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PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF FOREIGN AID AND PERCEIVED NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY IN PAKISTAN: EVIDENCE FROM FAISALABAD, PUNJAB

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Abstract

Foreign aid in Pakistan is not only the source of development financing but also the potential source of external interference and economic dependency. This study's aim was to assess the perception towards foreign aid and its association with perceived national sovereignty restriction in adults residing in Faisalabad. The data were collected from the sample of 123 respondents who completed a structured cross-sectional questionnaire. Foreign aid was measured through Strategic Intent, Socio-Economic Effectiveness, and Humanitarian Goodwill, while dependency was represented by Macro-Financial Reliance and Everyday Debt Burden. Pearson correlation, regression, and mediation analysis were used. Strategic Intent ($r = .461$, $p < .001$) and Humanitarian Goodwill ($r = .475$, $p < .001$) were significantly associated with perceived sovereignty restriction. Socio-Economic Effectiveness had a weak bivariate association ($r = .187$, $p = .038$) but was not a significant independent predictor ($\beta = .054$, $p = .491$). The three aid dimensions explained 31.6% of variance in perceived sovereignty restriction. Everyday Debt Burden partially mediated the Strategic Intent–sovereignty association (indirect effect = .134, 95% CI [.076, .202]), while Macro-Financial Reliance did not mediate the proposed effectiveness pathway. Including dependency variables increased explained variance to 49.2%. Findings indicate that respondents distinguish aid effectiveness from dependency and autonomy. Because the design is cross-sectional and non-probability based, results describe associations among surveyed respondents rather than causal or province-wide effects.

INTRODUCTION:

Foreign assistance is often evaluated in terms of financial transfers, development projects, growth, poverty reduction, and institutional outcomes. However, aid is a social and political relationship, whose interpretation is subjected to citizens'

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perceptions. Alesina and Dollar (2000) reveal the existence of political and strategic considerations in determining aid allocations, apart from recipient needs, while Burnside and Dollar (2000) argue that aid effectiveness is dependent on the policy environment. Later studies questioned the potential of simple relationships between aid and growth, and emphasized the heterogeneity of aid allocations (Easterly et al., 2004; Qian, 2015). The same issue has been raised in Pakistan-specific studies, revealing the controversial nature of the relationship between external assistance and development (Ahmed & Wahab, 2011; Padda et al., 2024).

The present study focuses on public opinion rather than economic outcomes. Comparative literature suggests that citizens assess aid on the basis of who gives, how effectively, the state's needs, and what they expect from the donors (Findley et al., 2017; Kim & Kim, 2022; Singh & Williamson, 2022). Thus, aid can be seen in terms of its helpfulness for development, humanity, and reciprocal relationships. This understanding contributes to the analysis of social change because reciprocal perceptions of dependency or independence are social constructs. The empirical sample of the present study consists of 123 respondents from Faisalabad.

Theoretical and Empirical Framework

Dependency Theory is the main theory behind the work of Prebisch (1950); Baran (1957); Frank (1966); Dos Santos (1970); and Amin (1976). These researchers examine the relationship between development/under-development. Thus, the idea is that some countries can turn into dependent economies in the process of interacting with more economically powerful ones. In this way, Mahoney and Rodríguez-Franco (2016) define it as a set of concepts that deal with historically specific relations. However, for the purposes of the current analysis, dependency is interpreted in terms of people's perception of financial dependence and debt burden rather than actual macro-financial position.

Sovereignty is generally considered to be multifaceted, with Krasner (1999) being the first to distinguish between the formal and the actual sovereignty, the latter of which refers to the state's ability to realize its will, free from external constraints. The IMF conditionality literature on economic globalization provides several examples of international financial institutions' impact on states' policy autonomy, including their ability to pursue independent foreign and domestic policies, while formal sovereignty remains intact (Buckley, 2007; Gritsch, 2005; Kentikelenis et al., 2016; Stone, 2008). The recent articles on Pakistan's IMF experience also highlight the dilemma between survival and the autonomous pursuit of economic policy, with the former being prioritized (Iqbal & Seerat, 2026; Samad et al., 2025).

Aid motivation and effectiveness are also multidimensional. Donor strategic interests are documented in Alesina and Dollar (2000), Dreher et al. (2018), Lancaster (2007), Milner (2006), and Kundi and Bano (2007). Effectiveness remains contested (Burnside & Dollar, 2000; Easterly et al., 2004; Qian, 2015; Sumner & Glennie, 2015), while humanitarian framing and donor identity influence legitimacy and public attitudes (Blair & Roessler, 2021; Swiss, 2016; Kim et al., 2025).

The study therefore examines three aid-perception dimensions—Strategic Intent, Socio-Economic Effectiveness, and Humanitarian Goodwill—and two dependency dimensions—Macro-Financial Reliance and Everyday Debt Burden—as correlates and proposed mediators of perceived sovereignty restriction.

