

The Tightrope: World (Dis)Order and the Quest for Pakistan's Security

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Abstract

Shifts in global power structures, regional geopolitics, and transnational challenges have influenced Pakistan's security paradigm, encompassing its security policies, military strategies, and diplomatic initiatives. Utilizing a realist theoretical framework and adopting a mixed-methods approach, this article introduces integrated qualitative assessments of policy documents and expert opinions, complemented by quantitative analyses of security metrics. The research article underscores the significant role of major world powers in reshaping global and regional alliances, and assesses how Pakistan has navigated its relationships with these actors to safeguard its national interests. The findings reveal that Pakistan's national security strategy during the period has been characterized by a delicate balancing act between aligning with global powers, addressing regional rivalries, and managing internal security challenges. The research concludes with policy recommendations for enhancing Pakistan's resilience in an increasingly multipolar and unpredictable world order, highlighting the need for a balanced foreign policy, diplomatic diversification, economic resilience, and regional cooperation to safeguard national interests.

Keywords: World order, great power politics, geopolitics, geoeconomics, comprehensive national security, multipolarity, military strategy, economy, diplomacy, nuclear technology, terrorism, extremism, South Asia.

Introduction

The 20th century was defined by global upheavals that reshaped political and security paradigms. The two world wars were dominance contests, driven by

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competing visions of global order. Their aftermath produced the Cold War – an ideological standoff between the capitalist West and communist East – followed by a unipolar era by the US after the Soviet collapse. Globalization and technological advancement then accelerated interdependence, blurring traditional notions of sovereignty and expanding the scope of global competition beyond military power to economics, technology, and information.

In the 21st century, terrorism, geo-economics, and technological warfare replaced conventional geopolitics as central themes, while the proliferation of nuclear capabilities continued to threaten peace. Today, a multipolar shift is underway, with China's ascent and Russia's resurgence challenging US primacy. The US remains the most influential power and is calibrated towards Indo-Pacific, strengthening its strategic partnership with India to counter China's influence. Simultaneously, the EU and Japan view India as a growing partner, while Afghanistan struggles for stability, often attributing its failures to Pakistan.

India's regional posture has become increasingly assertive under Modi's Hindutva-driven leadership. Its alignment with the US through the Indo-Pacific framework serves dual objectives: advancing global ambitions and containing China and Pakistan. Meanwhile, its persistent interference in Pakistan's internal affairs, coupled with the unresolved Kashmir dispute, continues to destabilize regional peace.

For Pakistan, formed in the aftermath of World War II, survival and security concerns shaped its early foreign policy choices. During the Cold War, Pakistan aligned with the US-led capitalist bloc, gaining military and economic support but at the expense of long-term strategic autonomy. This dependence deepened during the post-9/11 war on terror, when Pakistan's extensive cooperation with Washington brought internal instability, terrorism, and socio-economic costs. These historical experiences underline Pakistan's recurring dilemma: reliance on external alliances versus the pursuit of strategic sovereignty.

Today, Pakistan again stands at a crossroads amid shifting global alignments. The resurgence of China and Russia offers opportunities to recalibrate foreign relations toward a more balanced, multi-vector approach. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), under Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative, positions

Pakistan as a pivotal state for regional connectivity and economic integration. Consequently, Russia's renewed engagement and vast energy potential provide avenues for diversification, particularly as Western economies struggle with energy insecurity and inflation.

Pakistan's geostrategic value extends beyond South Asia. Its proximity to the Middle East and Central Asia allows it to serve as a bridge between regions. However, the Riyadh-Tehran rivalry poses a persistent challenge. Maintaining equilibrium between Saudi Arabia and Iran is essential to preserve economic and energy cooperation and prevent sectarian spillover. With the Central Asian Republics, Pakistan's shared cultural and religious linkages, coupled with its access to warm waters, offer mutual economic benefits and new trade corridors.

The evolving world order – marked by competition, multipolarity, and interdependence – demands strategic adaptability. Pakistan's challenge is to transform its geography from a source of vulnerability into an instrument of opportunity. The state must balance relations with major powers, pursue economic diplomacy over security-centric approaches, and strengthen internal resilience.

Ultimately, Pakistan's experience through successive world orders raises critical questions: How effectively has it navigated global transitions from bipolarity to multipolarity? To what extent have its alliances advanced or constrained national interests? The answer to these questions will define Pakistan's strategic direction in the emerging global landscape.

Reviewing Available Literature on the Subject

The evolution of the modern world order is rooted in the Treaty of Westphalia (1648)², which established the principles of sovereignty, legal equality, and the balance of power among states. Kissinger (2014)³ argues that global order depends on shared norms of conduct and a power equilibrium that prevents domination. In

². Derek Croxton, "The Peace of Westphalia of 1648 and the Origins of Sovereignty," *The International History Review* 21 (1999).

³. Kissinger, *World Order* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015).

the anarchic international system described by Mearsheimer (2001)⁴, states pursue power for survival, while Fukuyama (1992)⁵ envisioned liberal democracy as the final form of governance. Huntington (1998)⁶, however, anticipated that post-Cold War conflicts would stem from cultural and civilizational division rather than ideological ones, identifying major civilizations as future sources of tension.

Indian strategic thought highlights the need for a coherent grand strategy to secure national interests. Shukla (2016)⁷ emphasizes integrating diplomacy and defense to advance India's economic ambitions, while Malik (2016)⁸ critiques institutional weaknesses and coordination gaps in India's security framework. Kanwal (2016)⁹ outlines a four-pronged approach toward Pakistan – civilian engagement, deterrence, covert operations, and diplomatic isolation – reflecting India's evolving regional strategy.

In contrast, Pakistani scholars view security through the prism of existential threats and geopolitical vulnerability. Hussain (2016)¹⁰ notes that Pakistan's early policies were shaped by India's regional dominance and Afghanistan's irredentist claims, leading to alliances with the US and China and the pursuit of nuclear deterrence. Ali (2021)¹¹ contends that Pakistan's military-centered approach has

⁴. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001).

