



RESEARCH PAPER

The Counter-Violence Strategies and Foreign Policy Realignments of Pakistan Dissected under the Paradigm of Regional Security Complex Theory

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ABSTRACT

In the cotemporary arena of international relations, it is commonly accepted notion that the internal fragility and incapacity of any state to control the security spillover may lead to compromise the security features of the respective region. The Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) propounds that the security paradigm can best be explained using regional clusters of states which are so closely interrelated in their histories, geographies and politics, that their insecurities cannot be objectively examined in a separate account. Same is true in the case of Pakistan wherein the political volatility, ethnic imbalances, the lack of effective governance, and the economic strains have impaired its capacity to address the perennially existing interregional and intra-regional security threats and concerns. In this background, this paper studies the counter violence strategy followed by Pakistan and its impact on the domestic as well as regional political developments. It also reviews various measures taken by the security establishment of Pakistan to restore peace in the regions hit by terrorism. Furthermore, it examines the strategic realignments and foreign policy options for Pakistan towards the regional players as well as the global powers actively involved in the geostrategic developments of the South and Central Asia. It recommends that, though, Pakistan needs alliances but should not to rely solely upon them and should maintain such balance in the relationship with its partners that would make it stronger without conjuring at compromising the sovereignty or the long term stability. Pakistan has to enlarge its participation at the regional multilateral forums like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) to ensure economic stability and safeguard its strategic interests since such forums are valuable substitutes to the conventional overdependence on global economic giants such as the United States and China.

KEYWORDS Counter Violence Strategy, Foreign Policy Alignments, Pakistan, NACTA, Tehrik e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)

Introduction

The withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan in August 2021 altered the domestic and regional security situation of Pakistan. The Taliban recapture of Afghanistan coupled with the collapse of U.S-supported government in Kabul entailed the emergence of new uncertainties on the western border of Pakistan. Whereas some scholars in Islamabad had hoped that an Afghanistan, which would now be led by the Taliban, would lead to the stabilization of borders but it was the other way round. The post-2021 security

scenario has been marked by the continuity of cross-border attacks, the reinstatement of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and expansion of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-KP) in the adjacent regions such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Hard and rocky land area in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border and the question of ideology and brotherhood with the Afghanistan Taliban and the TTP has landed harsh border security problems to the Pakistanis.

Since the beginning of the fight against terrorism, National Counterterrorism Authority (NACTA) has become one of the key creators of the institutional response to terrorism in Pakistan, which is predominantly embodied in the National Action Plan (NAP-2014) and its upgraded resolution of National Action Plan (NAP-2021). Despite the fact that plans of such policies are started with an intention of realizing the aspiration of integrating the efforts towards curbing terrorism in civil and military domains, the realization of such policies has always been flawed due to some problem of coordination, flexibility in political will to act and minimal representation of the institutions in reforms, creating a gap between the promise and performance.

Theoretical Framework

The Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) proposed by Barry Buzan & Ole Waever (2003) provides the theoretical basis to study the interdependent security dynamics of Pakistan, Afghanistan and the rest of the South and Central Asian region. According to RSCT, security can be best explained using regional clusters of states, in which states are so closely interrelated in their histories, geographies and politics, that their insecurities cannot be objectively examined in a separate account (Buzan & Waever, 2003). It is directly seen in the weakening of security situation in Pakistan after Taliban took over power in Afghanistan. The revival of the TTP, the cross-border violence and the porosity of the border management proves the primary concept of RSCT that the security crisis that Afghanistan is facing crosses over to Pakistan (Popalzay, 2024). The lack of recognition of the Taliban government and the existence of the Durand Line dispute are the other factors which enhance interdependence. The empirical evidence positively reinforces the RSCT since it indicated that Pakistan and Afghanistan constitute an inseparably interlocked security complex.

The RSCT does not just complicate the simple bilateral models, and contends that the region should have a framework that involves more players and cross-cutting threats. The studies show that the security of Pakistan is not only influenced by Afghanistan, but it is also influenced by U.S.-India strategic partnership, influence of Iran, Gulf-oriented policies, and economic footprint of China (Ali et al., 2024; Hussain et al., 2024; Zaidi & Nirmal, 2022; Muzaffar, et. al., 2021). The fact that a new complex of security threats is created through a combination of interdependent sources rather than individual state conflicts is confirmed through RSCT narrative. The transformation of the foreign policy of Pakistan to a more practical and region-oriented approach, including participation in SCO and ECO is a testimony to RSCT framework model of regions.

