imperfectly understood by Pakistan's leaders from Governor-General Ghulam Muhammad to Prime Minister Muhammad Ali Bogra and President Ayub Khan, and publicized even less. This led to a disalignment of expectations which had to burst in 1965. In his own account, Friends Not Masters, Ayub admits that he wanted to be an American partner rather than an American pupil, and admits to his disappointment after. (Ayub Khan, 1967). Moonis Ahmar has claimed that Pakistan's participation in the Western system cost it a potential neutrality, loss of significant support bases in the Muslim and nonaligned world, and a diplomatic edge for India in communist and developing countries, yet did not resolve the security or economic challenge (Ahmar, 2023). That is a harsh but not an unfair verdict. The alliances did, however, establish a modernizing military, a generation of officers and bureaucrats with transatlantic networks and a pattern of external rent-seeking that would last beyond the

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alliances (Haqqani, 2013). From 1951 onward till later decades, Pakistan would be among the biggest beneficiaries of American aid in the non-NATO world, which helped in building the state and delayed the development of a self-sustaining fiscal base (Yusuf, 2026).

The first systemic shock was the Sino Indian war of 1962, which afforded an alternative. China's short and sweet Himalayan war showed the Indian conventional weakness and formed a strategic community of interest between Beijing and Islamabad. The boundary agreement was signed on 2 March 1963 and the frontier was settled on conditions favourable to Pakistan and opened a relationship that would be billed as higher than the Himalayas, as and deeper than the oceans by both sides (Small, 2015; Sattar, 2017). From there, a second pillar was added to the Pakistani diplomacy. The major source of economic and military assistance continued to be the United States, while China was to provide the main source of strategic reassurance against India and eventually of nuclear and missile cooperation. The two pillars did not always go together. In 1965, when Operation Gibraltar in Kashmir failed and a general war broke out between India and Pakistan, Washington stopped the supply of military equipment to both countries, but it had a more detrimental effect on Pakistan due to its reliance on the American equipment (McMahon, 1994). China threatened on the north front of India, but failed to act. The status quo ante was restored in the Tashkent Declaration of January 1966 at the behest of the Soviet Union, which moved not an inch on the Kashmir issue. As a result, the war revealed the extent to which the American alliance and the Chinese friendship could be used as means of altering the map. It also hastened Ayub's political downfall and helped to pave the way for the conditions under which the eastern wing would within six years separate.

The 1971 crisis was the most severe foreign-policy failure in Pakistan's history and the event that still structures elite memory of India. The refusal of the military regime of General Yahya Khan to transfer power after the Awami League's electoral victory, the military crackdown in East Pakistan, the refugee flow into India, and India's subsequent intervention produced the independent state of Bangladesh and the surrender of more than ninety thousand Pakistani troops (Sisson and Rose, 1990; Raghavan, 2013). The United States, under the Nixon-Kissinger opening to China, tilted toward Pakistan diplomatically and despatched the USS Enterprise to the Bay of Bengal, but it did not prevent defeat. China again limited itself to political support. The Simla Agreement of 2 July 1972, negotiated by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Indira Gandhi, converted the ceasefire line in Kashmir into the Line of Control, committed both parties to bilateral resolution of disputes, and allowed Pakistan to recover territory and prisoners. Sattar and other Pakistani official historians insist that Simla did not extinguish the international character of the Kashmir dispute or the relevance of United Nations resolutions (Sattar, 2017). Indian official doctrine has treated Simla as the charter of bilateralism that excludes third-party mediation. That disagreement has never been resolved and continues to shape every subsequent crisis.

Bhutto's post-1971 foreign policy was an attempt to rebuild status through Islamic diplomacy, nuclear insurance and a more diversified set of partnerships. Pakistan withdrew from SEATO, left the Commonwealth for a period, hosted the second Islamic Summit at Lahore in 1974, and made the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, later the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, a central venue of its identity politics (Sattar, 2017). India's nuclear test of 18 May 1974 at Pokhran confirmed Bhutto's conviction, privately formed earlier, that Pakistan required a nuclear deterrent of its own. The resulting programme, pursued through a mixture of indigenous effort, clandestine procurement and, later, Chinese assistance, became the most consequential single investment in Pakistani national security and the most persistent source of friction with the United States (Khan, 2012; Fair, 2014). Bhutto also tried a bilateralism policy with the Soviet Union, better relations with the non-aligned movement, and