Objectives of the study:

- To explore the relationship between perceived Strategic Intent of foreign aid and perceived national sovereignty restriction.
- To examine the association between perceived Socio-Economic Effectiveness and perceived national sovereignty restriction.
- To know about the relationship between perceived Humanitarian Goodwill and perceived national sovereignty restriction.

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• To observe whether Macro-Financial Reliance mediates the relationship between Socio-Economic Effectiveness and perceived national sovereignty restriction.
• To find out whether Everyday Debt Burden mediates the relationship between Strategic Intent and perceived national sovereignty restriction.

Research Hypothesis:

H1: Strategic Intent has a significant association with perceived sovereignty restriction.
H2: Socio-Economic Effectiveness has a significant association with perceived sovereignty restriction.
H3: Humanitarian Goodwill has a significant association with perceived sovereignty restriction.
H4: Macro-Financial Reliance significantly mediates the Socio-Economic Effectiveness–sovereignty relationship.
H5: Everyday Debt Burden significantly mediates the Strategic Intent–sovereignty relationship.

Methodology

A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was used. The target population comprised adults aged 18 years and above in Faisalabad. Purposive sampling was used to obtain variation in gender, age, education, occupation, and household income. The final sample was N = 123, including 43 males (35.0%) and 80 females (65.0%). The questionnaire contained demographic items and 32 substantive five-point Likert statements: Strategic Intent (4 items), Socio-Economic Effectiveness (4), Humanitarian Goodwill (4), Macro-Financial Reliance (5), Everyday Debt Burden (5), and National Sovereignty (10). Responses ranged from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree. Scale-based measurement followed DeVellis (2016), while the quantitative survey design followed Creswell and Creswell (2018). Pearson correlation, multiple regression, and mediation analysis were used. Mediation was interpreted as a statistical indirect relationship, not proof of causal sequencing, because the data were cross-sectional (Hayes, 2022).

Table 1. Respondent Profile (N = 123)

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	43	35.0
	Female	80	65.0
Age	18–24	39	31.7
	25–31	34	27.6
	32–38	27	22.0
	39–45	17	13.8
	46–52	3	2.4
	53–59	1	0.8
	60+	2	1.6
Education	Intermediate	11	8.9
	Bachelor	47	38.2
	Master	25	20.3
	M.Phil	33	26.8
	Ph.D	7	5.7
Primary information source	Television	6	4.9
	Digital media/social networks	110	89.4
	Print newspapers	3	2.4
	Peer discussions	4	3.3

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Results

The sample was primarily educated and technologically advanced. The majority of the respondents have a bachelor's degree (38.2%), and 89.4% of survey participants chose digital media/social networks as their primary source of information.

Table 2. Strategic Intent Perceptions

Statement	SD %	D %	N %	A %	SA %	M	SD
Aid packages are structured to benefit lending institutions rather than Pakistan.	4.1	5.7	32.5	43.1	14.6	3.59	.949
Conditions attached to foreign loans extract long-term advantages from developing nations.	5.7	10.6	17.9	50.4	15.4	3.59	1.055
Global donor agencies use aid strategically to expand authority over weaker nations.	0.8	6.5	17.1	42.3	33.3	4.01	.919
Foreign loan agreements pressure Pakistan into geopolitical concessions.	2.4	4.9	17.1	44.7	30.9	3.97	.949

Table 3. Socio-Economic Effectiveness Perceptions

Statement	SD %	D %	N %	A %	SA %	M	SD
Foreign-funded development programmes have failed to improve basic infrastructure.	3.3	12.2	24.4	41.5	18.7	3.60	1.030
International development aid does not generate sustainable youth employment.	4.1	6.5	22.8	44.7	22.0	3.74	1.007
Foreign assistance is largely ineffective in eradicating deep-rooted poverty.	2.4	11.4	15.4	43.1	27.6	3.82	1.040
Despite decades of grants, health and education show no real structural growth.	1.6	10.6	13.8	37.4	36.6	3.97	1.040

Table 4. Macro-Financial Reliance Perceptions

Statement	SD %	D %	N %	A %	SA %	M	SD
National budget is unsustainably reliant on continuous foreign borrowing.	1.6	2.4	17.1	42.3	36.6	4.10	.882
Domestic economy cannot survive without continuous financial bailouts.	2.4	14.6	18.7	39.0	25.2	3.70	1.078
Major development projects are permanently dependent on external finance.	1.6	8.1	16.3	51.2	22.8	3.85	.920
Without regular international financial intervention, the macro-economy would collapse.	6.5	12.2	26.8	44.7	9.8	3.39	1.037
Economic policies are designed more to please foreign monitors than foster domestic industry.	1.6	7.3	15.4	55.3	20.3	3.85	.884

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Table 5. Composite Descriptive Statistics (N = 123)