Institutional weaknesses of security complexes, e.g., inadequate cooperation between borders and weak anti-terrorism structures, enable threats to spread across the borders. The situation can be noted in the fact that the Taliban failed to suppress the actions of the TTP, there is no collaboration in managing the border, and the insecure and diplomatically isolated Pakistan implements a reactive foreign policy (Hasar, 2024). In addition, the mistrust within the regions and deficiencies in cooperative security architecture reflect the outlook as presented by RSCT.

The NACTA and Policy Mandates

According to Wahab (2023), the tragedy at the Army Public School of 2014 was followed by the creation of National Action Plan (NAP), which, in its turn, has become the driving force of the entire national and political process of Pakistan at first. However, partial success of the NAP in achieving objectives has been established through the study done by Wahab while adopting the Van Um and Pisoiu Model of Effectiveness. Even though, the hardcore counterterrorism policy received sufficient attention by taking part in kinetic military action, the softcore did not receive sufficient attention and incorporation which primarily included the educational reforms, counter-narratives and de-radicalization. Such imbalance has done much to undermine the big picture in the plan of eliminating extremism from its origins.

The institutional issue lies way deeper due to the lack of successful combination between the both federal and the provincial institutions as explicated by Ullah et al. (2024). They observe political tension, lack of capacities, and bureaucratic delays are among some of the key factors which have been joined together to ensure that implementation of NAP is done slowly particularly at provincial level. Communications and sharing of resources is uncoordinated even with the formal buildup of the multi-sector representation in NACTA and the NAP system of representation. Still, it remains to be seen on a more positive note that when the cooperation between the provinces and the federation comes to accord, it can reduce the frequency of terrorist attacks.

A few of these structural weaknesses are resolved in the Revised National Action Plan (2021) as wired by Ali (2023). It provides the new policy aims, expanded spheres of appreciation and concentration on reforms in the spheres of investigation, prosecution and judicial adjudication which were previously ignored. However, Ali concludes that the implementation problems are still present particularly due to poor institutional mechanisms and unstable politics. This reflects a larger scheme where carefully articulated policy intentions have not been followed up by either adequate reforms, or resourcing, at the working level.

Ullah et al. (2019) observe that the NAP is complemented by the National Internal Security Policy (NISP) which is the part of the bigger internal security plan in Pakistan. Nevertheless, they state that the classical manners of fighting terrorism in Pakistan are stagnant and require modification in the light of the shift in the nature of threats. Their research suggests that there exists the need to have a psychosocial healing of those societies that have been exposed to terrorism as well as intelligently regulating the position of jobs between the military and the civil workforce in the war on militancy. The authors also noted the psychological toll that the people of Pakistan had to pay owing to the war, decades of civil unrest and chaos, which factor is mostly underrepresented in policymaking stages.

In the case of Pakistan, despite the fact that the NACTA is legally bound to monitor national integration of the counterterrorism policy, its power and independence are generally too modest to enforce policy integration upon other levels of government. The institutional autonomy, inter-agency data sharing and political agreement, are the things stressed by their paper to promote continuity in undertaking the uniform and effective counterterrorism measures in such a country where security policies may run amok following the change in the government and the ruling parties.

Summing up all these diverse studies, it could be theorized that NACTA and the anti-terrorist activities around it had developed a very strong theoretical and structural

framework on the security process in Pakistan. The Achilles heel is however implementation. The incidence of role fragmentation, provincial ownership, and poor judicial reforms coupled with lack of advanced preventive strategies all go to show that the second generation of the policy should be less interventionist and more militarization-oriented. This would include building up the technological, legal and political capabilities of the NACTA to become a real life coordinator of the counterterrorism efforts, the one that combines both the soft and the hard power in the long term prospect of peace and stability.

Military Operations: Radd-ul-Fasaad and Zarb-e-Azb

Since the adversary drift toward terrorism and extremism in the country aggravated, Pakistan has conducted several important military operations during the last two decades, but the most notables were the Operation Zarb-e-Azb (2014) and Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad (2017-2020). These operations aimed at destruction of infrastructure of terrorists, overcoming lawless areas and achieving internal security. The successfulness and the collaborative benefits of these military responses give birth to a critical dimension under which the broader perception of the strategy of counter-terrorism in Pakistan could be viewed.