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monetization of the Pakistani labor and military expertise following the oil price shock of 1973. By the end of the 1970s, the basic contours of Pakistani foreign policy were thus in place: a threat perception that was India centric; a nuclear hedge against conventional inferiority; a double-hung relationship with the USA and China; a claim to leadership or at least centrality in the Muslim world; and a military that saw external policy as too serious to be handled by civilians. But on 24 December 1979, it would get a new theatre, a new patron and a new set of long-term costs with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

The Afghan war of the 1980s is sometimes referred to as Pakistan's greatest geopolitical moment. During the military dictatorship of General Zia ul Haq, Islamabad was indispensable as the conduit for the American and Saudi support for the Afghan mujahideen, a large package of economic and military aid was received and Islamabad's influence in Washington and Riyadh was greater than ever before in the civilian governments of the 1970s (Coll, 2004; Rashid, 2008). The policy was consistent on the Cold War front. It drove out Soviet troops, brought Pakistan back into the role of frontline state, and appeared to guarantee a friendly government in Kabul to offer strategic depth against India. The expenses were deferred and the bills came due – the militarisation of the tribally dominated regions, the proliferation of sectarian and jihadist networks, the heroin trade, the millions of refugees, and the rise of the intelligence services as a foreign policy instrument in and of themselves (Abbas, 2014; Haqqani, 2013). Zia also Islamized the domestic law and public culture, thereby tightening the Islamic identity of the state with its projection to the outside world on Kashmir and Palestine. Pakistan did not step back from the theatre, when the Geneva accords of 1988 resulted in withdrawal of the Soviets without a stable Afghanistan. It remained influential in the ensuing civil war, which in 1996 culminated in the support of the Taliban movement in the capture of the city of Kabul. Strategic depth, as a concept which was never a full-fledged public doctrine but was a genuine operational concept, saw Afghanistan as a land that cannot be allowed to come under the influence of India and where Pakistan needs a friendly land, if available (Tajbakhsh, 2025). That idea would dog policy through the twentieth century.

The first long period in Pakistan's foreign policy therefore ended not with the end of the Cold War but with the establishment of a security state whose foreign policy external behavior was organised by India; facilitated by extra-regional patrons; and was increasingly being conducted through military and intelligence channels. Jinnah's message of peace with all was not lost as official policy. It was tamed into a policy of alignment, deterrence and proxy warfare that the founding generation would have known to be the cost of a challenging neighbourhood if not approved of by some of its tactics. The job of the next step was to continue that practice in a world without the Soviet Union, a nuclear India and America without the need of a front line state in South-West Asia.

Nuclear Deterrence, Afghanistan and the War on Terror

The end of the Cold War stripped Pakistan of the strategic rent that the Afghan war had provided and exposed the nuclear programme to a non-proliferation regime that Washington was now free to enforce. In October 1990 the Bush administration invoked the Pressler Amendment, cutting off most military and some economic assistance because it could no longer certify that Pakistan did not possess a nuclear explosive device (Kux, 2001; Khan, 2012). The 1990s therefore combined democratic restoration, at least in form, with diplomatic isolation, economic stress and a deteriorating security environment in Afghanistan and Kashmir. Civilian governments led by Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif attempted, with limited success, to diversify toward East Asia, to manage the nuclear file quietly, and to keep channels to India open. The composite dialogue process and various confidence-building measures showed that Pakistani diplomacy was not incapable of engagement (Sattar, 2017). At the

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same time, the Kashmir insurgency that erupted in 1989, and the alleged involvement of Pakistani territory and services in sustaining it, kept the bilateral relationship on a hair trigger and kept American and Indian pressure high (Schofield, 2010; Fair, 2014). Afghanistan remained a Pakistani theatre. Support for the Taliban was intended to produce a pliable government, open trade routes to Central Asia, and exclude India. It also associated Pakistan with a regime of exceptional international odium and with networks that would, after 2001, be defined as the enemy of the residual American order.

