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# Foreign Policy of Pakistan: A Case of Misplaced Priorities

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**Mohmad Waseem Malla\***  
**Ashok Behuria\*\***

*This paper argues that Pakistan's misplaced priorities—favouring military alliances with powers like the United States and China, and fixating on India—have fostered dependency, fuelled militancy, and sidelined opportunities for sustainable growth, as evident in ongoing tensions in 2025. By analysing the historical roots, institutional impacts, and contemporary fallout of these choices, we seek to answer: How have Pakistan's foreign policy priorities shaped its internal and external challenges, and what reforms can realign its trajectory?*



## Introduction

Since its creation in 1947, Pakistan's foreign policy trajectory has been predominantly shaped by a security-centric approach, informed by an enduring perception of existential threat emanating from India and a concomitant quest to secure external patronage—primarily military and

financial—to reinforce its defence apparatus. This entrenched securitisation of foreign policy, while historically rooted in the geopolitical anxieties of partition, has consistently prioritised short-term strategic gains over long-term economic sustainability, democratic consolidation, and regional cooperation. The consequent empowerment of the military establishment has occurred at the

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expense of institutional civilian authority, engendering a persistent democratic deficit and internal volatility. The repercussions of this approach—manifested in the proliferation of militancy, sectarian violence, and economic precarity—have rendered Pakistan's security architecture increasingly fragile and reactive.

Amid this volatile internal security environment, Pakistan is navigating a complex rope in its external alignments, with the deepening strategic entanglement with China through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), near-complete diplomatic disengagement with India, deteriorating ties with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and tentative recalibration of relations with the United States in the context of a second Trump presidency. These developments necessitate a critical reassessment of the country's foreign policy priorities.

Recent policy decisions illustrate the high stakes involved. In January 2025, Pakistan's Foreign Office, reportedly under pressure from the military establishment, privileged the procurement of an additional \$2 billion in Chinese loans to offset India's Rafale jet deployments. This decision sidelined civilian initiatives advocating for the revival of intra-

regional trade via the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)—a move emblematic of the continued subordination of economic diplomacy to militarised strategic calculus, with implications for rising indebtedness and regional isolation (Al Jazeera 2025). This policy pattern encapsulates the central argument advanced by this paper: Pakistan's failure to reconcile security imperatives with economic and democratic priorities perpetuates systemic instability.

While Pakistan's geopolitical location—bridging South Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia—accords it with immense strategic value, however, this potential has often been squandered by its policy miscalculations and overreliance on geopolitical rent-seeking. From Muhammad Ali Jinnah's 1947 overtures for American aid as a counterweight to India to the \$62 billion financial loans under CPEC deepening its external debt by 2025, Pakistan has repeatedly traded its sovereignty for short-term strategic or fiscal relief, thereby entrenching military dominance (Jalal 2014; IMF 2024). Incidents such as the 2024 Kurram tribal violence, which resulted in over 130 fatalities, and insurgent attacks targeting CPEC infrastructure in Balochistan underscore how external alignments

exacerbate internal strife (Geo News 2025). While recent developments—such as Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif’s overtures towards reviving trade dialogue with India and Beijing’s push for CPEC Phase II despite outstanding liabilities of \$27 billion—may signal an incipient recalibration, these efforts remain constrained by entrenched institutional (militarism) and structural (economic) impediments (Express Tribune 2025).

This study employs historical analysis, drawing on primary sources, such as Jinnah’s speeches and secondary works by scholars like Ayesha Siddiqi, alongside 2024–2025 data from institutions such as the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and the World Bank. Quantitative assessments of defence expenditure, trade balances, and debt burdens are complemented by case study analysis—particularly of CPEC—as a lens through which contemporary strategic-economic dynamics are explored.

The central thesis advanced here is that Pakistan’s foreign policy, by fixating on India and trading geopolitical leverage for aid, has perpetuated militarised governance, weakened civilian policy autonomy,

and exacerbated internal insecurity, besides undermining its potential as a regional power. The research question guiding this analysis is: How have Pakistan’s foreign policy choices contributed to its internal and external challenges, and what strategic recalibrations are necessary for realigning its trajectory? Drawing on historical records, trade data, and contemporary reports, the paper traces this arc from Jinnah’s aid-seeking in 1947 to over-reliance on China (exemplified by CPEC and loans to address default).

The relevance of this inquiry is underlined by its timeliness. With Pakistan’s over \$100 billion debt, 500+ terror attacks in 2024, and strained diplomatic engagements with traditional allies, including with the US in the post-Trump return, reimagining foreign policy is critical. By synthesising archival research (e.g., Jinnah’s 1948 speeches), quantitative data (e.g., OEC’s trade stats), and content analysis, the study seeks to inform both academic and policy discourses. It advocates for a qualitative shift in Pakistan’s policy approach from a security state to a trade-oriented, democratic polity—one that leverages the country’s geostrategic location for developmental purposes rather than peril.

The paper is divided into six sections besides this Introduction: Section 2 explores the historical roots of Pakistan's security focus; Section 3 critiques its India obsession and aid dependency; Section 4 examines the military's rise; Section 5 links policy to internal security crises; Section 6 analyses CPEC's costs; and Section 7 proposes reforms with the potential to recalibrate the current policy limitations towards a civilian-led development-oriented approach.