The operation Radd-ul-Fasaad was a tactical transformation of the reactive military actions used in the past to a more complex and preventive intelligence framework. This operation was started in 2017 and in addition to having the aim of bashing the hide outs of the terrorists the operation was also concentrating on border protection, intelligence-based operation (IBO) and neutralization of sleeper cells. The Khyber-IV in Rahgal valley as well as the fencing operation along Pakistan-Afghanistan border were some such tactical operations that helped to reduce the cross border infiltration. Such policy moves as the integration of FATA into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa into single administrative unit and the removal of Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) that dated to the colonial times were also characteristic of a political disposition to expand the national system by including into it the territories that previously were not listed.

In yet another operation, Zarb-e-Azb that was initiated in 2014 had a direct target of attacking the strongholds of the militants in the North Waziristan region. Zafar et al. (2023) look at how this operation has been covered by the international media. In their contribution, they demonstrate how the Zarb-e-Azb within the frames of war on terrorism was largely reported in the international media in the positive way, which enabled the military intervention of Pakistani government to be viewed as a legitimate one. There were the general tactical successes like the destruction of the infrastructural backbone of militants, halting them in the supply chain and killing of high profile targets.

Irfan et al. (2022) inspect the road to counterterrorism that was followed by Pakistan after 9/11 and assume that the course of the US was consistent, still, that of Pakistan had no sense because it failed to produce the desired results of eradicating violence and terrorism from the country in particular and the region in general. Furthermore, the military could not help while resorting to non-conventional methods of war as they were easily confronted by terrorists. These were special tactical initiatives including deployment of special forces, real time intelligence and multilateral coordination which played a key role as far as Zarb-e-Azb and Radd-ul-Fasaad operations were concerned.

In the opinion of Rahman et al. (2023), such operations in the framework of a systematic review manage to reduce the number of terrorist actions and civilian casualties. They however raise some critical issues pertaining to the long term sustainability, risk of militant recovery as well as the post-conflict reconstruction. Moreover, they call that

selective enforcement over only few groups may be utilized and other group may be overlooked or even tolerated that creates a gap in the national security fabric. They stress that military success cannot be sustainable alone unless coupled with the socio-economic development and spread of governance.

The further historical consideration provided by Chaudhry et al. (2020) confirms that military activities have harmed the existence of terrorist networks, yet they did not eliminate ideological appeal and attraction of these networks and their capacity to attract more members. The authors are calling to the adoption of the all-embracing measure that includes military intervention and education, de-radicalization and judicial adjustments as the instruments of dealing with the roots of terrorism.

Following events of US withdrawal from Afghanistan, after which the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in 2021, terrorist activities have increased again especially in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa area which compelled the Pakistani leadership to organize Operation Azm-e-Istehkam in 2024. Ali (2024) defines this operation as the multilateral military, intelligence and socio-political action against the resumption of the violence. When compared at a glance to the preceding operations, Azm-e-Istehkam is more specific about the socioeconomic causes of extremism focusing on international cooperation, engagement of local communities and cross-mutual-information exchange with a view to react as per the evolving nature of the threat.

Warraich et al. (2023) reveal that the military activities have disturbed the capabilities of the militants; however, the root of the extremism such as political instability, bad governance, and national disunity remain unresolved. This kind of oversight in the long-run may provide the room to restore the extremist doctrines especially in the marginalized regions. Similarly, Bilal, Khan and Azhar (2022) stress over the importance of border protection and full-scale decision-making capacity while neglecting the adverse impacts of military operation over the socio political fabric of the region.

On the whole, the major war operations conducted in Pakistan such as Zarb-e-Azb, Radd-ul-Fasaad and Azm-e-Istehkam strategically delivered in reducing and narrowing the extent and frequency of the attacks. Nevertheless, it has to be noted that the literature under analysis cautions that the success of the military alone cannot lead to national security. The change into more comprehensive counter-terrorist evolutions that include a mixture of kinetic operation and policy exposure, economic fusion, and ideological combat is critical in achieving the long-lasting peace and regional security.

The withdrawal of the US support and the troops from Afghanistan not only left an impression on the internal security scenario in Afghanistan but also impacted the security dynamics of South and Central Asia including Pakistan. As a matter of fact, as Humza & Khan (2022) indicate, the state of Afghanistan traditionally was a place of compromise in the interests of global and regional powers, of which the U.S., China, India, Iran, Russia were a part. The geopolitical interests of these powers have always superseded the stability of Afghanistan in the current international system in which each state is its own judge and jury and where no one to enforce the rule. The Pakistani state, in particular, is failing to survive peacefully under a post-withdrawal paradigm where the shift in threats and opportunities is accompanied by the shift in the interests of key players.