May 1998 was the second great turning point of the nuclear age in South Asia. India's tests were followed within weeks by Pakistan's tests at Chagai on 28 May. The decision fulfilled a twenty-four-year project and established Pakistan as the first Muslim-majority nuclear-weapon state. It also triggered sanctions, confirmed the centrality of deterrence in national strategy, and made any future India-Pakistan war a potential nuclear crisis (Khan, 2012; Sagan, 2009). The Kargil conflict of 1999, a limited war initiated by Pakistani forces and irregulars across the Line of Control, demonstrated both the existence of a stability-instability paradox and the limits of nuclear cover for territorial revision (Lavoy, 2009). American pressure, Indian mobilisation and the absence of Chinese or broader Islamic support forced a Pakistani withdrawal. The subsequent military coup of October 1999 brought General Pervez Musharraf to power and returned foreign policy unambiguously to military stewardship. Kargil and the coup together damaged Pakistan's claim to responsible nuclear custodianship and to democratic legitimacy, two currencies that would matter greatly after September 2001.

The attacks of 11 September 2001 reconstituted Pakistan's international position almost overnight. Musharraf's decision to abandon the Taliban and to join the American-led campaign in Afghanistan was presented as a matter of national survival in the face of an implied American ultimatum (Musharraf, 2006). It restored aid, debt relief and diplomatic access. It also placed Pakistan in an agonizing double game: cooperation with the United States against al-Qaeda, combined with a residual, and in the American view insufficiently residual, relationship with the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network as hedges against a future Indian-influenced Kabul (Rashid, 2008; Tankel, 2011). The costs of that double game were enormous. Pakistan suffered tens of thousands of casualties in its own war against the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan and associated groups; its major cities were bombed; its relationship with Washington passed through the humiliation of the 2011 Abbottabad raid that killed Osama bin Laden and the Salala incident later that year; and its reputation as a sanctuary for militant groups became a structural feature of Western and Indian discourse (Haqqani, 2013; Congressional Research Service, 2023). The Kerry-Lugar-Berman legislation of 2009 attempted to rebalance American assistance toward civilian institutions and to condition it on counterterrorism performance. It was received in Rawalpindi as an insult to sovereignty. By the time American combat operations in Afghanistan wound down, the relationship was exhausted on both sides. Pakistani officials argued, with some justice, that they had captured more al-Qaeda leaders than any other partner and had paid a higher domestic price. American officials argued, also with some justice, that the Afghan Taliban's leadership continued to enjoy space in Pakistan and that the Haqqani network had killed American soldiers (Congressional Research Service, 2023).

India policy during the Musharraf and subsequent civilian years showed flashes of flexibility that were not converted into a settlement. The 2001-2002 military standoff after the attack on the Indian Parliament, the Composite Dialogue of 2004-2008, the near-agreement on a Kashmir framework that some participants still describe as being within reach, the Mumbai attacks of November 2008, and the subsequent freeze illustrated a recurring pattern: negotiation in the presence of a credible Pakistani interlocutor, disruption by militant violence, Indian insistence on the

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dismantling of infrastructure before talks, and Pakistani insistence that Kashmir cannot be parked indefinitely (Coll, 2018; Sattar, 2017). After 2014, the election of a more hard-line government in New Delhi, the 2016 Uri attack and Indian surgical strikes, the 2019 Pulwama-Balakot crisis, and India's revocation of Article 370 of its Constitution on 5 August 2019, which ended the special status of Jammu and Kashmir, closed most remaining space for structured dialogue (Congressional Research Service, 2023). Pakistan's response was diplomatic internationalisation, trade downgrades, and the insistence that there could be no normalisation without reversal of the Kashmir measures. That position remains official policy even as some Pakistani voices, including in the 2022 National Security Policy, have spoken of the desirability of a better relationship (Government of Pakistan, 2022).