⁵. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006).

⁶. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2002).

⁷. Gurmeet Kanwal and Manish R. Shukla, "Contours of India's Grand Strategy," in *The New Arthashastra: A Security Strategy for India*, by Gurmeet Kanwal (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2016).

⁸. Gurmeet Kanwal and V. P. Malik, "Defense Policy and Management of National Security," in *The New Arthashastra: A Security Strategy for India*, by Gurmeet Kanwal (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2016).

⁹. Gurmeet Kanwal, *The New Arthashastra: A Security Strategy for India* (Noida, Uttar Pradesh: HarperCollins India, 2016).

¹⁰. S. R. Hussain, "Pakistan's Quest for Security: A Historical Analysis," *Strategic Thought* 1 (2019): 83–98.

¹¹. A. Ali, *Pakistan's National Security Approach and Post-Cold War Security: Uneasy Co-existence* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2021).

ensured survival but hindered sustainable growth. Ahmed (2020)¹² building on Lasswell's "Garrison State" thesis, argues that persistent insecurity entrenched military dominance in policymaking, reinforcing the perception of Pakistan as a security state.

Burki (2011, 2021)¹³ situates Pakistan within an ideologically divided neighborhood influenced by China's authoritarianism, Iran's theocracy, and India's nationalism. He advocates regional cooperation to reposition South Asia within the global order. Salik (2016)¹⁴ traces Pakistan's strategic culture to its geography and ideological foundations, asserting that its Eurasian location made it central to the US containment strategy during the Cold War. Jaspal & Zubair (2016)¹⁵ further describe Pakistan's strategic outlook as a hybrid shaped by history, religion, and external pressures, arguing that political instability and military interventions have entrenched security-oriented thinking.

Collectively, these perspectives reveal that Pakistan's security paradigm has evolved within shifting global structures, from the bipolar Cold War to the emerging multipolar order dominated by China's rise and the renewed great-power competition. While the traditional security framework has safeguarded sovereignty, it has also constrained socio-economic progress and regional integration. Increasingly, scholars call for a comprehensive security approach that integrates economic resilience, human development, and regional cooperation as key determinants of national strength.

¹². I. Ahmed, *Pakistan the garrison state: origins, evolution, consequences, 1947-2011* (OxfordOxford University Press,2013).

¹³. S. J. Burki, *Pakistan: Statecraft and geopolitics in today's world*. (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2022). ; Shahid Javed Burki, *South Asia in the New World Order: The Role of Regional Cooperation*, vol. 40 (London: Taylor & Francis, 2011).

¹⁴. N. A. Salik, "Evolution of Pakistan's Strategic Culture," in *Pakistan's Security Problems and Challenges in the Next Decade*, by S. Malik (Islamabad: National University of Sciences and Technology, 2016).

¹⁵. Naeem Jaspal and Bilal Zubair, "Pakistan's Strategic Culture: A Critical Appraisal," in *Pakistan's Security Problems and Challenges in the Next Decade* (Islamabad: National University of Sciences and Technology, 2015).

In essence, the literature demonstrates that Pakistan's strategic orientation reflects both inherited geopolitical compulsions and emerging economic imperatives. The central challenge lies in reconciling defense priorities with developmental goals in a world characterized by interdependence and technological transformation.

Theoretical, Research & Methodological Settings

No single theory, including Morgenthau's Classical Realism, Waltz's Structural Realism,¹⁶ Buzan's Regional Security Complex Theory,¹⁷ Critical Security Studies and Constructivism fully explain the complexities of the world order and national security. Understanding Pakistan's security thus requires a multi-theoretical framework combining power politics, regional interdependence, and normative dimensions. The research design needs to be descriptive, analytical, and comparative. A mixed-method, interdisciplinary approach – primarily qualitative but supported by quantitative data – best captures these dynamics. Integrating case studies, comparative analysis, and statistical insights allows for a deeper understanding of how global structural changes shape Pakistan's evolving national security paradigm within an increasingly complex international system. The rapidly evolving global security environment may affect the durability of some assessments; nevertheless, these limitations are consistent with accepted practices in strategic and security studies research.

World Order – The Concept, and its Evolution

The evolution of world order reflects humanity's transition from tribal survival units to a globally interconnected society. Early nomadic and clan-based systems were defined by kinship loyalty and exclusion of outsiders, forming the foundations of social order. The Code of Hammurabi¹⁸ – one of the earliest codified

¹⁶. Arash Heydarian Pashakhanlou, "Comparing and Contrasting Classical Realism and Neorealism," *E-International Relations* (2009): 1–7.

¹⁷. Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹⁸. L. W. King, "The Code of Hammurabi," in *The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History, and Diplomacy* (New Haven, CT: Yale Law School, Lillian Goldman Law Library, 2008), <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/ancient/hamframe.asp>.

legal systems – illustrated the emergence of institutionalized governance, setting a precedent for rule-based societies. Civilizational orders developed independently across six major cradles of civilization - Mesopotamia, Egypt, Indus Valley Civilization, China, Mesoamerica, and the Andean region – each crafting unique social, economic, and political hierarchies. As interactions expanded through conquest, trade, and exploration, classical antiquity marked the first phase of regional integration. Religion and philosophy began shaping governance, legitimizing rulers, and influencing inter-civilizational relations.

The Treaty of Westphalia (1648) was the defining moment in institutionalizing the nation-state as the basic unit of world order. It introduced the principles of sovereignty, non-interference, and territorial integrity – core tenets of international relations to this day. European stability was maintained through the ‘Concert of Europe’ and the ‘balance of power’ mechanism, though this equilibrium repeatedly collapsed under the weight of imperial competition, culminating in two World Wars.