According to the analysis that was put forth by Akhtar & Iqbal (2023), the bilateral bond between Pakistan and Afghanistan within the Taliban government is currently taking place in the perilous triangle of cooperation, enmity, and survival. Such uncertainty has forced Pakistan to reconsider its policy in the region where it is more oriented to scenario-

based planning (i.e., giving more emphasis to contingencies), practical diplomacy, and safeguarding its western borders not only in military but also economically.

At the same time, the people-oriented perspective, on the other hand, has been defined by the National Security Policy of Pakistan (2022-2026) that has relied even more on the concept of geo-economics and geo-strategy. Abbas & Cheema (2022) note that there is a radical shift in the way of looking at a security approach in Pakistan in this document as it places economic strength in the center of national security as the most important and significant aspect of it. Nevertheless, this type of policy lacks a strengthened system to counter the non-traditional security threats that have been acquiring prominence in the post-withdrawal context, such as climate change, radicalization, and the insurgency grounded on borders.

The foreign policy of Pakistan is also under a challenge of institutional fragmentation and internal contradiction (Muzaffar, et. al, 2016). The claims by Hussain et al. (2023) further indicate that civil-military difference, coordination, and responsive policymaking have confined Pakistan to its coherently modified policy in the region. With the appearing of non-conventional threats to the foreign policy and issues of the climate changes shocks, the information war and the radicalization of the youth, the foreign policy situation becomes even more complicated and requires a more pro-active and integrated approach to the strategy.

Moreover, the failure to incorporate the indigenous knowledge systems into the peace building activities in Afghanistan too has notched some regional peace. Abawe et al. (2023) emphasize that the external-agenda-dominated policy in Afghanistan has not listened to the voice of the locals, and such vacuum has been filled/occupied by extremist thinking. Influence of this absence is also felt in Pakistan because of the trans-national ethnic, ideological and tribal rifts which have its repercussions in terms over the power of militancy and the state.

In sum, the U.S withdrawal has not only reshaped the domestic situation in Afghanistan, but it had also restructured the strategic and regional interests. As an immediate consequence, Pakistan is in the midst of such new strategic period where a balanced, multidimensional approach needs where a more complex picture of relationship between diplomacy and defense, economy and security, bilateralism and multilateralism is required. A free, gradual and flexible approach as recommended by the different research studies will be useful in attaining the national interest and enhancing the long term peace in the region.

Regional Rebalancing: The Cases of India, Iran, and the Gulf States

Pakistan is now reconstituting its international relations with its important neighbors and regional actors as well as its relations with India, Iran and the gulf states as the global and regional geopolitical scenario keeps on reshaping. Such changes indicate that Pakistan is trying to retain relevance as far as strategy is concerned, and protect its security, as well as pursuing new economic opportunities in the multipolar world.

The biggest issue as faced by Pakistan is its policy towards India more so in the face of increasingly closer U.S. India strategic partnership. This partnership due to mutual interest in resisting the Chinese presence in the Indo-Pacific region has led India and Pakistan to further apart from each other in the provision of defensive capacities, leverage in diplomacy, and regional dominance (Zaidi & Nirmal, 2022; Gul, 2024; Muzaffar, 2021a).

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). In case of Pakistan, this realignment not only increases security-related complexities and anxieties of the region - especially with respect to the Kashmir and other cross-border issues, but also forces Islamabad to enhance its relationship with China as a balancing force. It is therefore the Indo-US nexus that has become a big factor behind the eastward drift of Pakistan.

In comparison, the relations of Pakistan and Iran can be defined using a combination of multiple factors, such as common borders, culture, and local conflicts. Although the two countries collaborate on border management and trade, their strategies tend to differ especially due to the growing partnership of Iran with India and its complicated involvement in Afghanistan and Balochistan. Nevertheless, the increased role of China in both Iran and Pakistan, and, more in particular, through long-term investment agreements and the projects based on the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI), have created new opportunities of trilateral activity (Hussain, et al., 2024). Through this regional organization headed by China, Pakistan is ready to have a less contentious rather warm relationship with Iran.

Pakistan in the Gulf region is weighing between a move from religiously symbolic foreign policy to strategic realism-based foreign policy orientation. In the past, its relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE were based on the Islamic solidarity, currently, it is rediscovering its long-standing ties, defining them through economic cooperation, investment, and compliance with Chinese interests in the Gulf. Such a transition can be observed in the cautious foreign policy of Pakistan regarding local conflicts such as the war in Yemen and balancing between Riyadh and Tehran.

