

Associate Paper

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Pakistan's Security Outlook in the Global Power Shift

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Key Points

- Despite its many internal problems, Pakistan is an active member of the international community's security matrix.
- Its security leaders see it as a guardian of Islam, thus legitimating its involvement in many parts of the Muslim world.
- Whereas it previously had a strong relationship with the US, it feels it has been let down by Washington.
- Although it has, consequently, turned increasingly towards China, it still sees the need to maintain its relationship, albeit diminished, with the US.

Summary

As a middle income, developing country, and despite being overwhelmed by internal conflicts, political instability and a lack of governance, Pakistan has remained an active international actor in global politics. For its critics however, it is this prominent international role – especially during the long Cold War and the more recent War on Terror (WoT) – that may have undermined Pakistan's domestic stability, thereby upsetting its economic growth and the civil military balance in the country. For protagonists of the active foreign policy, on the other hand, Pakistan's international outlook and shrewd foreign policy is what allowed the country to foster alliance blocs with regional (China) and global (US) powers to survive in what it perceived as a hostile neighbourhood, with India to its East and Afghanistan its West, both countries with which Pakistan has border disputes.

Analysis

Pakistan is an example of a classic quagmire – a country torn between progress and failure, democracy and dictatorship, and supporting the Taliban and prosecuting the WoT at the same time. This inherent dichotomy is what makes it a unique and a “hard country” to govern. It is often frustratingly perceived by Western policy-makers as a “safe-haven” for terrorists and a “rogue state” that cannot be trusted.¹ The suspicion around Pakistan’s duplicity in the WoT could be a result of the country’s complicated geostrategic location, which has forced its security establishment to act in its own self-interest, even if that required supporting certain elements within the Taliban.

A product of colonial architecture, Pakistan is construed simultaneously as being part of South Asia, the Af-Pak construct and the Middle East – a dilemma that has prevented Pakistan from developing its own unique national identity but opened doors for deep involvement in multiple regions. Recently, with extensive Chinese investment, Pakistan has also become a major part of the greater Chinese Game in the region.² Moreover, with a population comprising over 70 per cent Sunni and 25 per cent Shia Muslims, Pakistan is involuntarily deeply imbedded in Middle East politics. Also critical is the fact that Pakistan as a nuclear power has long been involved in a rivalry with India over the Kashmir issue and simultaneously (allegedly) deeply involved in Afghanistan. This has created an on-going regional power struggle that eats up a major portion of defence spending. Hence, given Pakistan’s complex challenges, it has been cautiously in both its foreign and defence policy so as to ensure domestic stability.

In light, however, of the changing global power equation with the rise of China, a US tilt towards engagement with Iran in the Middle East, India’s growing international prominence, and most importantly for Pakistan, the withdrawal of Western forces from Afghanistan, the decades to come look critical for Pakistan’s foreign and defence policy posture. Pakistan is one of the few countries that share extraordinary ties with the US, China, Iran and the Arab world but uneasy relations with India and Afghanistan – a balance that it will have to maintain in order to avoid getting embroiled in proxy wars.

It is in the above context that this paper seeks to analyse Pakistan’s security outlook at a time of global power shifts. The paper is structured around two sections. The first part will flesh out in detail the ideological underpinnings of Pakistan’s security policy establishment and how it configures itself vis-à-vis regional and global players, and its tactical approach to achieving foreign policy objectives. The discussion in the first part will set the framework for the second part of the paper to critically analyse Pakistan’s foreign policy and defence posture looking at the new alliance blocs to assess the country’s tilt in decades to come. The paper will conclude with an analysis of Pakistan’s likely significance in the emerging global order.

¹ Declan Walsh, ‘Whose side is Pakistan’s ISI really on?’ *The Guardian*, 12 May 2011. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/may/12/isi-bin-laden-death-pakistan-alcqaida>

² Arif Rafiq, ‘How China and Pakistan are Beating India in the Great Game’, *The National Interest*, 12 June 2005. <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-china-pakistan-are-beating-india-the-new-great-game-13096>

Pakistan's Security Establishment: The Core Ideological Tenets

Pakistan's security policy orientation has largely been a product of its colonial roots, geostrategic location, global events (for instance, the Cold War and the WoT), the ideological inclinations of its elite and, to an extent, an exaggerated view of itself as a key player in global affairs. Hence, despite repeated military takeovers and ideological differences between successive governments, Pakistan's security policy has remained consistent. At the heart of the security establishment's policy framework are certain ideological underpinnings that steer the short- and long-term foreign and defence policy direction of the country.

The Guardian of Islamic Interests

Pakistan's security establishment has portrayed the country – by virtue of its 95 per cent Muslim population and a strong nuclear-armed military – as a guardian of Islamic interests³ all over the world. This allows it to play a greater role in Middle Eastern politics, whether in the Palestinian independence issue or the crisis in Yemen. Arguably, the foundations of Pakistan's most successful and striking diplomatic relationship is its extraordinary personal ties with the House of Saud, the rulers of the Emirates, the Iranian supreme leadership and the Turkish Prime Minister – a divergent group hotly contesting for power in the Middle East. These close relations across the political divides of the Middle East have allowed Pakistan to survive through severe economic sanctions from the West, and pursue backdoor diplomacy for its national interest. In return Pakistan has offered its services to Middle Eastern countries to ensure their security and defence needs.