## **2. Historical Context: Genesis of Pakistan's Foreign Policy**

Pakistan's foreign policy, conceived in the tumultuous aftermath of the 1947 Partition, was inextricably shaped by an overriding security imperative. From its inception, the nascent state prioritised strategic deterrence vis-à-vis India and the procurement of external assistance, particularly from Western powers, over fostering economic self-sufficiency or cultivating regional cooperation. This section contextualises the formative years of Pakistan's foreign policy, contending that the early strategic calculus—marked by alignment with the Western bloc and an emphasis on military consolidation—laid the structural foundations for the ascendancy of the military

establishment and the marginalisation of democratic institutions. By engaging with the ideological underpinnings of Jinnah's diplomatic vision, the Cold War realignments, and the resultant institutional imbalances, this section explicates how Pakistan's initial choices configured its long-term entrapment in a security-dominated paradigm.

### **2.1 Jinnah's Vision and Early Strategic Priorities (1947–1958)**

Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founding father of Pakistan, articulated an ostensibly non-aligned and conciliatory foreign policy premised on "friendliness and goodwill towards all nations," as conveyed in his February 1948 address to the United States (Jinnah 1948). Nonetheless, with the geopolitical exigencies of state formation, exacerbated by the Kashmir conflict (1947–48) and acute fiscal constraints, Jinnah sought Western backing to bolster Pakistan's fledgling economy and military. His request for a \$2 billion loan from the United States, though unmet, signalled an early strategic alignment with Washington, born out of apprehensions regarding India's demographic and military preponderance (Jalal 2014). The

financial toll of the First Kashmir War, which cost an estimated \$100 million, not only cemented India as the existential threat and, hence, principal security adversary, but it also precipitated a structural diversion of state resources away from developmental priorities to military and broader defence expenses.

Under Liaquat Ali Khan, Pakistan's first prime minister, this security-centric trajectory was further consolidated. His 1950 US visit secured \$10 million in aid and reinforced the country's Western orientation. However, his refusal to accept Soviet overtures—despite invitations—effectively circumscribed Pakistan's strategic latitude, subordinating national autonomy by prioritising its anti-India alliance with the US-led anti-communist bloc over neutralism (Muzaffar 2016). These early choices, while pragmatic given Pakistan's vulnerabilities, institutionalised a dependency on foreign patrons and militarised the foreign policymaking process—developments that would culminate in the ascendancy of the armed forces as the country's most influential 'actor' beyond the confines of its conventional role, as analysed in Section 4.

## **2.2 Cold War Realignment: Integration into the US-Led Security Bloc (1950s–1960s)**

The onset of the Cold War offered Pakistan a strategic opportunity to monetise its geopolitical location, but at the cost of long-term autonomy. By joining the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954 and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) in 1955, Pakistan aligned itself with the US-led capitalist bloc. This alliance yielded substantial military dividends as Pakistan received approximately \$500 million in defence assistance by 1960, including advanced weapons systems such as F-86 Sabre jets and Patton tanks (FRUS 1955–1957). This bolstered the army, with the country's defence expenditures swelling to consume over 50% of the national budget by 1958, dwarfing social sector allocations, such as the 10% earmarked for education (Cohen 2004). In return, the US used Pakistani territory, most notably the Badaber airbase near Peshawar, for its military reconnaissance operations, including U-2 spy missions, thereby entrenching Islamabad's policy to American interests and subservient to its global agenda.



However, this strategic embrace entailed significant opportunity costs for Pakistan over the years. The 1965 war with India, launched under the misapprehension of leveraging military superiority to alter the Kashmir status quo, provoked a suspension of US military aid, exposing the vulnerabilities of its external reliance and military overreach (Fair 2018). Simultaneously, Soviet estrangement curtailed prospects for economic diversification, while China's limited assistance—amounting to \$60 million in 1963—proved insufficient to compensate for Western disengagement. Thus, the Cold War alignments may have secured Islamabad short-term military advantages but constrained long-term economic and developmental partnerships, a pattern dissected in Section 3.

### **2.3 Early Costs: The Weakening of Democratic Institutions**

The securitisation of Pakistan's foreign policy triggered an erosion of the country's nascent democracy, facilitating the institutional ascendancy of the military at the expense of civilian authority. The inflow of foreign military aid and the legitimisation of security threats as overriding national priorities

empowered General Ayub Khan to orchestrate the 1958 coup d'état under the pretext of restoring order and safeguarding sovereignty. The political instability in Pakistan at the time, coupled with unresolved issues like the canal water disputes and tensions over Kashmir, were seen as failures of the civilian government to adequately address external threats. Ayub Khan, along with Iskander Mirza, justified the coup as a necessary step to restore stability and protect Pakistan's sovereignty. The coup dismantled parliamentary checks, with the Foreign Office relegated to executing military directives and policy decisions increasingly framed through the lens of strategic threat perception (Rizvi 2000).

Civilian leaders like Suhrawardy, who had advocated regional economic cooperation, were sidelined, and the 1956 Constitution's foreign policy clauses were ignored under martial law. Ayub Khan's unilateral approach to the Kashmir dispute symbolised the military establishment's grip over the country's diplomacy to the exclusion of dissenting civilian perspectives, thereby setting a precedent for the military coups in 1977 and 1999 (Lieven 2011). The militarisation of diplomacy not only stifled pluralistic debate but also entrenched a coercive

state apparatus ill-equipped to address domestic grievances, thus sowing the seeds of enduring internal instability. As such, by the 1960s, the edifice of democratic accountability had been decisively undermined, with long-term implications for Pakistan's state-society relations and governance capacity.