Post-1945, the US led the establishment of a liberal, capitalist, rule-based international order, countered by the Soviet Union’s communist bloc. The Cold War redefined global politics into ideological, military, and technological competition, shaping alliances such as NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Smaller and developing states became arenas of proxy wars and ideological alignment, their security and economic policies often dictated by great-power rivalry.¹⁹

The collapse of the USSR in 1991 produced a unipolar world dominated by the US, heralded as the ‘liberal world order.’ However, post-9/11 interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq eroded American moral and strategic dominance, while emerging powers – particularly China and Russia – began reclaiming geopolitical influence. China’s economic ascent transformed global production networks and shifted power from West to East, signaling a systemic rebalancing.

¹⁹. D. F. Fleming, “The Costs and Consequences of the Cold War,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (1966): 127–38.

The contemporary world order is thus characterized by a transition from unipolarity to multipolarity, shaped by economic interdependence, technological diffusion, and shifting power centers. Fukuyama's optimism about the 'End of History' has proven premature; instead, Huntington's 'Clash of Civilizations'²⁰ and Allison's 'Thucydides Trap'²¹ better capture the structural tensions of the 21st century. The geopolitical peripheries - Africa and South America – are now increasingly integrated into global economic and security frameworks.

Today's order is defined less by territorial conquest and more by geo-economics, technological competition, and strategic connectivity. Power is diffused, interdependence is deep, and the future global order will depend on how major powers manage rivalry within this increasingly complex, multi-layered international system.

Understanding National Security

As explained earlier, the Peace of Westphalia (1648) established the principles of state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference, forming the foundation of the modern nation-state system. This transformation marked a decisive shift from religiously dominated political structures towards secular, rational governance. The French Revolution (1789-1799) further refined political legitimacy by institutionalizing popular sovereignty, nationalism, and constitutionalism. These ideas dismantled monarchies and reshaped the global political order, embedding the notion that the state derives authority from the citizens.²² As the nation-state model spread, so too did the imperative to protect the territorial and ideological integrity of the state, laying the groundwork for the modern concepts of national security.

National security today extends far beyond military defense. It is the safeguarding of a nation's people, institutions, and interests against internal and

²⁰. Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993).

²¹. Graham Allison, *Destined for War - Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

²². Robert Wilde, "The Origins of the French Revolution in the Ancien Régime," January 30, 2019, <https://www.thoughtco.com/origins-french-revolution-ancien-regime-1221874>.

external threats across multiple domains.²³ National security is also intrinsically linked with national purpose, values, and national power - together defining a state's strategic behavior.²⁴ National purpose embodies a nation's collective ideas and aspirations; national values shape its identity and governance ethos; and national interest remains the guiding principle of statecraft, determining priorities in diplomacy, defense, and development.²⁵ The concept of national power has evolved from a military-centric notion to a composite measure of a state's material and immaterial capacities. It includes geography, natural resources, industrial strength, population, morale, diplomacy, governance quality, information, military, economy, and law enforcement agencies – each operating in coordination to advance national objectives.²⁶

At the institutional level, the National Security Council (NSC) serves as the central mechanism for policy formulation and interagency coordination.²⁷ Supported by the National Security Advisor (NSA), it ensures cohesion between defense, foreign, and intelligence policies.²⁸ The NSC's adaptive structure reflects the fluid nature of contemporary security challenges, ranging from hybrid warfare to transnational terrorism and climate-induced instability.

Contemporary security management increasingly demands a whole-of-government approach, where policy coherence, information sharing, and interagency collaboration are paramount. Effective national security governance now relies on structural integrations, joint training, interoperable communication

²³. Dr. Kim R. Holmes, "What Is National Security?," in *2015 Index of U.S. Military Strength Assessing America's Ability to Provide for the Common Defense* (The Heritage Foundation, 2015).

²⁴. Prabhakaran Paleri, *National Security: Imperatives and Challenges* (Tata McGraw-Hill Publishing Company Limited, 2008).

²⁵. Col Robert E. Hamilton and Mark E. Duckenfield, *National Security Policy and Strategy* (US Army War College, Department of National Security and Strategy, 2017).

²⁶. Ehsan Mehmood Khan, "National Interest: A Contextual Perspective," in *NDU Monograph, NSP-II 2022* (2022).

²⁷. *National Security Council: A Comparative Study of Pakistan & Other Selected Countries* (PILDAT, 2005), 9–24.

²⁸. Stephen J. Hadley, *The Role and Importance of the National Security Advisor*, Scowcroft Paer No. 1 (Scowcroft Institute of International Affairs, Bush School of Government and Public Service, Texas A&M University, 2016), 1–10.

systems, and partnerships between the public and private sectors. This approach recognizes that complex threats - cyberattacks, pandemics, or energy disruptions - cannot be mitigated by isolated institutions but require systemic coordination and global cooperation.²⁹

Modern security extends across land, maritime, air, and cyber domains, each with unique vulnerabilities. Maritime and airspace security ensure control over territorial waters and skies, while cybersecurity has become central to national defense and governance integrity. Increasingly, human security has emerged as a complementary paradigm, emphasizing the protection of individuals from poverty, disease, and violence. This perspective broadens the meaning of security, situational human welfare, and sustainable development as its core.

Ultimately, a country's National Security Policy (NSP) integrates these elements into a cohesive framework. It articulates strategic priorities, aligns institutional capacities, and defines how the state seeks to secure its sovereignty, prosperity, and citizens in an increasingly complex and interconnected global order.³⁰

Pakistan's National Security Construct & How the World Order Affects It

Pakistan's Geostrategic Position and National Security Dynamics

Situated at the intersections of Iran, Afghanistan, China, India, and the Indian Ocean, lying at the crossroads of civilizations of the Middle East, the Gulf, Central Asia, and the Far East, Pakistan occupies a significant strategic location as a land bridge between the East, the West, the landlocked Central Asia, and the warm waters to the south. With its hyphenated geographical significance, it remains poised to play an important role both as an asset and a battleground of competing strategic interests.