To conclude, Pakistan's foreign policy of rebalancing in the region is an indication of more pragmatic and multi-aligned foreign policy. This reality of new strategic pressures blended with hard economic challenges is upending Pakistan as it attempts to reposition itself through the diversification of its partnerships and discovery of its strategic flexibility: in search of stability and growth when faced by tensions with its long time traditional rivals and the need to reconcile its role in an ever changing order.

The growing power of India in South Asia and its impact on the global scene has become a central factor whereby the emerging foreign policy agenda of Pakistan is concerned. Over the past few years, India has managed to considerably widen its presence in the region via polite diplomacy, economic integration, as well as accumulation of strategic weaponry. Since this growth has been bringing fruits in the form increasing alliance between India and United States while forming at the same time a new power bloc in the region thus this cooperation has been directly impacting the security and the diplomatic positioning of Pakistan (Zaidi & Nirmal, 2022).

The U.S. Indian strategic alliance has developed at a fast pace, especially in the fields of advanced technology, defense cooperation, counter terrorism and maritime security in the Indo Pacific. This partnership has also been cemented by the military exercises, selling and buying of arms as well as the collaboration in countering the power of China in that region. It poses a strategic problem to Pakistan as the equilibrium in South Asia could be altered and the Pakistani influence on the international platform such as the United Nations or the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) would diminish.

According to Zaidi & Nirmal (2022), this development has resulted in the realignment of regional priorities of the United States, in which India is considered a desirable partner, whereas Pakistan has lost its status as a U.S. ally. The consequences of this shift not only affect at the level of bilateral relations, but also impact the way regional conflicts, even as Kashmir, are viewed and dealt with by the international society. The thickening of U.S. and Indo relationship has concomitantly constrained the diplomatic scope of Pakistan; it forced the former to strike a closer relationship with China and other states of the region.

Because of this, Pakistan has increased its strategic relations with China, and tries to diversify foreign policy choices by enhancing relations with Russia, Turkey and the Gulf states. Nevertheless, the rising influence of India in addition to its capacity to influence international discourse would remain a strategic issue of concern to Pakistan in the long-term.

Technically, the relations of India with the United States are forming the geopolitical restructuring of the South Asian region. It gives strength to the eastward strategic orientation of Pakistan and emphasizes the necessity of the suitable adjustment of the foreign policy of Islamabad through proactive diplomacy, interregional cooperation, and strategic balance.

The Pakistan-Iran ties have always been influenced by the geographical proximity with a mix of shared cultural-religious values and strategic rivalry. Their relationship has been wary and shaky at best since the two nations have both engaged in Afghanistan as well as having a clash in interest in that country particularly in sectarian perspective, and Iran being more aligned to India. Nevertheless, the possibility of the development of a triangular China--Iran--Pakistan framework caused by the increasing Chinese influence in the region is creating new avenues of the strategic balancing (Hussain, et al., 2024).

The strategic agreement between China and Iran along with heavy investments into CPEC with Pakistan has preconditioned the further connectivity and energy collaboration as well as the regional integration. This trilateral axis is largely influenced by Chinese influence - it is the need to promote security in the region, resisting the strong presence of the United States in the Middle East and South Asia and locking overland trade and energy supplies. In the case of Pakistan, it has a chance to work practically with Iran without compromising its old relationships with the Gulf Arab countries or welcoming more potential tensions on the sectarian matters.

According to Hussain et al. (2024), although Iran and Pakistan do not necessarily see eye-to-eye in several aspects of regional politics, in particular in Afghanistan and towards Saudi Arabia, both countries are aware of the numerous advantages of collaboration in China-led arrangement. As an example, energy reserves in Iran, geographical positioning of Pakistan and economic might of China will present a triangle in the building of infrastructure, trade corridors and coordination of security while their internal long-term rivalries.

Simultaneously, Pakistan should be wary of this balancing act because improving relations with Iran may put a strain on its relationship with Saudi Arabia and UAE, its major economic trade and political allies. Thus, the relations of Pakistan and Iran within the Chinese coverage can be characterized with the notions of strategic hedging that can be well defined as the strategically cautious collaboration between two participants who are not completely aligned with each other but promoted by matching interests in the region and mediated by a neutral third party.

Overall, the trilateralism between China, Iran, and Pakistan provides another paradigm of regional cooperation in the framework of which Pakistan can adjust its relationship with Iran without worrying about the major shifts of its overall strategic orientation. This has been a balancing act indicative of Islamabad coming to rely ever more on pragmatism than ideology in a more multipolar and interdependent region.