### **3. Misplaced Priorities: Security Over Economy**

From the very outset, Pakistan's foreign policy has been characterised by a disproportionate emphasis on perceived security threats, particularly from India, often to the detriment of long-term economic and strategic partnerships. We argue that the state's securitised worldview of prioritising short-term military gains and geopolitical leverage over sustainable development entrenched a cycle of dependency, inhibited civilian institutional consolidation, and catalysed internal instability, thereby facilitating military dominance and internal security crises, as explored in later sections. By examining Pakistan's India-centric obsession, its reliance on external patronage, foreign aid, and neglect of regional economic integration, this section interrogates the structural underpinnings of its enduring strategic miscalculations.

### **3.1 India-Centric Security Fixation**

From 1947, Pakistan's strategic calculus revolved around countering perceived existential threats from India, a fixation that shaped both its civil-military architecture and diplomatic alignments. The 1947–48 Kashmir War, sparked by Pakistan's state backed tribal incursions into Jammu & Kashmir, crystallised India as the primary adversary, consuming resources and attention (Jalal, 2014). The 1965 war, launched under *Operation Gibraltar* in an effort to instigate rebellion within Kashmir, backfired, resulting in economic losses worth approximating \$500 million while exposing the perils of military adventurism (Cohen, 2004). The 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War further entrenched this rivalry, with Pakistan's defeat—losing East Pakistan with 93,000 of its soldiers as POWs—cementing India's regional dominance.

This protracted obsession and antagonism fostered a "security state" mentality wherein diverting funds from development sector to meet the defence expenditures became a norm. By the 1980s, under General Zia-ul-Haq's regime, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) institutionalised the use of militant

proxies, such as Hizbul Mujahideen, to wage asymmetric warfare in Kashmir, a strategy that persisted into the 1990s with Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) (Fair, 2018). The 1999 Kargil conflict, engineered by then-Chief of Army Staff General Pervez Musharraf, aimed to internationalise Kashmir but resulted in Pakistan's diplomatic isolation instead, forcing a humiliating withdrawal under US pressure. As such, defence expenditures, averaging 6% of GDP in the 1990s compared to India's 2.5%, starved social sectors like education (2%) and health (1%), thus sowing seeds of internal discontent that have continued to fuel militancy and radicalisation in the country, as discussed in Section 5.

### **3.2 Geopolitical Rent-Seeking and Aid Dependency**

To sustain its antagonistic posture towards India, Pakistan, from the very outset, prioritised its short-term gains over sovereignty by adopting a geostrategic rentier model wherein it leveraged its geopolitical location in exchange for economic and military assistance. During the Cold War, its joining to the US-led security alliances—SEATO (1954) and CENTO (1955)—yielded approximately \$500 million in

American aid by 1960, which helped it modernise its conventional military capabilities with assets such as Patton tanks and F-86 Sabres (FRUS, 1955–1957). However, this alignment alienated the Soviet Union, limiting trade options, and tethered Pakistan to US strategic goals, as seen in the 1965 war when Washington suspended aid which exposed its external dependency and vulnerability alike.

In the post-9/11 era, when Pakistan rebranded itself as a frontline state in the US-led War on Terror, it received over \$20 billion in military aid between 2001 and 2018, including \$14 billion under Coalition Support Funds (US Committee on Foreign Affairs, 2018). This influx, however, exacted a heavy toll: over 400 US drone strikes within Pakistan's borders by 2018 which resulting in heavy civilian casualties, thereby stoking anti-American sentiment and indirectly catalysing the rise of insurgent actors like the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Simultaneously, Saudi patronage, amounting to \$10 billion in oil subsidies and loans from the 1970s through the 2010s, further shaped this policy, pushing ideological influence by promoting Sunni orthodoxy, thereby exacerbating sectarian fault lines, particularly in conflict-prone areas like Kurram (see Section 5.2).

These deals and aid flows reinforced military hegemony over policymaking, sidelining civilian oversight and distorting national economic development priorities.

### **3.3 Neglect of Regional Economic Integration**

Pakistan's securitised posture systematically marginalised opportunities for regional and global economic integration, undermining self-sufficiency and perpetuating structural economic vulnerabilities. Intra-regional trade under SAARC remains anaemic, accounting for merely 5% of total trade as of 2023, starkly lower than ASEAN's 25%, thereby reflecting Islamabad's failure to leverage South Asian markets (OEC, 2023). Its political tensions with India have consistently influenced its decisions to stall the operationalisation of the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), with its own bilateral trade with New Delhi declining from \$2.7 billion in 2016 to \$2 billion by 2023. Moreover, prospective economic corridors with Central Asia, accessible through Afghanistan, have remained unrealised due to Pakistan's entanglement in Cold War alignments and domestic instability, leading to missed opportunities such as the TAPI gas pipeline.