However, beneath the exceptional ties with key Middle East powers, the Government of Pakistan is criticised by its own people for propagating itself as a “fortress of Islam” and letting Saudi Arabia and Iran use Pakistan as a proxy to extend their religious and political ideology through the funding of *madrasahs* (religious schools).⁴ This has resulted in serious sectarian conflicts between Sunni and Shia communities in Pakistan over the past two decades. Despite this, the notion and identity of being the “Islamic Army” runs strong in the mind-set of Pakistan's security establishment, which aims to secure a position of power and leverage in regional affairs and more widely.

A Winner of the Cold War and a Responsible Global Player

Despite the strong Islamic orientation of the country, Pakistan's security establishment is mostly secular in nature,⁵ and has historically aligned with the West in its wars against enemies such as the Soviet Union or ideologies like global terrorism. At the core of the Pakistani security establishment's view of itself is the idea that it was through Pakistan's sacrifices and efforts that the West, in particular America, was able to defeat the Soviet

³ Christine C. Fair, 'Is Pakistan's Army as Islamist as we think', *Foreign Policy*, 15 September 2011. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/09/15/is-pakistans-army-as-islamist-as-we-think/>

⁴ Mateen Haider, 'ME countries providing funds to religious seminaries', *The Dawn*, 30 January 2015. <http://www.dawn.com/news/1160458>

⁵ Christine C. Fair, 'Is Pakistan's Army as Islamist as we think', *Foreign Policy*, 15 September 2011. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/09/15/is-pakistans-army-as-islamist-as-we-think/>

Union ending the Cold War.⁶ Hence, Pakistan celebrated the fall of the Berlin Wall as a product of its efforts. At the same time, however, there runs a strong sentiment within the Pakistani security establishment of being “abandoned” by the West in the post-Cold War period, leaving the country in total chaos to deal alone with a war-torn Afghanistan on its border. This will be discussed in more detail in the second part of this Paper.

The product of its (sometimes exaggerated) role in the Cold War has been that Pakistan’s security establishment has come to view the country as a responsible global player that can provide solutions to many international problems. They offer Pakistan’s provision of some of the largest numbers of troops for UN peacekeeping missions and the fact that is one of the countries with a relatively strong lobby in the United Nations as proof of its attempts to remain relevant in global politics. The Pakistani security establishment also credits itself for helping build modern South East Asia and the United Arab Emirates by providing pivotal help to South Korea, Malaysia and Middle Eastern countries in developing their economies.

The Unreliable America and Dependable China

The phrase, ‘It’s bad to be enemies of the US, worse to be its friend’, lies at the crux of the Pakistani security establishment’s perspective of the US, after decades of interaction.⁷ This notion developed after two events: the perception of US failure to support Pakistan during the Indo-Pak War of 1971 and its abrupt withdrawal from the Af-Pak region at the end of the Cold War. In 1990, as Pakistan struggled to recover from the end of the Cold War in the region, the distrust was enhanced by severe economic and military sanctions imposed on Pakistan over its nuclear enrichment program under the Pressler Amendment (1985). The distrust intensified further during the decade of the WoT with secret US campaigns inside Pakistan and America’s “do more” rhetoric pushing Pakistan to pursue locally unpopular policies – for instance the operation in North Waziristan.

While relations with the US remained turbulent, Pakistan’s interaction with China on the other hand has only seen an upward trajectory. Considered an “all weather friend” by the Pakistani security establishment, China has backed Pakistan in turbulent times with major arms sales, nuclear technology, and economic assistance. With the recent US\$50 billion investment towards stabilising Pakistan’s economy, there is no other country that has won the hearts and minds of both the people and leadership of Pakistan quite like China has.⁸ Moreover, given China’s lack of concern about Pakistan’s internal affairs or its human rights violations, the security establishment in Islamabad finds itself more comfortable doing business with Beijing. China is viewed by Pakistan as everything that the US is not – a stable partner and its trump card in the UN, especially when it comes to the regional power equation with India.

⁶ Declan Walsh, ‘Whose side is Pakistan’s ISI really on?’, *The Guardian*, 12 May 2011. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/may/12/isi-bin-laden-death-pakistan-alcqaida>

⁷ Seth McLaughlin, ‘Pakistan: Marriage of convenience Or is US Sleeping with an Enemy’, *The Diplomat*, 31 May 2011. http://washdiplomat.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=7864:pakistan-marriage-of-convenience-or-is-us-sleeping-with-an-enemy&catid=1474:june-2011&Itemid=477

⁸ Mateen Haider, ‘Chinese President to Visit Pakistan’, *The Dawn*, 16 April 2015. <http://www.dawn.com/news/1176302>

The reason why Pakistan's relations with the US have been tricky is because their transactionary nature usually pivoted around global wars instead of a long-term strategic partnership. The same has not been the case with China, which is regionally situated and has a long term interest in maintaining stable relations with Pakistan. While Pakistan and the US share exceptionally close ties on the surface because of a decades old partnership in wars, mutual suspicion runs deep within the policy communities of both countries.