Historical Security Context

²⁹. James W. Derleth, "Fostering a Whole-of-Government Approach to National Security from the Bottom Up," *Military Review*, no. Online (February 2018): 1–6.

³⁰. Alix Julia Boucher, *National Security Policies and Strategies: A Note on Current Practice*, Future of Peace Operations Program (Stimson Center, n.d.), 2–15.

Pakistan's geopolitical environment has been characterized mostly by the Cold War between the Communist and Capitalist camps, the Afghan Jihad, the global war on terror, strategic competition between great powers, regional instability, its strategic location, religion, and domestic challenges, especially a frail economy. As it meanders through these complexities, its priorities are dominantly shaped by its quest for security and economic development, guided by Quaid-e-Azam's principle of "Peace within and Peace without".

The early post-independence years were marked by political turbulence: the partition's accelerated timeline generated refugee crises, infrastructural breakdown, economic blockades, and unsettled territorial disputes, particularly in Kashmir. Indian hegemonic behavior and Afghan irredentism forced Pakistan to prioritize defense over development. Its westward diplomatic leaning, signaled by Liaqat Ali Khan's 1950 visit to Washington, reflected early strategic choices anchored in security imperatives, lesser in ideological alignment.³¹

National Security in the Cold War Era

The Cold War provided Pakistan with a strategic entry point into Western alliances. Surrounded by a larger and hostile India, Pakistan joined SEATO and CENTO to secure defense and development assistance. However, its expectations from the US remained largely unmet, particularly during the 1965 and 1971 wars. India's 1974 nuclear tests further deepened Pakistan's insecurity and accelerated its nuclear ambitions.³²

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 elevated Pakistan's strategic value. As a frontline state, Pakistan became central to the anti-Soviet campaign, supporting the Mujahideen and facilitating UN and OIC initiatives. While this partnership yielded short-term strategic and economic benefits, it also had long-term costs: the proliferation of weapons, the rise of religious extremism, drug trafficking,

³¹. Shamshad Ahmad, "Chapter 5 - Pakistan's Foreign Policy & External Relations," in *Pakistan and World Affairs* (2017).

³². Sultan Mohd. Khan, "Pakistani Geopolitics: The Diplomatic Perspective," *International Security* 5, no. 1 (1980): 26–36

and large refugee inflows destabilized internal security. The subsequent US disengagement left Pakistan to manage these aftershocks largely on its own.³³

*The Unipolar Moment: Strategic Repositioning*³⁴

The collapse of the USSR in 1991 marked a decline in Pakistan's immediate strategic utility for Washington. The Pressler Amendment and related sanctions targeted its nuclear program, causing a sharp downturn in military and economic support.³⁵ Concurrently, India's strategic significance grew, especially as a partner for the US in Asia.

This period forced Pakistan to diversify its strategic partnerships – most notably with China – laying the groundwork for hedging strategies and multilateral engagement to reduce overdependence on any single power. Internally, Pakistan grappled with the aftereffects of the Afghan Jihad: militant networks, illegal arms, and narcotics were deeply embedded in its security landscape, shaping the contours of future counterterrorism policies.

Global War on Terror: Strategic Centrality and Internal Fallout

The 9/11 attacks repositioned Pakistan at the center of the global security map. As a frontline state in the US-led Global War on Terror (GWOT), Pakistan became a major non-NATO ally, regaining strategic relevance and economic assistance. However, these alliances came at a profound cost. Pakistan endured unprecedented waves of terrorism, with thousands of civilian and military casualties. It became a theater for drone strikes, international counterterrorism operations, and proxy conflicts, complicating its relations with both allies and neighbors.

³³. Mujtaba Dr. Rizvi, "Pakistan's Geopolitical Environment and Security," *Pakistan Horizon* 35, no. 3 (1982): 29–43

³⁴. Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Washington Post*, July 20, 1990,

³⁵. *Arms Control Association*, under "Confrontation and Retreat: The U.S. Congress and the South Asian Nuclear Tests - Key Legislation."

<i>Summary of Year-Wise Losses Cost of War (2001-2017)</i>				
<i>Serial</i>	<i>Years</i>	<i>Billion \$</i>	<i>Billion Rs.</i>	<i>% Change</i>
1.	2001-02	2.67	163.9	-
2.	2002-03	2.75	160.8	3
3.	2003-04	2.93	168.8	6.7
4.	2004-05	3.41	202.4	16.3
5.	2005-06	3.99	238.6	16.9
6.	2006-07	4.67	283.2	17.2
7.	2007-08	6.94	434.1	48.6
8.	2008-09	9.18	720.6	32.3
9.	2009-10	13.56	1136.4	47.7
10.	2010-11	23.77	2037.33	75.3
11.	2011-12	11.98	1052.77	-49.6
12.	2012-13	9.97	964.24	-16.8
13.	2013-14	7.7	791.52	-22.8
14.	2014-15	9.24	936.3	-20
15.	2015-16	6.49	675.76	-29.8
16.	2016-17	5.47	572.6	-15.7
17.	2017-18	2.07	223.32	-62.2
<i>Total</i>		126.79	10762.74	-

*Figure 1: Summary of Year-Wise Losses Cost of War (2001-2017)*³⁶

The social fabric fractured between those who viewed the War on Terror as a national responsibility and those who saw it as externally imposed. The 2014 Army Public School attack catalyzed decisive action, leading to the National Action Plan (NAP), Operation Zarb-e-Azb, and Operation Radd-ul-Fassad – legal and military measures that eventually subdued major terrorist networks. Yet, the conflict imposed

³⁶. Government of Pakistan, “Impact of War in Afghanistan and Ensuing Terrorism on Pakistan’s Economy,” in *Pakistan Economic Survey 2017-18* (2018)

staggering economic costs, alongside significant reputational and political challenges.