Instead, Pakistan has relied heavily on remittance inflows, \$30 billion in 2023, and periodic IMF bailouts, such as \$7 billion in 2023, to address external account deficits, thereby masking its deep-seated structural deficiencies. While its exports have remained stagnant at \$30 billion, a stark contrast to India's \$450 billion, its defence allocations have surged to \$10 billion in 2024. This militarised fiscal 'mismanagement' has contributed to spiralling inflation (30% in 2023) and growing unemployment (8%), fuelling discontent in restive regions like Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (World Bank, 2024). The subordination of economic rationality to security imperatives foreclosed prospects for industrial development and macroeconomic stability. Paradoxically, initiatives like CPEC, explored in Section 6, have reinforced this dependency paradigm—this time vis-à-vis Beijing.

### **4. Rise of the Security Establishment: Institutionalizing Militarized Governance**

Pakistan's foreign policy orientation, with its unrelenting focus on security threats and external alliances, has disproportionately

strengthened its military, institutionalising its dominance over democratic mechanisms and civilian governance. This section argues that the security establishment's ascendancy, fuelled by strategic choices from the Cold War to the CPEC, has not only entrenched a civil-military imbalance but has also prioritised defence imperatives over developmental imperatives, exacerbating the domestic vulnerabilities discussed in subsequent sections. By tracing the trajectory of the military's institutional consolidation, the systematic erosion of democratic structures, and the persistent civil-military divide, we highlight how Pakistan's foreign policy has enabled an unelected elite to assert hegemonic control over the state apparatus, with profound implications for its national stability.

#### **4.1 Military's Institutional Dominance**

From its inception, Pakistan's external alignments and threat perceptions, particularly with reference to India, demanded a robust defence apparatus, thereby serving to institutionalise the military's centrality within the state. Its early joining in the US-led defence blocs such as SEATO (1954) and

CENTO (1955) not only yielded hundreds of millions worth of military aid by the 1960s, facilitating the acquisition of advanced armaments (e.g., Patton tanks, F-86 aircraft), it also accelerated the professionalisation of this otherwise conventional army (FRUS, 1955–1957). This inflow of resources laid the groundwork for the 1958 military coup by General Ayub Khan, which was rationalised as a bulwark against both internal political dysfunction and external security threats from India (Cohen, 2004).

Subsequent regimes further entrenched this militarisation of governance. General Zia-ul-Haq's tenure (1977–1988) was marked by the convergence of foreign patronage and ideological reengineering under his Islamization programme. Zia leveraged Pakistan's geopolitical locus to align with US-Saudi interests during the Afghan Jihad, as he positioned his country as a conduit for channelling approximately \$3.2 billion in aid towards arming different mujahideen factions while simultaneously expanding the mandate and autonomy of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) (Jalal, 2014). This trajectory normalised the military's direct role in formulating and executing foreign policy,

particularly through proxy warfare in Kashmir and strategic bargaining with Western donors.

This dominance is reflected in defence budgets, which consumed 6% of GDP in the 1980s, a pattern that persists with a \$10 billion allocation in 2024, dwarfing the combined \$2 billion directed to developmental sectors (SIPRI, 2024). The ISI's role in shaping policy—backing Kashmir militancy in the 1990s and negotiating US deals post-9/11—further entrenched the military as Pakistan's chief foreign policy architect. By controlling aid flows and strategic decisions, the army not only fortified its arsenal but also its political influence, setting a precedent for civilian subordination.

## **4.2 Weakened Democratic Institutions**

The military's rise has come at the expense of democratic governance and consensus, as it effectively relegating civilian leadership to political ineptness. For instance, the 1958 coup not only dismantled parliamentary governance, Ayub Khan's regime sidelined elected leaders like Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, who had advocated regional economic integration over militarised nationalism, to political obscurity. The 1977 coup by Gen.

Ziaul Haq, precipitated by the populist but assertive foreign policy of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, marked a further regression—suppressed democratic dissent, suspending political parties, manipulating elections, and promoting Islamists aligned with military objectives (Siddiq, 2017). The 1999 coup by Gen. Pervez Musharraf, triggered by Nawaz Sharif's attempt to normalise ties with India post-Lahore Summit, underscored civilian vulnerability to military overreach.

Civilian governments, even when nominally in power, have struggled to assert autonomy over foreign affairs. The Foreign Office, ostensibly a civilian affair, functioned largely as an administrative adjunct to the Army's Rawalpindi General Headquarters (GHQ), particularly on critical issues such as India (Kashmir), Afghanistan, and the United States. Gen. Musharraf's unilateral reversal of Pakistan's Afghanistan policy in 2001, undertaken without parliamentary consultation, exemplifies the marginalisation of civilian input in strategic decision-making, even though the military establishment boasted of bringing in \$20 billion in subsequent US assistance (US Committee on Foreign Affairs, 2018). Attempts to reassert civilian control have been frequently thwarted. For

instance, Benazir Bhutto's first tenure (1988–1990) was curtailed amid military-imposed constraints on her India policy, while Nawaz Sharif's 2017 ouster, ostensibly over the Panama Papers but widely interpreted as orchestrated by the military establishment, further highlight the fragility of civilian supremacy (Lieven, 2011). The cumulative effect has been the institutional hollowing-out of democratic structures, leaving elected officials unable to act as effective counterweights to military prerogatives.