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Strategic Intent	2.203	.983	1	3
Socio-Economic Effectiveness	2.935	.279	1	3
Humanitarian Goodwill	2.472	.591	1	3
Macro-Financial Reliance	2.081	.685	1	3
Everyday Debt Burden	2.423	.587	1	3
National Sovereignty Restriction	2.024	.659	1	3

Table 6. Pearson Correlations Among Composite Variables (N = 123)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Strategic Intent	—	.168	.398**	.389**	.418**	.461**
2. Socio-Economic Effectiveness	.168	—	.237**	−.015	.169	.187*
3. Humanitarian Goodwill	.398**	.237**	—	.370**	.484**	.475**
4. Macro-Financial Reliance	.389**	−.015	.370**	—	.505**	.559**
5. Everyday Debt Burden	.418**	.169	.484**	.505**	—	.588**
6. National Sovereignty Restriction	.461**	.187*	.475**	.559**	.588**	—

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$, two-tailed.

Table 7. Main Regression and Mediation Findings

Analysis	Result	Interpretation
Strategic Intent → sovereignty	$\beta = .318$, $p < .001$	Significant unique predictor
Socio-Economic Effectiveness → sovereignty	$\beta = .054$, $p = .491$	Not significant after controls
Humanitarian Goodwill → sovereignty	$\beta = .336$, $p < .001$	Significant unique predictor
Three aid dimensions	$R^2 = .316$	31.6% variance explained
Strategic Intent → Debt Burden → sovereignty	Indirect effect = .134; 95% CI [.076, .202]	Partial mediation
Socio-Economic Effectiveness → Macro-Financial Reliance → sovereignty	Not significant	No mediation supported
Aid + dependency variables	$R^2 = .492$	49.2% variance explained

Discussion

Strategic Intent coefficient was positively associated with the perceived sovereignty restriction item and still retained significance in the simultaneous model. Such a result is consistent with the evidence on the fact that donor allocation can reflect political and strategic considerations (Alesina & Dollar, 2000; Dreher et al., 2018; Lancaster, 2007). It should nevertheless be interpreted as a perception-based association rather than an indication that foreign aid objectively decreases sovereignty. Socio-Economic Effectiveness was associated with a small bivariate relationship with sovereignty restriction ($r = .187$, $p = .038$) but its independent contribution was eliminated after Strategic Intent and Humanitarian Goodwill was entered together. This result fits with the contested aid-effectiveness literature: effectiveness is not a single, stable property of aid, and aggregate evidence varies with

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how policy conditions, the identification problem and the type of aid are handled (Burnside & Dollar, 2000; Easterly et al., 2004; Qian, 2015; Sumner & Glennie, 2015). Humanitarian Goodwill was positively associated with perceived sovereignty restriction as well. The results of the study should not be interpreted as humanistic aid resulting in the deprivation of sovereignty; instead, what the findings mean is that the respondent can assess humanitarian assistance as both humanitarian and restrictive to national sovereignty at the same time. Donor identity, communication, and legitimacy may affect such an assessment (Blair & Roessler, 2021; Kim et al., 2025; Swiss, 2016).

The strongest bivariate relationships were those found between the two dependency constructs: Macro-Financial Reliance was correlated .559 with sovereignty restriction and Everyday Debt Burden correlated .588. The Everyday Debt Burden pathway partially mediated the Strategic Intent relationship whereas Macro-Financial Reliance did not mediate the proposed effectiveness pathway. The results of this pattern were compatible with findings in the literature linking the role of external financial relationships and conditionality in domestic policy space and public evaluations of economic autonomy (Biglaiser & McGauvran, 2022; Kentikelenis et al., 2016; Reinsberg et al., 2026; Stone, 2008).

The results therefore support a multidimensional interpretation of public attitudes toward foreign aid. Respondents did not dichotomize aid as good or bad but differentiated on the basis of the motive, development performance, humanitarian orientation, economic dependence, and autonomy of their nations.

Conclusion, Limitations and Recommendations

This study provides citizen-level evidence in Faisalabad about the relationship between the perception of foreign aid, economic dependency, and national sovereignty. Strategic Intent and Humanitarian Goodwill had a significant association with the perception of sovereignty restriction while Socio-Economic Effectiveness was revealed to be significant at the bivariate level only. Dependency perceptions were more strongly associated with sovereignty restriction compared to any of the individual dimensions of aid. Everyday Debt Burden also showed a significant indirect relationship between Strategic Intent and sovereignty.

The study has three main limitations. Firstly, the sample size was small and selected intentionally from Faisalabad district. The findings cannot be generalized to other areas in Punjab or Pakistan. Secondly, this was a cross-sectional study; thus, it could not determine the temporal relationship between the variables. Thirdly, the variables assessed in the study just reflect perception of national level of aid, debt, and sovereignty. There is a need for future studies with a larger sample size and selected randomly from various districts and provinces. The study should be longitudinal rather than cross-sectional. There is also a need to compare the perspectives of people with different socio-economic backgrounds, such as education, income, and occupation, gender, and level of media exposure.

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