Great Power Competition in the 21st Century

Pakistan remains deeply embedded in evolving great power dynamics. The US-China strategic rivalry – often described as a modern manifestation of the ‘Thucydides Trap’ – positions Pakistan at the intersection of competing global and regional interests. Pakistan’s strategic partnership with China, consolidated through the CPEC, has elevated its economic and geopolitical profile. Beijing’s investments – over \$ 160 billion in energy, infrastructure, and trade hubs – represent both an opportunity for economic transformations and a point of friction with Washington.

<i>Serial</i>	<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>USA</i>	<i>China</i>
1.	<i>GDP</i>	<i>\$ 25.5 trillion</i>	<i>\$ 18 trillion</i>
2.	<i>Share of World GDP</i>	<i>15.4 %</i>	<i>18.9 %</i>
3.	<i>Good Exports with each other</i>	<i>\$ 154 billion</i>	<i>\$ 536.2 billion</i>
4.	<i>Services Exports with each other</i>	<i>\$ 41.5 billion</i>	<i>\$ 26.6 billion</i>
5.	<i>Defense Expenditures</i>	<i>\$ 877 billion</i>	<i>\$ 292 billion</i>
6.	<i>Population</i>	<i>339 million</i>	<i>1.42 billion</i>
7.	<i>World Population Share</i>	<i>4.2%</i>	<i>17.7 %</i>

Figure 2: Economic & Military Comparison - China & USA³⁷

Pakistan-US relations remain transactional, shaped by divergent views on Afghanistan, India, and China. While cooperation persists in counterterrorism and regional stability, structural mistrust and shifting American priorities towards India constrain strategic convergence. Pak-Russia relations, meanwhile, have seen steady

³⁷. Ana Swanson, “The Contentious U.S.-China Relationship, by the Numbers,” *The New York Times*, July 7, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/07/business/economy/us-china-relationship-facts.html>.

improvement through trade growth, discounted energy deals, and defense cooperation – part of Islamabad’s broader hedging strategy in a multipolar world.

Regional Security Complexities

India remains the primary external security challenge. A history of territorial disputes, wars (1948, 1965, 1971, Kargil), cross-border terrorism allegations, and nuclear competition has entrenched mistrust. India’s strategic partnership with the US, ambitions of regional hegemony, and rivalry with China deepen this divide. Pakistan’s nuclear capability acts as a deterrent, but both states continue to engage in sub-conventional and hybrid competition.

Afghanistan remains a persistent variable in Pakistan’s security calculus. Since independence, bilateral relations have been strained by Afghan opposition to Pakistan’s UN membership, disputes over the Durand line, and the Pakhtunistan issue. The Soviet invasion, Taliban rise, and post-9/11 war transformed Afghanistan into a core strategic concern. Issues such as border skirmishes, transit trade, terrorist sanctuaries, and refugee movements continue to complicate relations.

Iran and Saudi Arabia represent another axis of strategic balancing. Pakistan maintains close military and economic ties with Riyadh while preserving neighborly relations with Tehran. The Yemen conflict underscores the diplomatic tightrope Islamabad must walk between its two key partners. Its large diaspora in Gulf states and dependence on remittances make this balance both necessary and delicate.³⁸

Economic Dimension of National Security

Traditionally, Pakistan’s national security has been viewed through a geopolitical lens centered on military strength. However, shifting global trends and internal economic fragility are pushing Islamabad towards a geo-economic paradigm – emphasizing trade, connectivity, investment, and energy cooperation as essential components of national power. Pakistan’s dependence on foreign aid, remittances,

³⁸. Basmah Nouman, *Navigating Geopolitical Crossroads: Middle Eastern Influence on Pakistan’s Foreign Policy*, 2024, 1–7.

and imports makes it vulnerable to global economic fluctuations, amplifying internal social and political pressures.

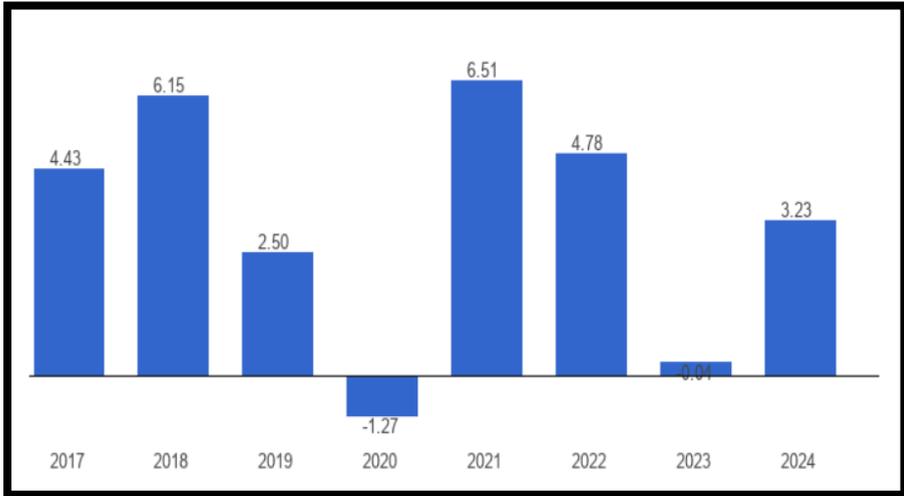


Figure 3: Pakistan's Economic Growth (%)³⁹

Economic fragility compounds security vulnerabilities, fueling unrest and extremism. Thus, sustainable national security now depends on integrating economic stability into strategic planning – an evolution reflected in Pakistan's National Security Policy (NSP 2022-26), which places economic security at its core.

³⁹ . “Economic Growth: The Rate of Change of Real GDP,” *The Global Economy*, n.d., accessed October 11, 2025, https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Pakistan/Economic_growth/.