### **4.3 Civil-Military Imbalance Today**

As of 2025, the civil-military divide remains starkly entrenched, with foreign policy continuing to be a military domain. The 2024 elections, marred by allegations of rigging to favour military-backed candidates, saw Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) sidelined despite public support, reinforcing perceptions of military tutelage over democratic processes (Dawn, February 10, 2024). Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif's foreign engagements—visits to China for CPEC debt relief (\$27 billion owed, 2024)—have required military approval, as the army retains control over the security and strategic dimensions of CPEC

and hence the bilateral relationship with China (Pant & Kugelman, 2023). The military's narrative, framing itself as the country's guardian against India and internal threats like TTP, sustains its influence, even as civilian leaders struggle with economic crises (30% inflation, 2024).

Such a narrative continues to be used to legitimise military's dominance in public discourse. Civilian efforts to recalibrate regional policy, such as reviving SAARC trade or initiating dialogue with Kabul, are frequently subordinated to the military's threat-centric approach. Military establishment domination have weakened civilian institutions to such an extent that they are unable to enforce their writ across country. For instance, the limits of civilian governance in volatile regions is reflected by its ineffectiveness in managing the longstanding disputes in the tribal hinterland like Kurram, which has seen tribal cum sectarian violence since years and yet the state is unable to enforce peace. The clashes of 2024, which resulted in over 130 fatalities, underscore this dynamic where military intervention remains a *de facto* mechanism for conflict resolution (Geo News, March 29, 2025).

This persistent militarisation of policy undermines institutional

coherence and stymies strategic realignment. As explored in Section 5, the internal ramifications of this imbalance are acute—manifesting in governance deficits, civil unrest, and a narrowing of policy space for civilian leadership. Rectifying this imbalance is a prerequisite for Pakistan's long-term political stability and the reorientation of its foreign policy toward inclusive national development.

### **5. Implications: Deteriorating Internal Security**

This India-centric security obsession and reliance on external aid not only empowered its military establishment but also precipitated a cascade of internal security challenges that continue to threaten national cohesion. This section argues that the instrumentalisation of geopolitical leverage at the expense of domestic stability has fostered a permissive environment for militant blowback, intensified sectarian and ethnonationalist cleavages and exacerbated economic fragility, creating a volatile security landscape. By examining the repercussions of militancy sponsorship, the intensification of sectarian and ethnic tensions, and the economic fallout tied to policy choices, we underline

how Pakistan's foreign policy missteps recursively destabilised it internally, with ripple effects that persist into 2025.

#### **5.1 Blowback from Militancy**

Pakistan's strategic use of non-state armed groups as instruments of regional policy, particularly against India, has backfired, spawning domestic terror groups that challenge state authority. The Afghan Jihad (1979–1989), backed by \$3.2 billion in US-Saudi assistance, facilitated the militarisation of Islamist networks by trained mujahideen who went on to form groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), initially targeting Kashmir (Haqqani, 2015). However, the 2007 formation of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) marked a turning point, as these militant networks turned their focus inward to contest state authority, capitalising on the state's post-9/11 strategic realignment. The blowback intensified after Parvez Musharaf-led military establishment started cooperation with the US, which brought \$20 billion in aid but provoked domestic jihadist opposition, peaking with the TTP violence of 2009, which claimed over 1,500 lives (US Committee on Foreign Affairs, 2018).



By 2024, TTP's resurgence—linked to the Taliban's Afghan takeover—saw over 500 terror incidents, including the November 2024 Kurram attack that killed 41 (Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies, 2024). Simultaneously, ethno-separatist groups such as BLA, emboldened by grievances over CPEC's unequal benefits, have escalated operations, targeting both China-linked projects and Chinese nationals. For instance, the BLA's Majeed Brigade militants targeted a Chinese workers convoy right outside Karachi's highly fortified Jinnah International Airport on 7 October 2024, killing two Chinese engineers. It underscored both the escalating security liabilities associated with the project as well as the reach of insurgent groups to target at will and beyond their conventional fighting zones (BBC News, October 7, 2024).

Despite sustained international scrutiny, including from the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) in recent years, Pakistan's reluctance or inability to comprehensively dismantle militant sanctuaries highlights the structural contradictions in its security doctrine, a legacy explored in Section 6 through CPEC's lens. We argue that Islamabad's persistent privileging of India-centric threat perceptions over internal stabilisation has enabled the

entrenchment of a parallel militant ecosystem, once seen as state proxies for foreign policy goals, to exploit Pakistan's porous Afghan border and military-centric governance to destabilise national cohesion and expose deep fissures in civil-military policy coordination.

## **5.2 Sectarian Polarisation and Ethnic Tensions**

Pakistan's foreign policy alignments, particularly with Sunni powers like Saudi Arabia, have deepened sectarian divides, compounding ethnic unrest. Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization, undergirded by \$10 billion in Saudi loans and ideological support through the 1980s, empowered Sunni groups like *Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP)*, targeting Shias, thereby engendering systemic marginalisation of Shia communities (Jalal, 2014). The 2024 Kurram clashes, claiming over 130 lives, reflect this legacy, with Sunni tribes blockading Shia-majority Parachinar, disrupting the Thall-Peshawar Road, which underscores this sectarian approach (Geo News, March 29, 2025). Geopolitical entanglements further exacerbate these tensions. Iran's alleged patronage of banned Shia militias such as *Zainabiyoun*—proscribed in April 2024—mirrors broader Saudi-Iranian rivalries

playing out within Pakistan's territorial space, rendering domestic sectarian dynamics susceptible to transnational polarisation (Lieven, 2011).

