

# STRATEGIC AUTONOMY OR ISOLATION: AN ANALYSIS OF MAJOR DYNAMICS OF PAKISTAN'S FOREIGN POLICY

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## **Abstract**

*The foreign policy of Pakistan as a part of South Asian milieu and one of the significant Muslim states always remained characterized by the various regional and global restraints which not only made it vulnerable to the external pressures but also substantially affected its strategic choices. Currently, Pakistan is facing multiple internal and external constraints ranging from its domestic economic problems to continuing with CPEC as a real game-changer strategy at the operational level while not upsetting the US. The prime focus of this study is to have an insight into diplomatic coercion faced by Pakistan and its consequences on her foreign policy decisions. As Indian-centric approach throughout history left limited options for policy-makers. This research examines why Pakistan is being challenged about strategic choices in response to vigorous Indian attempts to isolating her in the international arena. This analytical and descriptive research would possibly recommend the recent foreign policy measures by Pakistan regarding its external dynamics of politics.*

**Keywords:** Pakistan, Foreign Policy, Strategic, Isolation, Autonomy.

## **Introduction**

**I**n the recent past, there were mainly four foreign policy objectives of Pakistan with respect to strategic vision in regional and global scenarios. First, to safeguard the security of the country while ensuring the protection of national interests of Pakistan. The political and military strategy would be incorporated to eliminate violence, extremism and intolerance from Pakistani society and a policy of non-interference in the matters of other states would be followed. Second, important objectives were outlined as the economic and sustainable development of Pakistan. Third, stemming from the previous two core objectives, it was to strive for a peaceful external environment in the neighborhood to proceed vigorously for core national interests. Forth, to focus on a balancing approach through the incorporation of geostrategic, geoeconomics, and geopolitics approaches to transform Pakistan's geographical position from a liability to an asset while becoming an active part of transport, trade and energy corridors towards China, Central Asia, and West Asia.

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The strategic vision of policymakers since 2014 onwards provides Pakistan's intentions to strengthen the ways to advance a strategic partnership with China by focusing on measures to operationalize the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Furthermore, it was pronounced that Pakistan was no more interested to apply the flawed ideas like 'Strategic Depth' in Afghanistan while replacing it by 'Reaching out Afghanistan', which was primarily comprised of the policy of 'mutual respect of sovereignty and territorial integrity' and with no particular favorite picks. Pakistan also acknowledged that desirable peace cannot be achieved without improving bilateral ties between both states through cooperation. Pakistan, while recognizing the US as a key source of trade, investment, counterterrorism measures and regional stability stressed on the reorientation of Pakistan-US mutual interests. The strategic vision also focused to revive the approach of global and regional cooperation by improving its connections with Muslim countries especially Saudi Arab, Turkey and Iran including regional organizations, such as SAARC, OIC, and ECO while on global perspective potential ties with the EU are focused.<sup>1</sup>

With the advent of the PTI government in August 2018, Prime Minister (PM) Imran Khan indicated no major changes in foreign policy considerations. In his inaugural speech, making peace with the neighbors was the highlight as it remained the laudable goal of Pakistan's foreign policy throughout the years. He provided foreign policy priorities by enlisting balanced and strengthened relationships with China focusing on CPEC, Afghanistan, the US, Saudi Arab, Iran, and India<sup>2</sup>. Keeping in view the foreign policy since August 2018, it seems that there is much continuity in foreign affairs as compared to the previous government. Pakistan's foreign policy remained in disarray under the previous PML(N) government as, during its first four years in power, no Foreign Minister was appointed and PM Sharif retained the respective portfolio while managing foreign affairs through his Adviser, Sartaj Aziz. Later in 2017, Khawaja Asif was appointed as Foreign Minister under PM Shahid Khaqan Abbasi.