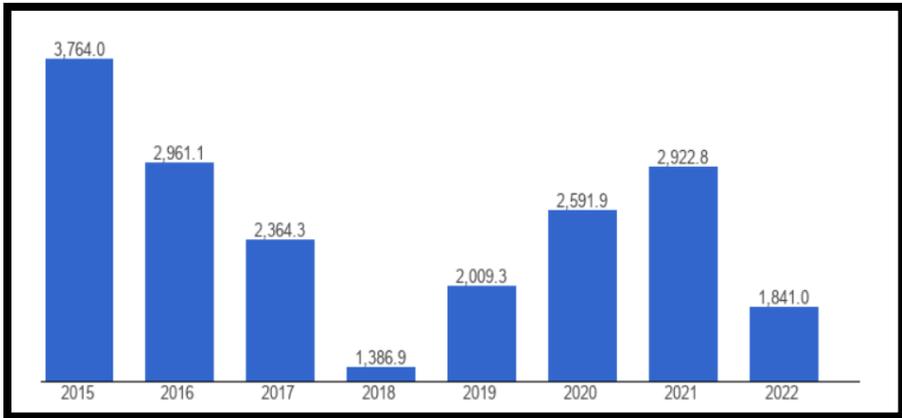


Figure 4: FDI in Pakistan (Mn USD)⁴⁰

The Nuclear Factor

Pakistan's nuclear program has been both a guarantor of security and a source of external pressure. Nuclear capability has strengthened deterrence vis-à-vis India and enhanced Pakistan's strategic relevance. However, it has also triggered sanctions, reinforced security dilemmas, and necessitated high military expenditures that divert resources from socio-economic development. The resulting security-insecurity paradox reflects broader regional dynamics where strategic stability at the nuclear level coexists with heightened risks at lower conflict thresholds.⁴¹

Balochistan & Strategic Competition

Balochistan's strategic significance has increased with Gwadar Port's development – a key node in CPEC. Its location near the Persian Gulf places it at the heart of regional power competition. Chinese investments, Indian covert activities (as evidenced by Kulbhushan Yadav's arrest), and Iranian concerns about cross-border unrest make the province a geopolitical flashpoint. The US also

⁴⁰. "Foreign Aid & Development Assistance Received," *The Global Economy*, n.d., accessed October 11, 2025, https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Pakistan/foreign_aid

⁴¹. Ghazala Yasmin Jalil, "Nuclear Arms Race in South Asia: Pakistan's Quest for Security," in *Strategic Studies*, 1st ed., vol. 37 (2017).

perceives Gwadar as a potential Chinese naval foothold, heightening great-power competition in the region.

Pakistan's National Security Architecture

Pakistan's national security framework has evolved through successive crises and strategic calibrations. Inherited colonial-era institutions were adapted to address unique post-independence challenges. Key structures include:

- National Security Committee (NSC) – established in 1969, institutionalized in 2004, and serving as the apex civil-military forum for strategic decision-making.
- National Security Division (NSD) – established in 2014, responsible for NSP formulation and strategic policy integrations.
- National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) – formed in 2008, tasked with intelligence coordination and counter-extremism strategies.
- National Action Plan (NAP) – launched in 2014, revised in 2021, instrumental in counterterrorism operations.
- National Internal Security Policy (NSP) – aiming to create a secure environment protecting civil liberties and promoting socio-economic development.
- Vision 2025 – articulating long-term economic, governance, and security objectives.

The Strategic Policy Landscape

Pakistan's NSP 2022-26 marks a significant conceptual shift: moving away from purely militarized security paradigms towards comprehensive security, integrating economic resilience, human development, and geopolitical strategy. The NSP identifies opportunities in Pakistan's location at the intersection of global trade routes, emphasizing connectivity and economic diplomacy. Other key strategic frameworks include:

- Maritime Doctrine of Pakistan – Articulating the role of maritime power in advancing policy and national interests.

- National Cyber Security Policy - aimed at protecting Pakistan's digital infrastructure.
- National Space Policy – focusing on technological development and national sovereignty.
- Paigham-e-Pakistan – a state-led counter-extremism narrative grounded in Islamic teachings and constitutional principles.

These policies signal a widening security agenda that incorporates nontraditional domains – cyber, space, energy, climate, and human security – alongside conventional defense considerations.

Think Tanks & Strategic Discourse

Pakistan’s growing network of thinktanks and strategic forums (in the dozens in Islamabad alone) contributes to national security debates and policy formulation. The ‘Islamabad Security Dialogue’, in particular, has become a platform for articulating Pakistan’s vision of geo-economics and integrated security. This evolution underscores a shift from reactive security postures to strategic thought leadership.

Defense Capability & Strategic Posture

Pakistan maintains the sixth-largest armed forces in the world, complemented by civil armed forces and a credible nuclear deterrent. This robust defense capability underpins its strategic autonomy. However, sustaining such capacity in the face of economic fragility necessitates a balanced approach that ensures the alignment of defense spending with broader national development goals.

Serial	Year	India (Mn USD)	Pakistan (Mn USD)	Ratio
1.	1965	2126	440	4.8:1
2.	1970	1692	553	3.1:1
3.	1975	3324	772	4.3:1
4.	1980	5421	1430	3.8:1
5.	1985	7568	2144	3.5:1

6.	1990	10538	2810	3.8:1
7.	1995	9755	3666	2.7:1
8.	2000	14288	2974	4.8:1
9.	2005	23073	4587	5:1
10.	2010	46090	5975	7.7:1
11.	2015	51295	9506	5.4:1
12.	2020	72937	10241	7.1:1
13.	2024	86126	10166	8.5:1

Figure 5: India - Pakistan Military Expenditures⁴²

Recommendations

Navigating through the Great Power Competition - Reviewing Geostrategic Choices

Over the turn of the century, the international system has been reshaped by China's rise, Russia's resurgence, and the relative decline of the US. These shifts have intensified great power competition, eroding multilateral norms and constraining Pakistan's strategic space. Pakistan's security environment is further complicated by instability in Afghanistan, Iran's diplomatic marginalization, India's revisionist behavior, and the disruptive potential of emerging technologies and Artificial Intelligence.