In parallel, ethnonationalist alienation has intensified and destabilised the state further. In Balochistan, where CPEC's \$62 billion infrastructure footprint is secured by over 15,000 military personnel, local communities perceive economic dispossession and demographic marginalisation, fuelling BLA insurgency (Shah, 2019). Similarly, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pashtun grievances over military operations, collateral damage from over 400 drone strikes (by 2018), and systemic neglect have galvanised the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), whose non-violent mobilisation challenges state narratives on counterterrorism. Likewise, Sindh's ethnic unrest, tied to resource disparities, simmers under the Muttahida Qaumi Movement's (MQM) revivalist rhetoric. These fractures, exacerbated by a foreign policy that courts external patrons over internal equity, weaken Pakistan's social fabric, leaving governance gaps the military struggles to fill, as Section 4 highlighted.

### **5.3 Economic Fallout and Instability**

The economic consequences of Pakistan's aid-dependent foreign policy have amplified internal insecurity by fostering poverty and unrest. Reliance on emergency financing, such as recurrent IMF bailouts (\$7 billion in 2023) and Chinese loans (\$27 billion for CPEC, 2024), masks structural weaknesses, with over \$100 billion debt burden constraining growth (IMF, 2024). The absence of export diversification, evident in a meagre \$30 billion export volume in 2023 (compared to India's \$450 billion, for instance), and neglected intra-regional trade (with SAARC constituting only 5% of Pakistan's trade) illustrate the opportunity costs of strategic insularity for Islamabad's self-sufficiency, as Section 3 noted (OEC, 2023).

The socio-economic consequences of this policy outlook are acute. For instance, in 2023, Pakistan's inflation surged to 30%, while unemployment hovered at 8%, aggravating youth disenfranchisement in conflict-prone regions such as Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and pushing them toward militancy (World Bank, 2024). In Balochistan, the exclusion

of locals from CPEC-related employment opportunities has sparked widespread protests, often met with coercive state responses, as witnessed in the July 2024 demonstrations in Gwadar (The News International, August 25, 2024). In KP, underfunded schools—2% of GDP vs defence's 6%—reinforce dependence on madrassas that continue to serve as breeding grounds for recruitment by extremist groups of various hues (SIPRI, 2024). Likewise, in urban centres like Karachi, the 2023 riots over electricity shortages highlight the volatility of infrastructural neglect amid heavy debt-servicing, which, for instance, consumes 51% of the federal budget outlay for 2024-25.

This entanglement of economic fragility with internal security degradation reflects a foreign policy orientation driven by short-term strategic calculus rather than sustainable developmental logic. This ephemeral calculus perpetuates a cycle of dependency, unrest, and repression, undermining Pakistan's resilience in the face of persistent militant, sectarian, and socio-political threats, as detailed above.

### **6. Case Study: CPEC and China's Expanding Strategic Footprint**

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), launched in 2015,

epitomises Pakistan's foreign policy pattern of trading geopolitical leverage for external support, but at a significant cost to sovereignty and internal stability. This section argues that CPEC, while promising economic transformation, has deepened Pakistan's strategic dependence on Beijing, replicating past patterns of asymmetrical partnerships it pursued with the United States and Saudi Arabia and giving rise to domestic unrest. By analysing CPEC's promises, Pakistan's alignment with China, and the resulting security challenges, we highlight how Islamabad's policy outlook continues to prioritise short-term gains over long-term resilience.

#### **6.1 CPEC's Promises and Pitfalls**

CPEC, with a current investment portfolio of estimated \$62 billion, was initially framed as a transformative project aimed at modernising Pakistan's infrastructure, alleviating energy deficits, and enhancing regional connectivity through strategic linkages between Gwadar Port and China's Xinjiang region. By 2024, the corridor had contributed over 5,000 megawatts to the country's national electricity grid and added 800 kilometres of highway infrastructure, addressing chronic power shortages and improving

logistical integration (Pant & Kugelman, 2023). Pakistan hailed CPEC as a “game-changer,” projecting 2% GDP growth annually.

However, the macroeconomic viability of CPEC has come under increasing scrutiny. Pakistan’s bilateral debt to China, estimated at \$27 billion, constitutes approximately 40% of its total external liabilities, with annual repayments reaching \$1.8 billion (IMF, 2024). Pakistan’s fiscal burden has intensified its balance-of-payments crisis and directly contributed to constraining the country’s fiscal space for developmental expenditures. What is more problematic is the project’s governance mechanism, which is opaque and non-competitive. Inflated contract estimates—exemplified by the \$4 billion Thar coal initiative—echo previous episodes of aid mismanagement and elite capture (Siddiqi, 2017).

Moreover, the local economic multiplier effect has been minimal; Gwadar Port, for instance, employs merely 500 Pakistani workers compared to an estimated 2,000 Chinese personnel. Additionally, 30% of CPEC-related funds have been dispensed as grants or concessional finance rather than foreign direct investment, further exacerbating Pakistan’s sovereign

debt position (World Bank, 2024). These pitfalls mirror the aid traps, undermining the initially ascribed transformative potential of the CPEC.