In contrast to this, the Chinese connection grew fat as the American connection grew lean. Since its initial announcement in 2015 while President Xi Jinping was in Pakistan, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor was meant to offer tens of billions of dollars in investments in Pakistan in energy and infrastructure, a new port at Gwadar, and a land link between the Chinese province of Xinjiang and the Arabian Sea (Small, 2015; Ali, 2022). Later, official data indicated that the amount of realised investment by CPEC was around 25.4 billion dollars, while the originally advertised investment envelope was around 62 billion (IIS, 2022; Yusuf, 2026). CPEC was, for the elites in Pakistan, both an economic lifeline and a strategic buffer between India and America, and a certificate of approval from an emerging superpower. It was a path to the Indian Ocean and a showcase of China's Belt and Road project for China, and a way of securing itself a partner on India's western flank. What appears to have been quicker, less borrowing and less security dominated rhetoric has been slower. The partnership has been beset by attacks on Chinese workers by Baloch militants, circular debt in the power sector, disagreement over the financing terms for the Main Line-1 railway, and a longstanding bilateral trade imbalance that favours China. Nevertheless, China had emerged by the late 2010s as the biggest trading partner, leading bilateral creditor, and main source of conventional military technology, as well as a diplomatic shield for Pakistan, on issues from FATF grey-listing to Kashmir (Congressional Research Service, 2023). Later, SIPRI data revealed that China had supplied some 82 per cent of the major arms purchased by Pakistan in 2019-23, compared to 69 per cent in the preceding five years (Yusuf, 2026). With full membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in 2017, India joined Pakistan in an existing platform of Eurasia, which supplemented the earlier Islamic and Commonwealth forums (Ali, 2022; Yusuf and Akhtar, 2023). At first, the Afghan endgame of 2021 seemed to be a long Pakistani wager that was finally paying off. America's retreat and the return of the Taliban to Kabul brought an unfriendly and Indian leaning republic to the Pakistani border and appeared to give strategic depth again, albeit in a new form. The next one has been a bitter disappointment. The Taliban government has failed to provide Islamabad the kind of cooperative border regime it had hoped for; the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) ha reconvened from Afghan territory; the Durand Line is not recognised by Kabul; and cross-border violence, including Pakistani incursions into Afghanistan, has resumed, turning the relationship into one of 'managed hostility' (Tajbakhsh, 2025; Yusuf, 2026). The attacks linked to the TTP have significantly increased in 2025, resulting in over a thousand casualties in one year, and prompting a more coercive stance from Islamabad toward Kabul (Yusuf, 2026). The lesson yet to be learned is that control of a militant movement in opposition does not necessarily translate into control of a militant movement in power and that Afghan nationalism is not a Pakistani instrument.

By the beginning of the 2020s, Pakistan, therefore, exhibited a paradoxical mix of increased options and decreased capabilities in foreign policy. These included a still-deep China partnership, a residual but still trustful American link, Gulf financial supports, a

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nuclear deterrent, and being part of a wider circle of multilateral organisations than at any other time. The scarce capacity had been a product of a long-standing balance-of-payments crisis, repeated reliance on the International Monetary Fund, a period of FATF grey-listing (2018-2022), political polarisation and a neighbourhood wherein India was expanding and Afghanistan was not governable according to Pakistani terms, and Iran was under sanctions that made energy diplomacy more complicated (Congressional Research Service, 2023; Government of Pakistan, 2022). In that context, the state has developed its first detailed National Security Policy and announced a turning point which was immediately put to the test by events.

Contemporary Strategic Priorities

Contemporary Pakistani strategic priorities cannot be read off a single document, but the National Security Policy 2022-2026 is the most authoritative statement of how the state wishes to be understood. The document places economic security at the core of comprehensive national security, argues that a country without a stable economy cannot be considered secure, and presents a geo-economic vision in which Pakistan becomes a hub of north-south and east-west connectivity among South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East and China (Government of Pakistan, 2022; Yusuf, 2022). It endorses no-camp politics, meaning a refusal to be conscripted into a Sino-American confrontation, and it treats CPEC as the centerpiece of the economic relationship with China while still seeking trade, investment, energy and intelligence cooperation with the United States (Yusuf, 2022; IISS, 2022). Traditional files are not abandoned. The policy reaffirms nuclear deterrence, territorial integrity, Kashmir as a vital national security interest, and the need for a peaceful Afghanistan. What is new is the explicit ranking of economic security as the enabling condition of all other securities, and the attempt to fold geo-strategy into a larger account of national power that includes human development, climate and technology (Government of Pakistan, 2022). Critics have noted that the document is aspirational, that it does not specify trade-offs with the defence budget, and that a genuine geo-economic pivot would require a different India policy than the one Pakistan has actually conducted (IISS, 2022). Those criticisms are serious. They do not erase the fact that the vocabulary of Pakistani statecraft has changed, and that subsequent diplomacy has tried, with mixed results, to operationalize multi-alignment.