During decades, the foreign policy of Pakistan towards the Middle East was mostly conducted through Islamic identity politics and with great interest to religious solidarity, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and gulf monarchies based on ideological grounds. This has however changed in the recent years with a notable shift in this approach. In Pakistan, a pragmatic strategy based on interest is being consciously moved on to hanging more eggs on economic cooperation, geopolitical balance and regional stability than religious path.

This reassessment is being affected by the increasing role that China is playing in the Middle East in the sense that it has altered the balance of power in the Middle East. In as much as China continues to build on its relationship with both Iran and the Gulf states, Pakistan is also ushering itself in a new direction, geared towards the disintegrating economic and strategic realities. Rather than choosing a sectarian or an ideological side in an argument a country like Pakistan is being more balanced and neutral to this stance and is doing this due to trade, investments and infrastructure growth.

To take a recent example, Pakistan has not taken any strong position in the Yemen conflict and had moderated its diplomatic relations with both Saudi Arabia and Iran as well as cautiously engaging more in regional peacebuilding processes (Khan, Muzaffar, & Khan, 2019). This is unlike the previous policies which were influenced by bloc politics and religious symbolism.

This strategic realism is what Pakistan needed to stay realistically-economically stable and attract foreign investments and sustain itself in the knot of alliances in Middle East. It also allows Pakistan to enjoy the connectivity in the region though the BRI initiated by China without involvement into the ideological differences.

In all, as the trend of faith-based diplomacy across the world is coming to an end, same is the trend on the international front that is characterized by Pakistan following a rational approach to foreign policy towards the Middle East. The new direction places priority on economic practicality, geopolitical flexibility, and strategy neutrality, which has made Pakistan more dynamic player in fast changing regional order.

Internal Security and Foreign Policy Interlinkage

The foreign policy of Pakistan is directly linked with its internal issues of security but most importantly the kind of instability, militancy, and changeability of alliances that has characterized the political dynamics of the region. The challenges of terrorism, insecurity along the shared borders, political instability, and economic and social instability have in the past years had remarkable implications as far as how Pakistan interacts with other foreign stakeholders and the manner it forms its foreign policies.

The revival of terrorism, especially some of the organizations, such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) based across the Afghan border, has become one of the most burning issues. The reinstating of the Taliban in Kabul has led to a more liberal state of such gangs, derailing internal security of Pakistan and forcing the nation to flex more of its muscles on Afghanistan policies (Popalzay, 2024). Such cross-border menaces can also

influence the Pak-China interactions since the stability of CPEC infrastructure requires security on troubled territory such as Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Hussain, 2021).

Political instability in Pakistan, i.e. institutional strains, poor governance and economic weakness vis-a-vis the ability of the state to articulate a coherent foreign policy, further diminishes the capability of the state to exude a coherent foreign policy. This is a vicious cycle, and a weak internal control stimulates external forces to intervene in the internal matters, which infuses complexities the process of strategic decision-making.

In addition, the international image of Pakistan is affected by the issue of internal insecurity, which interferes with the relationships of international partners, particularly the U.S., the Gulf nations, and the multilateral agencies, with Islamabad. The issue of governance, militancy, and human rights conditions tend to influence foreign aid, diplomatic relationship, and security cooperation.

Pakistan has to see that the issues of foreign policy and internal security are interrelated and interconnected. Foreign policy success depends on internal stability, institutional strengths and inclusive development. An effective internal security system boosts the reputation of Pakistan as a partner, reinforces its presence in the region as well as improves its capacity to respond to changing power balances in the rest of the globe.

Indeed, what some people consider domestic issues when it comes to internal threats such as militancy and economic instability are foreign policy variables. The more its internal base is solid, the more strategically independent, the more resourceful as a diplomatic actor, it can be in the international arena.

The short term features of the foreign policy of Pakistan are not identical to the long term strategic planning, since the former usually prompted by immediate reactive courses against the insecurity and political instability experienced by the country. In light of this, Pakistan has a struggling internal environment (characterized by terrorism, sectarian conflicts, border violence and poor governance) and as a consequence of this development leaders in this country have often been reactive in their approach to foreign policy as opposed to being proactive or foresighted.

Pakistan is more likely to revise and move its foreign relationship when the internal problems become intense like terrorism or insurgencies to gain immediate help, i.e., support through military aids, diplomatic protection, or economic bail out. For instance, the increased military violence has more than once forced Pakistan to consider the help of the U.S. in countering terrorism or the tightening of its security ties with China, specifically to offer security to CPEC infrastructure and guarantee security in the region.