## **6.2 Strategic Dependence on China**

CPEC brought a significant reorientation of Pakistan’s foreign policy, displacing traditional reliance on Western patronage with an emergent strategic alignment with China. This pivot has been accompanied by the deepening of military-industrial cooperation, including approximately \$6 billion in arms acquisitions, such as JF-17 fighter jets and Type-054A frigates, and intensified joint military exercises by 2024 (Shah, 2019).

Diplomatically, Pakistan has increasingly echoed China’s foreign policy positions—supporting Beijing’s territorial claims in the South China Sea and maintaining silence on Beijing’s policies towards Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang—in exchange for over \$10 billion in concessional loans aimed at counterbalancing India’s growing ties with the QUAD alliance (Karim, 2025). However, this pivot cedes strategic leverage, encroaching on its sovereignty. For instance, Beijing’s effective taking over of Gwadar Port operations has foregrounded the

inherent asymmetry in this bilateral relationship. The 2023 exclusion of Pakistani authorities from key commercial decisions over tariffs exemplifies this erosion of sovereign agency.

Furthermore, this dependency risks isolating Pakistan and rendering it increasingly vulnerable to external shocks. The looming threat of US sanctions following the 2024 elections, compounded by \$15.9 billion in outstanding obligations to Beijing, underlines the geopolitical and fiscal costs Islamabad has paid to keep itself afloat (OEC, 2023). Civilian institutions, particularly under the leadership of Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif, have found themselves marginalised in key negotiations, as evidenced by the lack of debt relief during Sharif's 2024 visit to Beijing. The military's role in CPEC security, as Section 4 noted, further entrenches civil-military imbalances and perpetuates institutional fragmentation in foreign policy decision-making.

### **6.3 Internal Security Costs**

CPEC's implementation has generated substantial security externalities, contributing to the intensification of militancy and internal unrest. In Balochistan, BLA insurgents have repeatedly targeted CPEC-linked projects by portraying

these as emblematic of what they call Pakistan's 'imperial' loot of provincial resources and tools of demographic subjugation. The recurrent attacks on Chinese workers, with nearly half a dozen killed in 2024 alone, is indicative of this local resentment. Consequently, Pakistan has been forced to deploy 15,000 troops to protect CPEC projects, thereby diverting critical resources from counterinsurgency operations against groups such as TTP, which mounted over 500 attacks in 2024 alone (SATP, 2024). These unfolding situation and scenarios have raised serious questions about Pakistan Army's capability of addressing such threats, which has even forced Chinese authorities to make a case for stationing its own troops/security personnel within Pakistan. Acceding to such a prospect has turned many an eyebrow inside the country, which is perceived as an infringement in national sovereignty and potential catalysts for armed resistance.

CPEC has also exacerbated interprovincial disparities and ethno-political grievances. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has witnessed persistent protests over the state's failure to fulfil employment guarantees made in 2015, with Pashtun communities particularly vocal in contesting the inequitable distribution of CPEC benefits. The stark economic disparities between

provinces, for instance, between Balochistan, which grapples with a 50% poverty rate despite being resource rich against Punjab's 30%, reinforces the perception of CPEC as a project disproportionately favouring Punjab and Punjabis who dominate the civilian cum military establishment of the country (ADB 2024). CPEC's security demands thus perpetuate Pakistan's cycle of militarisation and instability, underscoring the need for reforms outlined in the following section.

As such, CPEC's securitised development trajectory has reinforced Pakistan's historical pattern of elite-driven, externally funded infrastructure projects that fail to address underlying social, political, and economic asymmetries. The resultant security dilemmas highlight the unsustainability of Pakistan's current foreign policy orientation—an issue the final section will address by proposing an alternative framework for national resilience and strategic autonomy.

## **7. Conclusion and Recommendations**

Since its inception in 1947, Pakistan's foreign policy has been overwhelmingly defined by a security-centric paradigm that prioritises short-term geopolitical manoeuvring over long-term

strategic coherence. This entrenched orientation has caused a recurring pattern of dependency on external patrons, consolidation of military dominance in policymaking, and the marginalisation of civilian institutions—ultimately undermining the state's internal cohesion and regional stature. This paper has demonstrated that the securitisation of foreign policy through misplaced priorities—manifested in India-centric threat perceptions, transactional alliances, and neglect of regional economic integration—has perpetuated cycles of militancy, sectarian strife, and economic fragility.

In light of emerging geopolitical dynamics in 2025—including the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, China's expansive influence through CPEC, and India's ascendance as a global actor—this conclusion synthesises key findings and articulates a reform agenda aimed at recalibrating Pakistan's foreign policy towards resilience, autonomy, and sustainable development by 2035.

### **7.1 Diagnosing Missteps**

The historical trajectory of Pakistan's foreign policy reveals a systemic overreliance on external security alliances at the expense of indigenous developmental priorities.

From Jinnah's initial overtures to Washington for military assistance to Cold War-era alignments under SEATO and CENTO, Pakistan consistently mortgaged its strategic autonomy in pursuit of short-term military aid—securing \$500 million in the 1950s while alienating the Soviet bloc and estranging non-aligned nations (Jalal, 2014; FRUS, 1955–1957). The obsession with Kashmir, driving wars in 1947/48, 1965 and 1999, and proxy militancy post-1980s has consumed a substantial share of its fiscal resources—up to 6% of GDP on defence during the 1990s—while social spending on education and health remained at 2% and 1%, respectively (Cohen, 2004). This sowed the seeds of what would aggregate into widespread social discontent, fostering radicalisation.