Managing great-power relations without going 100 percent “all in” is thus the first contemporary priority. Pakistan has been termed a hinge or a connecting bridge between mutually contradictory orders by the leaders of the country (Yusuf, 2026). What this has amounted to in practice is strengthening the China ties on defence, infrastructure and diplomacy, and opening a transactional account with the US after the second Trump swearing-in ceremony. The China account is still on the more structural side. Beijing is the key supplier of arms, a big lender, the political ally on Kashmir and FATF and a partner whose popularity is still relatively high in Pakistan. The joint statements still highlight Pakistan's support for the one-China policy and China's support for Pakistan's sovereignty and territorial integrity. In May 2025, Pakistani forces used Chinese-made combat aircraft and air-defence systems in an integrated fashion to boast about the operational component of the partnership, claiming a downing of several Indian planes, including Rafale fighters, which became a focal point of the domestic narrative of the crisis despite ongoing dispute over independent battle damage assessments (Congressional Research Service, 2025; Clary, 2025; Yusuf, 2026). Meanwhile, CPEC has now moved into a more down to earth second phase. Pakistani ministers have admitted that there was a delay in the implementation, the export relationship is highly imbalanced, to the extent of a bilateral deficit of 11 billion dollars, and Beijing's conditions of financing have tightened up (Yusuf, 2026). China's contribution to Pakistan's foreign direct investment (FDI) is about 30 percent, and over 20 percent of

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Pakistan's imports come from China, while the export-to-GDP ratio in Pakistan is approximately 8 percent, which is below the regional average (Yusuf, 2026). The corridor is being talked up as one that could be opened up to those in Afghanistan as well as a bilateral exclusive. That's because the evolution is in line with a Pakistani desire not to be just a China corridor, and a Chinese desire not to own Pakistan's security problems.

The American account has been rewritten more dramatically. After years of drift, sanctions talk and mutual exasperation following the 2021 Afghan withdrawal, 2025 produced a rapid thaw organised around counterterrorism cooperation, critical minerals, energy purchases and personalized diplomacy with the Trump White House. Pakistan nominated President Trump for the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of his claimed role in brokering the May 2025 India-Pakistan ceasefire, and high-profile visits by the army chief, later Field Marshal Asim Munir, and the prime minister were the public face of a bet that transactional America can be engaged without rupturing the China pillar (Yusuf, 2026; Congressional Research Service, 2025). Washington designated the Balochistan Liberation Army a Foreign Terrorist Organization in August 2025, a step Islamabad had long sought, and the two sides advertised intelligence cooperation including the capture of suspects linked to the 2021 Abbey Gate bombing in Kabul. Whether that bet holds will depend on American follow-through on investment, on Pakistani performance against groups that threaten American interests, and on the degree to which Washington is prepared to live with a partner that will not join an Indo-Pacific coalition against China. Historical precedent is not encouraging. Every previous American opening has ended in disappointment when Pakistani and American priorities diverged on India, Afghanistan or nuclear issues (Kux, 2001; Haqqani, 2013). The present opening is more modestly conceived, which may be its advantage. It is also more dependent on personalities, which is its risk. The United States remains a critical export market, absorbing a large share of Pakistani goods, and a decisive voice in the International Monetary Fund, whose 37-month Extended Fund Facility agreed in July 2024 continues to condition macroeconomic policy (Yusuf, 2026).

The second contemporary priority is the India relationship under conditions of nuclear deterrence, conventional asymmetry and diplomatic freeze. The May 2025 crisis was the most serious military exchange in decades. It was triggered by the 22 April attack near Pahalgam in Indian-administered Kashmir, in which gunmen killed 26 people, most of them Hindu tourists. India attributed the attack to Pakistan-linked militants, placed the Indus Waters Treaty in abeyance, and on 6-7 May launched Operation Sindoor, striking alleged terrorist targets in Pakistan-administered Kashmir and inside Pakistan, including sites associated with Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed (Congressional Research Service, 2025; Clary, 2025). Pakistan condemned the strikes as an act of war. Over four days both sides exchanged missiles, drones and artillery, targeting military installations well beyond the Line of Control. A ceasefire was announced on 10 May, first by President Trump on social media, who claimed American mediation; Pakistan acknowledged a third-party role more readily than India, which preferred to describe the halt as a bilateral military understanding (Reuters, 2025; Congressional Research Service, 2025). The crisis confirmed several established features of the rivalry: the speed with which militant violence can produce interstate escalation; the continuing centrality of Kashmir; the role of extra-regional crisis management; the demonstration effect of new military technologies, including Chinese-origin platforms on the Pakistani side; and the weaponisation of water as a strategic instrument. It did not produce a peace process. India's position remains that talks require an end to cross-border militancy and that constitutional changes in Kashmir are a domestic matter. Pakistan's position remains that Kashmir is internationally disputed, that the Indus Waters Treaty cannot be unilaterally suspended, and that deterrence must be maintained against a larger neighbour. The geo-