The situation has become worse by the lack of political stability characterized by civil military conflicts, leadership disputes and judicial activism which are other weakening factors that hinder the capability of the state to make a consistent foreign policy. Foreign policy in this aspect is reactionary since it is influenced by the imperative of diverting pressure within a country, attaining kinetic validity in the short term, or dealing with the external perception instead of executing strategic interests.

It also hinders the diplomatic independence of Pakistan because of its reactive stance, which complicates the process of maintaining a centrist approach between the large powers such as the U.S. and China. It also lowers the capacity of the country to play role

regionally on matters concerning the future of Afghanistan, the Kashmir conflict or even integration of its economy with Central Asia.

In brief, political turbulence and internal insecurity have frequently reduced the role of the foreign policy of Pakistan as an instrument that is used in order to manage the crisis, instead of being an instrument of promoting national interest. The focus here is that until Pakistan shows a better internal governance and stabilizes its institutions, engages in a long-term planning of policies, the vulnerable foreign policy of the country to external pressure and internal disturbances will continue to haunt it.

Not only domestic problems define the internal security of Pakistan, but the regional geopolitical processes strongly affect internal security of Pakistan especially those concerning Afghanistan, India and great power rivalries in general. These external forces directly affect the efficiency of the internal security systems of Pakistan and also expose the most important national projects to increased threats, particularly, the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Hussain, et al., 2021).

The vulnerable geopolitical relationship between China and India, and Indo-US increasing ties, adds to the internal problems faced by Pakistan, as Hussain et al. (2021) refer to them. India terms the CPEC as a problem and protests against its corridors passing through Gilgit-Baltistan. Consequently, CPEC falls victim to sabotaging tactics such as direct threats and proxy threats especially in the province of Balochistan where separatists have escalated their operations toward Chinese interests and Pakistani military deployments.

Furthermore, the vulnerability of CPEC that lies at the heart of Pakistan economic expectations and geopolitical plan is revealed by these regional tensions. To secure it, it will need Pakistan to enhance the domestic intelligence services, improve border management system, and engagement with neighbors and stakeholders in a diplomatic manner (Hussain et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the Pakistan's reactive security system and the lack of cohesive internal governance tendencies tend to make critical infrastructure prone to shockwaves in the region.

In practical terms in case of Pakistan, the geopolitics of the regions is closely intertwined to the domestic security issues. With such unstable neighborhood and incoherent domestic policies in place, projects such as CPEC are still vulnerable, and internal security structure could again be left fighting in the shadow of external conflicts and alliances.

Strategic Recommendations and Policy Options for Pakistan

The strategic importance of not collapsing into dependency on one side in the context of strategic interactions in the evolving geopolitical environment is one of the main lessons that Pakistan is to derive out of it in the current situation. Traditionally Pakistan has depended on heavyweight allies, first the United States and now to a greater extent on China, to fill its economic, military and diplomatic coffers. Nevertheless, such a practice has usually led to a loss of independence of policy and external influence on national and international relations.

The experience of Pakistan following economic aid by the U.S shows that that dependency is a risky thing. Although this aid was beneficial on the short-term, there was a set of conditions that did not grant Pakistan the freedom of action towards achieving its individual strategic interests. The study indicates that the role of the U.S. economic aid

contributed to the negative effects of economic aid to the foreign policy decision-making by making it more responsive, reactive and externally controlled. On the other hand, military relations between Pakistan and the U.S. had some financial beneficial aspects but had kept Pakistan bound to American interest. Having built a closer relationship with China, there is a danger that Pakistan may repeat this dependency habit unless it follows through the strategic diversification of partners. CPEC and BRI are not without any merits but this new model of China-centered engagement may restrict the ability of the country to negotiate with other regional and global powers.

To prevent this, a foreign policy approach founded on bilateralism, multilateralism in diplomacy and diversification in economics is required. Pakistan can minimize its exposure and improve its international position by developing new partners to include the Gulf countries, Russia, Turkey, Central Asian countries and the ASEAN region. This strategy would also enable Pakistan to exercise independence in its strategic dimensions and interests and prevent itself from the cross-fires of great power politics.

Through the active presence in the SCO, Pakistan is likely to enhance its relations with the powers of the region such as China, Russia, and even Central Asia states, as well as India despite the bilateral tensions. The SCO has provided Pakistan a platform to take part in negotiations that include topics pertaining to security of borders and counter terrorism as well as stability in the region without being restricted in terms of bilateral agreements alone. It also puts Pakistan in a stakeholders' position in Eurasian connection, energy trade, and conflict resolutions. Likewise, the ECO - platform that revolves economically around cooperation between nations of South and Central Asia, the Middle East, and the Caucasus can provide Pakistan an opportunity to enhance the regional trade by all possible means, build infrastructure connections, and diversify energy corridors. These interactions are capable of lessening the economic seclusion and dependency on one donor country or a strategic partner in the case of Pakistan.