The post-9/11 era saw the securitisation of aid deepen further, with over \$20 billion in US assistance accompanied by significant sovereignty trade-offs, including allowing drone strikes and conditional counterterrorism cooperation within its territory. These interventions inflamed anti-American sentiments and 'inadvertently' emboldened militant groups such as TTP, as evidenced by the 2024 violence in Kurram that

claimed over 130 lives (Geo News, March 29, 2025).

This security-first approach strengthened the military, which orchestrated coups (1958, 1977, 1999) and shaped policy, sidelining civilians like Nawaz Sharif, who was ousted in 2017 amid military pressure (Siddiq, 2017). Concurrently, economic neglect resulted in an anaemic intra-SAARC trade volume—5% as of 2024—and an unsustainable debt profile exceeding \$100 billion. Inflation rates of 30% and unemployment at 8% further exacerbated socio-political unrest, particularly in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (World Bank, 2024; OEC, 2023).

Initially heralded as a transformative investment vehicle, CPEC has reinforced Pakistan's external dependencies. With over \$27 billion in current Chinese debt liabilities and the proliferation of anti-China militancy—especially in 2024—the initiative has come to symbolise both economic promise and sovereign erosion (Pant & Kugelman, 2023). These cumulative missteps highlight the imperative for a strategic reset that rebalances security imperatives with economic, institutional, and diplomatic priorities.

## 7.2 Recommendations for Reform

To break this cycle, Pakistan must undertake a comprehensive reconfiguration of its foreign policy architecture along three core dimensions: economic diplomacy, civilian institutional empowerment, and internal security reform.

*First*, the state must take a break from the vicious cycle of aid-dependency entrapment and reorient toward proactive economic diplomacy. Reviving the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) framework could double intra-regional trade from 5% to 10% by 2030, unlocking access to markets such as India (\$450 billion in exports) and Bangladesh (\$40 billion) (OEC, 2023). Simultaneously, operationalising regional energy initiatives, such as TAPI and CASA-1000, requires strategic engagement with Afghanistan and Central Asia, thereby reducing dependence on volatile loans from Gulf countries. To institutionalise this shift, Pakistan's Foreign Office should establish specialised trade task forces aimed at increasing exports to \$50 billion by 2035, up from \$30 billion in 2023.

*Second*, foreign policy formulation must be civilian-led, with strong parliamentary oversight.

Establishing a dedicated parliamentary foreign affairs committee, perhaps akin to India's External Affairs Committee, could scrutinise defence-driven external engagements and ensure democratic accountability. Strengthening democratic checks—post-2024 election controversies highlight this need—requires judicial reforms to protect civilian tenure against military interference, as demonstrated by Nawaz Sharif's 2017 ouster (Dawn, February 10, 2024). Civilian-led dialogues with India, perhaps resuming backchannel dialogues stalled since 2016, could de-escalate bilateral tensions, chiefly centred around the Kashmir issue, freeing resources required for fulfilling developmental goals.

*Third*, internal security must be decoupled from external strategic considerations. Dismantling proxy networks such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), in line with Financial Action Task Force (FATF) guidelines post-2020, is critical to reestablishing domestic credibility and global legitimacy. Redirecting \$2 billion from the defence budget to enhance law enforcement and intelligence capacity—particularly in militancy-prone regions like KP and Balochistan—would bolster counterterrorism efforts. Moreover,




as the fragility of the 2024 Kurram peace deal underscores, a sustained de-radicalisation agenda could be undertaken, financed by diverting 10% of CPEC-generated revenues to education and vocational training, which could address the socio-economic roots of extremism. Additionally, diplomatic engagement with the Afghan Taliban, building on the 2021 humanitarian dialogue, remains essential to curbing cross-border TTP incursions.

### 7.3 Looking Ahead

As of 2025, Pakistan stands at a crossroads in every aspect of its existence. Its geopolitical leverage—bordering China, India, and Afghanistan—offers unmatched potential, yet continued reliance on security-centric policies risks deeper instability, symbolised by continued institutional dysfunction and unrelenting economic stagnation. Without reform, the country looks at continued erosion of erosion—signalled by mounting external debt (projected to reach \$120 billion by 2030), an emboldened militant ecosystem (500+ terror incidents in

2024 alone), and military dominance, as CPEC's debt trap warns (Haqqani, 2015). Conversely, a decisive pivot toward economic integration, institutional reform, and regional diplomacy could transform Pakistan into a trade hub, leveraging CPEC's infrastructure for regional connectivity.

A reimagined foreign policy, grounded in developmental pragmatism rather than ideological securitism doctrine, offers the only viable pathway to national renewal. Such a transformation could reposition Pakistan as a resilient state actor by 2035—anchored in democratic legitimacy, trade connectivity, strategic autonomy, and a military confined to defence, not governance. However, achieving this requires bold leadership—civilian and military—to prioritise national interest over entrenched agendas. Failure to act will perpetuate the missteps of the past, leaving Pakistan vulnerable to internal collapse and external exploitation. The choice is stark, but the path to redemption lies in reimagining foreign policy as a tool for prosperity, not just survival.



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