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economic vision of regional connectivity sits uneasily with this freeze. Eastward trade, energy and transport links cannot be built at scale while the political relationship is defined by non-recognition of the territorial status quo and by recurrent crisis (Yusuf, 2026). Pakistani analysts who favour a calibrated opening on trade do so on economic grounds; they have not yet carried the national-security establishment. Until they do, the India file will continue to function as a constraint on every other priority, including the connectivity agenda that the National Security Policy placed at the centre.

The third priority is the western neighbourhood: Afghanistan, Iran, and the routes to Central Asia. Pakistan's Afghan policy after 2021 has moved, in the language of recent scholarship, from a geopolitically and ideologically inflected search for a friendly regime toward a more geo-economic and counterterrorism-driven demand for border control, the expulsion or suppression of the TTP, and transit arrangements that would allow CPEC and Central Asian energy to move south (Tajbakhsh, 2025). The Taliban have not met those demands. The result has been fencing and barriers along the Durand Line, airstrikes, refugee expulsions, and a diplomatic relationship that requires Qatari, Turkish and occasionally Chinese mediation to keep from collapsing (Yusuf, 2026). Iran remains a neighbour of necessity. Energy logic points toward the long-delayed Iran-Pakistan pipeline; American sanctions logic has repeatedly obstructed it; sectarian and Afghan-related tensions have produced periodic border incidents; and yet both states share an interest in containing Baloch insurgency and in not allowing their territory to become a theatre of extra-regional war (Sattar, 2017). Central Asian connectivity, through TAPI, CASA-1000 and the extension of transit trade, remains more prospective than real, because it depends on Afghan stability that does not exist and on political conditions that the India freeze further complicates (Yusuf, 2026). The western neighbourhood is therefore still a security problem first and a corridor second, which is the reverse of the National Security Policy's preferred order.

The fourth priority is the Islamic world, and especially the Gulf, as a source of finance, energy, labour markets and strategic depth of a different kind. Pakistan's constitution enjoins the strengthening of bonds with Muslim countries, and the OIC has been a standing venue for Kashmir diplomacy since the 1970s (Sattar, 2017). In material terms the relationship is now organised around Saudi, Emirati and Qatari deposits and oil facilities that repeatedly rescue the balance of payments, around a large Pakistani diaspora whose remittances are a pillar of external accounts, and around defence cooperation that has acquired a new contractual density. In September 2025 Pakistan and Saudi Arabia signed a Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement in Riyadh, under which aggression against one would be treated as aggression against both (Associated Press, 2025). In August 2026 that bilateral instrument was joined by the Mecca Joint Defence Agreement, signed by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, which similarly stipulated that an armed attack on any of the three would be regarded as an attack on all (Associated Press, 2026; Atlantic Council, 2026). Pakistani officials described the Mecca pact as purely defensive and open to other regional states. Commentators who labelled it a Muslim NATO overstated both its operational content and its resemblance to Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty; none of these instruments has yet been tested in the manner associated with that alliance, and Pakistani officials have been careful not to present the 2025 Saudi pact as a nuclear umbrella (Atlantic Council, 2026). Even so, the agreements embed Pakistan more deeply in the emerging security architecture of the Middle East, complement decades of Pakistani military training and deployment in the Gulf, and give Islamabad a diplomatic asset that is independent of both Washington and Beijing. The Gulf relationship is not frictionless. Pakistan's attempt to remain neutral in the 2015 Yemen conflict

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disappointed Riyadh; sectarian management at home is watched from both Riyadh and Tehran; and the growing Saudi-Indian economic relationship reduces Pakistan's exclusivity. Energy dependence remains extreme. In an era of fiscal fragility, Gulf capital is as strategic as Chinese infrastructure or American market access. Remittances, a large share of which originate in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, continue to dwarf most categories of foreign direct investment (Yusuf, 2026).