The belief that the impulsive actions of the US do more damage than good drives Pakistan's cautionary security policy to insulate and minimise the damage. In a way, Pakistan sees itself as a rational, restraining voice whispering constantly in the ear of the US foreign policy establishment to take the right steps forward in a region and war that remains largely unknown to it. It may well be for this reason that while Pakistan supported the US WoT, it cautiously ensured that Taliban leadership survived so that when the war ended the Americans would have a local tribal leadership with whom to negotiate a political settlement.⁹ On the American side, the notion that Pakistan has been playing a 'double game' in the WoT makes it always look for back-up options on the table. The complicated interdependence between the US and Pakistan has created a love-hate relationship frequently labelled as a 'bad marriage' by commentators.¹⁰

Despite Pakistan's long-standing ties with both the United States and China, there is a stark difference in how it perceives and engages with them. Relations with the US both at the policy and public levels are considered necessary despite being viewed with suspicion and pessimism by the Pakistani security establishment. Relations with China, on the other hand, are stable, and viewed with sheer optimism with an underlying understanding that this is a long term strategic partnership.

Countering India and Ensuring a Friendly Afghanistan

Given Pakistan's border disputes with both India and Afghanistan since independence in 1947, it has perceived the two countries and any alliance between them as a direct security threat to itself. Tensions with India escalated immediately after Independence due to the Kashmir issue and both countries have since fought three wars. On the other hand, Pakistan's dispute with Afghanistan over the situation of the Durand line that forms their common border, while restricted to diplomatic engagements, will not permit Islamabad to allow a close co-operation between Afghanistan and India. Pakistan's fear of being stranded between the two hostile neighbours – often considered by political pundits as misplaced and overblown – is what drives Pakistan's security policy in the neighbourhood.¹¹

Since the Kashmir issue remains unresolved, that there is an on-going arms build-up, that there are regular border skirmishes on the Indo-Pakistani border and there is an increasing nuclearisation of the region, the perceived security threat posed by India remains central to

⁹ The Staff Report, 'Is Pakistan backing Taliban', *al Jazeera*, 2nd Feb 2012.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/insidestory/2012/02/2012227163094221.html>

¹⁰ Michael O'Hanlon. 'US-Pakistan: Bad Marriage, No Divorce', *Politico*, 15 November 2011. http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0511/54091_Page2.html

¹¹ Aziz Hakimi, 'Af-Pak: What Strategic Depth?', *Open Security*, 4th Feb 2010. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/aziz-hakimi/af-pak-what-strategic-depth>

Pakistan's security policy. While Pakistan started all three major wars with India, New Delhi's uncompromising stance on the Kashmir issue and martial language is viewed by the Pakistani security establishment as a major source of tensions between the two countries.¹² Given the Mumbai attacks of 2008 and Pakistan's support of separatist elements in Kashmir, India's attitude may well be justified.

At the same time, situated between India on the East and Afghanistan on the West, Pakistan's security policy towards Afghanistan has revolved around the notion of "strategic depth", which amounts to having a pro-Pakistan government in Afghanistan that can provide Pakistan with a degree of security on its Western front.¹³ Pakistan has historically viewed Afghanistan as being closer to India than itself, both during the Karzai Government in Kabul and before the Soviet invasion in the 1980s. Hence, supporting the Taliban's consolidation of power in Afghanistan in the aftermath of the Cold War was part of Pakistan's ambitious plan to ensure strategic control over Afghanistan and keep it free from Indian influence.¹⁴ To this day, Pakistan's security establishment jealously resists Indian presence in Afghanistan, as is obvious through Pakistan's reluctance to let India be a party to an end game in Afghanistan.

The second part of this paper, however, will examine Pakistan's perceptions of the region's shifting priorities and the formation of new alliances in the emerging global order to determine its evolving relationship with Kabul on the one hand and with Beijing, New Delhi and Washington on the other.

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¹² Hussain Nadim, 'Blaming India where it deserves', *Express Tribune*, 30 May 2015.

<http://tribune.com.pk/story/894371/blaming-india-where-it-is-due/>

¹³ Anand Arni & Abhimanyu Todon, 'The Genesis of Pakistan's Strategic Depth in Afghanistan', *Fair Observer*, 2nd June 2014. http://www.fairobserver.com/region/central_south_asia/the-genesis-of-pakistans-strategic-depth-in-afghanistan-88910/

¹⁴ Bruce Riedel, 'Pakistan, Taliban and the Afghan Quagmire', *Brookings Institute*, 24th August 2013. <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2013/08/26-pakistan-influence-over-afghan-taliban-riedel>

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