To safeguard strategic and economic autonomy, Pakistan must pursue a pragmatic, interest-driven foreign policy anchored in balance and adaptability. Rather than choosing sides in major power rivalries or falling into the 'Thucydides Trap', Islamabad should leverage its geostrategic position to act as a connector across competing blocs. Strategic autonomy requires nuanced engagement with both Washington and Beijing, maximizing economic and security dividends without overdependence on either.

⁴². *SIPRI Military Expenditure Database*, n.d., accessed October 11, 2025, <https://milex.sipri.org/sipri>.

Deepening the Pakistan-China partnership remains central to economic modernization, but success depends on operationalizing Special Economic Zones and transforming CPEC into a sustainable platform for trade and regional integrations, with Gwadar developed as a functional logistics hub. Simultaneously expanding energy and connectivity ties with Russia and the Central Asian Republics can diversify Pakistan's partnerships and mitigate vulnerability to geological shocks.

As global power shifts from West to East, Pakistan's strategic reliance must rest on balanced diplomacy, diversified alliances, and self-reliant economic strength.

Carving Out a Favorable Regional Order

South Asia remains one of the least integrated regions globally, hindered by weak trade links, infrastructure deficits, and unresolved political disputes. For Pakistan, enhancing regional connectivity is essential to transform this fragmentation into opportunity. Addressing nontraditional security threats – climate change, food insecurity, and water scarcity – requires cooperative regional frameworks rather than competition.

To capitalize on its geostrategic position, Pakistan must expand trade with neighbors and promote a functional revival of SAARC as a mechanism for peace and stability. Despite a volatile environment, Islamabad has demonstrated restraint by avoiding an arms race and seeking to rationalize defense spending in favor of socio-economic development.

Sustainable peace with India demands reciprocal sensitivity and the restoration of dialogue, which hinges on New Delhi's reconsideration of its post-August 2019 policies in Kashmir. In Afghanistan, Pakistan's engagement should prioritize connectivity to Central Asia and joint economic gains through stability and reconstruction.

Maintaining equilibrium between Saudi Arabia and Iran remains critical for Pakistan's regional diplomacy. A pragmatic, multi-vector foreign policy centered on economic diplomacy, balance, and conflict avoidance can strengthen Pakistan's sovereignty, diversify partnerships, and position it as a driver of cooperative integration in South Asia.

Moving from Geopolitics to Geo-economics

Pakistan must shift its strategic orientation from a paradigm of geopolitical rivalry to one anchored in geoeconomic collaboration. This transition requires a move beyond security-centric policies towards approaches that emphasize interdependence, regional integrations, and sustainable development. A coherent geoeconomic framework rests on domestic stability, peaceful regional engagement, and adherence to the principle of mutual non-interference in the internal affairs of other states.

To realize this vision, Pakistan must enhance intra-regional trade, expand connectivity, and develop competitive investment and industrial hubs. Institutional economic diplomacy should underpin efforts to diversify partnerships, promote regulatory transparency, and attract long-term investment. Empowering the private sector to drive industrial modernization and export growth, while addressing structural macroeconomic issues – such as inflation and the current account deficit – is essential. By adopting a sustained geoeconomic orientation, Pakistan can transcend the limitations of trading geopolitically and position itself as a key driver of regional connectivity, stability, and shared prosperity in South and Central Asia.

Leveraging Pakistan's Geopolitical Location

Pakistan's unique position at the crossroads of South, Central, and West Asia offers significant potential for regional connectivity and economic integration. To harness this advantage, the government must prioritize economic diplomacy, ensure a transparent and predictable business environment, and cultivate an investment-friendly climate. Strengthening institutional frameworks for cross-border trade and transit is equally vital. A people-centric approach that promotes inclusivity, skill development, and equitable growth should underpin this strategy. Empowering the private sector to lead industrial modernization and export diversification will be crucial for translating geography into economic strength. By effectively leveraging its location, Pakistan can emerge as a regional hub for trade, energy, and transport cooperation.

Embracing a Comprehensive Security Framework

National security today extends beyond military defense to encompass economic stability, climate resilience, and human well-being. Pakistan must adopt a holistic security framework that integrates defense, diplomacy, and development, ensuring that policies reinforce both state and human security. As contemporary threats increasingly transcend borders, no nation can achieve security in isolation; effective regional and global cooperation is imperative. Establishing a national consensus on comprehensive national security will enable Pakistan to align its strategic vision with emerging global realities. By addressing non-traditional threats such as economic fragility, climate change, and food insecurity, Pakistan can build a resilient foundation for sustainable peace, prosperity, and long-term stability.

Fostering International Cooperation against Threats

The resurgence of geopolitical rivalries and the polarization of international politics have eroded the effectiveness of multilateral institutions. Addressing transnational challenges such as pandemics, climate change, and technological disruptions requires renewed commitment to cooperative multilateralism. Equitable access to emerging technologies – particularly artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and biotechnology – must be ensured to prevent deepening global disparities. By promoting inclusive governance and strengthening international policy coordination, the global community can build resilience against future crises and sustain a rules-based international order conducive to shared prosperity.

Ensuring Economic Security

Pakistan's pursuit of economic security should be guided by the principles of connectivity, strategic development partnerships, and inclusive socio-economic progress, supported by a commitment to peace at both the domestic and international levels. The intersections of economics and geopolitics are increasingly reflected in the influence of international financial institutions and regulatory mechanisms such as the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). To safeguard against global economic volatility, Pakistan must strengthen regulatory oversight of cross-border trade, curb illegal financial flows, and adopt forward-looking strategies to anticipate external shocks. Promoting diversification within global value chains, enhancing resilience through innovation, and expanding international cooperation will be critical.

Ultimately, Pakistan should aspire to function as a regional hub for economic convergence, fostering coexistence and generating mutually beneficial outcomes among competing global actors.