The fifth priority is the maintenance and modernization of nuclear deterrence and conventional military credibility. This priority is never far from the surface of the others. Full-spectrum deterrence, including tactical nuclear weapons designed to close the space for limited conventional war, is the official answer to India's purported cold start or limited-war doctrines (Khan, 2012; IISS, 2022). Sea-based and cruise-missile capabilities have been developed to diversify the triad. Conventional modernization, heavily dependent on Chinese platforms, is intended to prevent the gap with India from becoming a temptation. The May 2025 exchange will be studied in both capitals as evidence about the usability of new systems and about the still-present role of Washington as de-escalator. None of this is compatible with a naive reading of geo-economics as the substitution of trade for force. It is compatible with a more careful reading in which a stronger economy is meant, as Moeed Yusuf wrote in the preface to the National Security Policy, to enlarge the resource pie from which defence will also draw (IISS, 2022; Government of Pakistan, 2022). Whether that bargain can be honored in a country that repeatedly faces IMF programmes and that continues to privilege defence in intra-bureaucratic contests is the unanswered domestic question that hangs over every external priority (Aslam, 2026). Pakistan's total public debt and liabilities stood around 138 billion dollars in 2025, with foreign-exchange reserves of about 16 billion dollars in early 2026, covering less than three months of imports (Yusuf, 2026). Those numbers are foreign-policy facts, not merely macroeconomic ones.

The sixth priority, which cuts across the others, is the recovery of economic sovereignty sufficient to make multi-alignment a choice rather than a begging-bowl circuit. Pakistan's contemporary diplomacy is still organised, to a degree that official doctrine dislikes, around the search for deposits, rollovers, deferred oil payments, IMF tranches and export market access. China, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and the United States are not only strategic partners; they are creditors and gatekeepers (Congressional Research Service, 2023; Yusuf, 2026). FATF grey-listing from 2018 to 2022 was a reminder that financial governance is now a foreign-policy issue. A foreign policy that cannot generate export growth, protect Chinese and other investors from militant attack, and present a predictable legal environment will continue to trade sovereignty for solvency. The National Security Policy understood this. Implementation has been held back by political instability, by the difficulty of export diversification in a world of Chinese manufacturing dominance, and by the security situation in Balochistan and along the Afghan frontier, where CPEC and any westward corridor must actually run. Climate vulnerability, including glacial melt, heat waves and coastal inundation, has been written into the security discourse but has not yet produced a commensurate diplomacy, despite Pakistan's claim to leadership among climate-vulnerable developing states (Government of Pakistan, 2022; Yusuf, 2026).

These six priorities, great-power multi-alignment, a deterrent India policy, a search for a usable western neighbourhood, Islamic and Gulf partnerships, nuclear and conventional credibility, and economic recovery, do not form a perfectly coherent grand strategy. They form a repertoire. The repertoire is more diversified than at any time since the 1970s. It is also more demanding. Multi-alignment requires diplomatic capacity, internal coordination and a domestic political settlement that Pakistan has not consistently possessed (Altaf, 2021; Aslam, 2026). The civil-military imbalance remains the

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most important institutional fact of foreign-policy making. The army's primacy on India, Afghanistan, nuclear weapons and, increasingly, on the management of great-power visits, means that the geo-economic agenda will advance only so far as it is compatible with the security establishment's threat perceptions (Siddiqa, 2007; Aslam, 2026). That is not an argument that the military is always wrong about those perceptions. It is an argument that a policy which claims to put economic security first must, to be credible, change the way trade-offs are decided, not only the way they are described.

CONCLUSION

Since the inception of Pakistan, the foreign policy has been an ongoing exercise of handling insecurity in an inadequate manner. Peace with all nations was the founding commitment, and it was more than just aspiration, it was soon too little strategy. A weaker state surrounded by a larger sometimes hostile state, with undetermined boundaries on two sides, a political identity that was defined in Islamic terms and a bifurcated territory until 1971 was going to look for balancers, patrons and deterrents. It discovered them one after another and at the same time in the United States, in China and in the Muslim world and it created a nuclear arsenal where alliances were conditional. The costs of this course have been as consequential as the benefits: lost wars, an eastern flanks lost, an Afghan trap that brought both strategic rent and strategic blowback, a security state that is no longer a smiling Washington ally now it is an uneasy commitment to Washington that can never be made without a fearful thought for the other, a Chinese dependence that is now too deep to be severed, and too uneven to be celebrated without hesitation (Burke and Ziring, 1990; Sattar, 2017; Haqqani, 2013; Aslam, 2026).