The excessive dependence on major powers may translate into lack of flexibility associated with the foreign policy of Pakistan because it risks being subjected to various conditions and geopolitical vicissitude. On the contrary, regional regimes facilitate group stability, common economic development and multilateral diplomacy, which are more appropriate to contain the manifold neighborhood dynamics in Pakistan. Substantially, the improved regionalization with the help of SCO, ECO, and other such groups makes it possible to have a more balanced and multipolar foreign conduct by Pakistan. It helps the nation to deal with domestic and international setbacks as a group and bolster economic self-sustenance as well as overcome time-bound strategic over-dependence on any single power in phases.

Pakistan has to change its way of thinking towards multidirectional foreign policy in the new dynamic world order moving out of traditional alliance, which is more towards the direction of economic diversification and proactive diplomacy. To do so, this strategy implies expanding the number of nations and regions to deal with including Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia but balancing relations concerning such powerful countries as the United States and China.

Multidirectional approach gives Pakistan an opportunity not to be over-reliant on any specific partner but to establish mutually constructive relationship with them depending on trade, investment, energy partnership, regional cooperation. As an example, Pakistan supports the establishment of energy and remittance trade with the Gulf nations and trade and technology with ASEAN and strengthen its economic ties with Central Asian countries by means of connectivity projects through CPEC and BRI.

Further, there is an urgent need to economically diversify Pakistan to create less exposure to outside economic shocks or a foreign policy based on aid. Pakistan needs foreign direct investment (FDI), export and growth of local industries, particularly in the agricultural, textile, minerals and IT sector rather than the dependence on heavy loans or conditional aid.

They are accompanied by active diplomacy. Pakistan needs to be a leader in regional peace building, conflict settlements and climate collaborations and enhance its international image through frequent participation in multilateral platforms like United Nations, SCO, OIC and ECO. Proactive diplomacy includes the agenda-setting - it is not the crisis response only, as well as the employment of the tools of soft power such as cultural diplomacy, educational exchange, and humanitarian operations.

Observing this fact, such a reoriented foreign policy framework will further improve the strategic autonomy of Pakistan and widen its access across the world and enable it to gain ground amid the great power confrontations without hampering national sovereignty. Pakistan is experiencing high economic growth, and its foreign policy can be more stable, balanced, and oriented to continued development with regional cooperation and global diversification.

Although the importance of such forums as the SCO and ECO is reflected in this study, the activity of Pakistan in these forums is intermittent and less utilized. The excessive strategic dependency on China may stall the same pattern that existed between Pakistan and the United States. Pakistan has also failed to take maximum advantage of the multilateral platforms that exist so as to counter global pressure and insecurity in the region despite the rhetorical promises of regional cooperation. Both economic diversification and multidirectional diplomacy have been the policy desiderata as opposed to a framework of action.

There has been a stark change towards strategic realism, where the ideological identity-based diplomacy especially in the Middle East is concerned. Nevertheless, the inability of the institutions to provide elaborate balancing policies, particularly between the archrivals such as Saudi Arabia and Iran or the U.S. and China, constrains the successfulness of such a change. The trend of policy is correct but the reformation in Foreign Service, economic planning and coordination of national security is lacking, this will keep the outlook on strategic realism rather unrealistic as opposed to functional.

Conclusion

The results of this study point at the direct influences of the U.S.-China rivalry, the interchange between the U.S. and India strategic alignment, and the triangle of China-Iran-Pakistan on the foreign policy and security arrangements of Pakistan. These alliances go beyond the region to include world actors who have considerable interests in South Asia. Although RSCT is useful in explaining regional interdependence, it still fails to comprehend the external strategic sources e.g. technology warfare, trade competition, and changes in global alliances. These are now the key determinants in influencing the regional behavior of Pakistan.

The indication at the end of the study is that the foreign policy of Pakistan is at a critical juncture. It is affected by external pressures of realignment as a result of shift of power in the world and internal constraints as result of challenges of security and governance. Although the language of multi-polarity, strategic balance and interest in engaging Asia through the region is apparent, the institutional platforms and dynamic

channels of putting them into practice are yet to be established. Pakistan has continued to be a passive subject as long as it fails to perform structural changes, minimize dependence and use regional diplomacy as the main method of success in the region where a strategic lead is the sole growth potential and merger provision.

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