Settlement of the Kashmir Issue

Regional stability and sustainable economic development in South Asia remain contingent upon the just and peaceful resolution of the Jammu & Kashmir dispute in accordance with the aspirations of the Kashmiri people and relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions. Lasting peace in the region required India to create conditions conducive to dialogue and to uphold the right of self-determination of the people of Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu & Kashmir (IIOJK). Addressing this long-standing issue through diplomatic engagement and international legal frameworks is essential for fostering mutual trust, regional cooperation, and enduring stability in the region.⁴³

Tackling Climate Change

Given its acute vulnerability to the impacts of global warming despite its minimal contribution to global carbon emissions, Pakistan must adopt a proactive and adaptive climate strategy. This entails the establishment of robust early warning systems, investment in climate-resilient infrastructure, expansion of forest cover, and the creation of green employment opportunities. Transitioning towards renewable and cleaner energy sources should form the cornerstone of this approach. Moreover, Pakistan must intensify diplomatic and institutional efforts to mobilize international financial and technological support to strengthen national resilience and sustainability.⁴⁴

Strengthening Human Security

⁴³. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, "Kashmir through Ages," accessed October 14, 2024, <https://mofa.gov.pk/jammu-and-kashmir-dispute>.

⁴⁴. Government of Pakistan, *National Climate Change Policy*, 2021st ed. (Islamabad, 2021).

The concept of human security represents a paradigm shift from state-centric approaches to frameworks that prioritize the safety, dignity, and well-being of individuals and communities. Enhancing living standards is integral to sustaining national stability and resilience. Pakistan's demographic youth bulge presents both a strategic advantage and a potential challenge; without adequate investment in education, skill development, and employment generation, this resource may become a socioeconomic burden. The experiences of successful nations underscore the centrality of human capital in national advancement. In this regard, regional platforms such as SAMECA provide opportunities for collaborative learning, while domestic think tanks should prioritize research on human resource development to inform policy and institutional reform.⁴⁵

Countering Extremism

Vulnerable populations remain highly susceptible to ideological manipulation and psychological exploitation by extremist groups, which often capitalize on socio-economic deprivation by providing essential services in areas neglected by the state. To counter this, Pakistan must adopt a comprehensive and preventive approach to violent extremism that integrates education reforms, healthcare provision, and access to basic amenities such as clean drinking water. Strengthening regulatory oversight of religious seminaries is essential to ensure transparency and accountability. Additionally, the creation of specialized intelligence units within civil defense and law enforcement agencies is recommended to enhance inter-agency coordination, information sharing, and early threat detection.

⁴⁵. "Peace & Development in South Asia, Middle East, Central Asia."
ISSN: 2789-1038

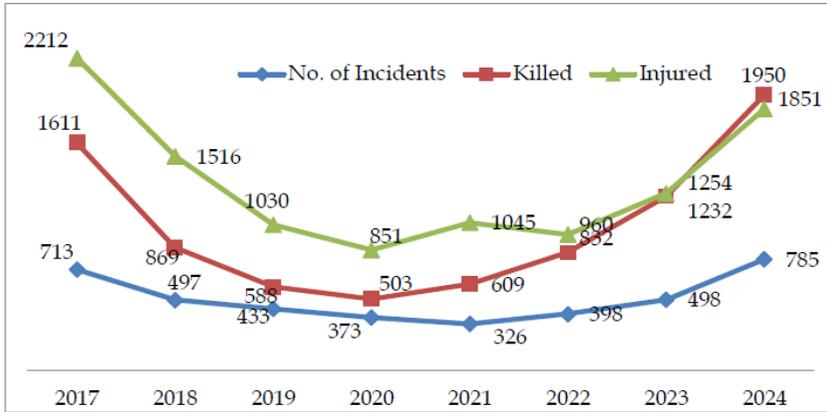


Figure 6: Comparison of Incidents of Violence & Casualties⁴⁶

Putting Own House in Order⁴⁷

Projecting a coherent and credible external image requires the consolidation of internal stability. This entails harmonizing public, political, and diplomatic narratives to ensure a unified national outlook and enhance the efficacy of foreign policy. Sustainable economic growth must rest on the foundation of political stability and effective governance. Population management policies are vital for maintaining ecological balance and long-term economic viability. Concurrently, the prudent conservation of water resources, expansion of cultivable land, and investment in skill development are imperative for addressing climate change challenges and fostering inclusive human development.

Conclusion

This article examined the intricate relationship between the evolving world order and Pakistan's national security imperatives, arguing that shifts in global power directly reshape its strategic outlook. Pakistan's security paradigm has expanded beyond military defense to include economic resilience, energy

⁴⁶. PIPS, *Pakistan Security Report 2024*, 17, no. 1 (2025): 9.

⁴⁷. "Grand National Dialogue" (Islamabad: Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI), 2024).

sustainability, climate security, and human development – reflecting a maturing understanding that security is multidimensional and interdependent.

The analysis shows that the transformation in the global order – from the Cold War bipolarity to the current Sino-American rivalry – has constrained Pakistan’s strategic autonomy, compelling it to balance between competing power centers. Regional dynamics, particularly relations with China, India, Iran, and Afghanistan, further complicate Pakistan’s security calculus, where diplomacy, alliances, and internal stability intersect. The research highlights that Pakistan’s foreign policy behavior is more about managing vulnerabilities within an unequal international system than about making choices.

In the contemporary era, non-traditional threats such as cyber warfare, hybrid conflicts, transnational terrorism, and climate change pose as serious a challenge as conventional military threats. Addressing these requires a shift from reactive security policies to an anticipatory and integrative framework linking economic governance, technological adaptation, and institutional reform.

Ultimately, Pakistan’s security trajectory will hinge not on alignment with great powers but on its ability to adapt to global transformations while aligning internal capacities with external challenges. A proactive, multidimensional, and regionally engaged approach is imperative for safeguarding sovereignty and achieving strategic stability in a volatile international environment.

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