The historical development can be divided into different periods in a not too simplistic way. The new state attempted to gain recognition, then sought for assistance, a balancer, and drifted, under elite and structural pressure, into the Western alliance system from 1947 to the mid-50s. Alliances were tried during the war, and failed as territorial revision tools between 1954 and 1971, and China became a second pillar. The state rebuilt from 1971 to 1979 via Islamic diplomacy and nuclear hedging. It was a front line state and its achievements against the Soviet Union were the seeds for future militant issues from 1979 to 1990. It was under sanctions from 1990 to 2001, tested nuclear weapons and continued to be involved in Afghanistan and Kashmir. It was once again a frontline state between 2001 and 2021, in a war it never shared the Afghan end-state with its American ally, and CPEC provided an alternative Chinese route. Since 2021, it has attempted to articulate a new doctrine of geo-economics and multi-alignment, even as crises with India and Afghanistan, and a perennial fiscal crisis, have dragged it back to the comfort of its security and solvency reflex (Government of Pakistan, 2022; Yusuf, 2026).

Across these periods the research questions posed at the outset receive relatively clear answers. The coherence of each phase has been supplied by the India-centric security paradigm, by the military as the dominant institutional actor, and by the availability or withdrawal of extra-regional patronage. Other relationships have modified that axis without replacing it. China has been the most successful modifier, because it shares the Indian concern and does not demand a transformation of Pakistani identity or of the Kashmir position. The United States has been the most volatile modifier, generous in emergency and punitive in disappointment. The Muslim world has supplied identity, money and diplomatic venues, and now, through the 2025 and 2026 defence agreements with Saudi Arabia and Turkey, a more formal security partnership, but not a substitute for the China relationship or for nuclear self-help against India. Afghanistan has been the graveyard of the hope that geography on the western side could compensate for inferiority on the eastern side.

The contemporary doctrine of geo-economics and no-camp politics should be interpreted as a real but incomplete recasting. It is real insofar as Pakistani elites now talk about exports,

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corridors, minerals, Gulf deposits and American markets in the same breath as they talk about deterrence, and insofar as the diplomatic calendar of 2025 and 2026 has been genuinely multi-directional (Yusuf, 2022; Yusuf, 2026). It is incomplete insofar as India policy remains frozen, Afghan policy remains militarized, defence claims remain politically sacred, and economic recovery remains hostage to IMF cycles and to security conditions along the routes that corridors must use. Multi-alignment is a rational response to a multipolar order. It is not a substitute for a productive economy, a coherent civil-military compact, or a neighbourhood policy that can distinguish between necessary deterrence and perpetual mobilization.

The implication for Pakistan's future as a middle or hinge power is therefore conditional. Geography, nuclear status, a large diaspora, a professional military, and relationships with both China and the United States, as well as with Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran and the European Union, give Pakistan more diplomatic inventory than its economic indicators would suggest (Yusuf, 2026). Converting that inventory into sustainable influence requires a reduction in the frequency of domestic political rupture, a foreign-policy process in which economic ministries have a voice commensurate with the doctrine that economic security comes first, a serious export strategy that China itself has been asked to facilitate through better market access, and a calibrated India policy that can at least reopen trade and crisis-communication channels without waiting for a Kashmir millennium. It also requires an Afghan policy that treats the Taliban government as a difficult neighbour to be managed rather than as a failed investment to be punished in ways that further inflame the TTP problem.

None of these conditions is beyond the state's capacity. All of them cut against powerful interests and habits. The scholarly literature has, for two generations, described those interests and habits with increasing precision, from Burke and Ziring's diplomatic history through Pande's India-escape thesis to Aslam's account of threat narratives and military predominance (Burke and Ziring, 1990; Pande, 2011; Aslam, 2026). The contribution of the present article is to insist that the contemporary moment be read in continuity with that history rather than as a rupture from it. Pakistan is not a new actor with a new map. It is an old actor with a new vocabulary, operating in a harsher economic climate and a more crowded strategic theatre. Jinnah's call for peace within and peace without remains the right standard. The record since 1947 shows how hard that standard is to meet. The record since 2022 shows that the state knows it must try a different mix of instruments. Whether it can do so will be the test of its foreign policy in the remainder of this decade, and the measure by which the geo-economic turn will be judged as strategy rather than as slogan.

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