Pakistan's geographic locale in South Asia primarily characterized by its traditional animosity with India, while dealing with several other shadow enemies. Its ideological connections based on religion with the Muslim world and its foreign policy compulsions largely stemming from its unsteady relationship with the US and economic shortcomings are making her foreign policy choices quiet complex and contrasting. Moreover, PM Imran Khan's decision of not visiting Malaysia and staying out of the Kuala Lumpur Summit held from 18-21 December 2019, not only indicated diplomatic constraints on foreign policy of Pakistan but also provided insights of the emerging divide in the Muslim world. Although Pakistan made an effort to maintain neutrality between Saudi Arab and an emerging Muslim bloc comprising Turkey, Malaysia, Iran and Qatar, there is another perspective of identifying this as 'Diplomatic Subservience' which limits Pakistan's ability to freely join alliances and blocs as per its strategic interests.<sup>3</sup>

This study, therefore, aims to proceed with research objectives, i.e., to evaluate external and internal factors of Pakistan's foreign policies leading towards diplomatic constraints on her strategic choices; to assess the Indian exertions of isolating Pakistan

regionally and globally; and to analyze the strategy of Pakistan in response to the emerging strategic challenges. This research intends to answer certain questions: Why the foreign policy choices of Pakistan are being affected by strategic isolation and diplomatic coercion in the region? Why an effective strategy from Pakistan's side is conditioned to countervail the attempts of strategic isolation by India? How Pakistan is dealing with diplomatic constraints especially by external actors? This study is primarily based on qualitative research. The historical, descriptive and analytical approaches have also been used to accomplish this study. Secondary sources are used to elucidate the underlying assumption of this research.

## **Major Dynamics of Pakistan's Foreign Policy**

### **Indian Factor**

India unlike Pakistan followed a nonalignment approach to establish its foreign policy paradigm; however, it enjoyed its treaty of friendship with the Soviet Union and got diplomatic and economic support without officially joining any alliance or communist bloc for years. This provided India enough opportunities to stay free of diplomatic constraints to formulate its foreign policy largely based on its changing needs and to enlarge its strategic choices. Since independence, Pakistan and India both viewed each other as traditional rivals and most often their policies remained hostage to the notion of relative power and position in the South Asian region. In wake of changing world order as a result of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, India calculated its policy options for advocating a multi-polar world and striving for a strategic partnership with powerful states like the US. Indian foreign policy vision was extended to its desirable global role from its previous assertion of regional ascendancy where another direct war with Pakistan was not at all an option due to two reasons. Firstly, Indian policymakers discarded the notion of viewing Pakistan as a competitor and a direct threat as its inability to match Indian economic growth and strategic relevance in the multi-polar world order. Secondly, due to Pakistan's defensive power through the second-strike capability since 1998, any direct war or military conflict is not in favor of Indian global hegemonic designs. This led Indian policymakers to incorporate a major shift in their policy orientation towards Pakistan where isolating Pakistan, regionally and globally, became an apparent theme to restrain Pakistan's choices to be a key part of any potential strategic planning contrasting to Indian interests.

In the post-Kargil scenario (1999), India extensively propagated against Pakistan for exporting terrorism to other countries. In the backdrop of Indian efforts to strategically isolate Pakistan, growing US support to Indian stance also became one of the key factors of the successful execution of this policy. Various studies explicated that after the end of the Cold War, there was a significant shift in US strategic thought with a special focus on Asia while starting to view India as a natural partner. However, due to the irresistible strategic relevance of Pakistan in South Asia, US President Bill Clinton after paying a five-day visit to India while formally putting an end to its 'Even Handed Policy' was bound to make a five-hour stopover in Pakistan<sup>4</sup>. Despite the significant shift in Indian foreign policy strategy and measures towards Pakistan, its intent and

perceptive view of Pakistan's strategic planning are not changed yet. Indian foreign policy observers believe that Pakistan's foreign policy measures are inherently antipathy of India due to the influence of Islamist factors irrespective of civilian government or military regimes in power and primarily revolve around her attempts of securing strategic parity with India. The Indian-centric policy of Pakistan led to sustaining its interests to establish a pro-Pakistan regime in Afghanistan and entering into alliances with external powers, such as the US and China.<sup>5</sup> India views its relationship with Pakistan as a negative relationship where the likely consequences of reduced security and economic aid from the US to Pakistan are also characterized by the fallout for India as it is gradually enhancing Pakistan's strategic and economic dependence on China, which is not inclined to advance its relations with Pakistan on US model of 'Marriage of Convenience.'

Indian strategic experts were stressing the 'Cold Start Doctrine'<sup>6</sup> since 2001 to search options to secure a response from Pakistan regarding Indian reservations for cross-border terrorism, however, this strategy was discontinued due to the high risk involved.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, in response to terrorist attacks especially in Mumbai (2008), India largely pursued deterrence by denial strategy.<sup>8</sup> Shivshankar Menon, who served as Foreign Secretary of India from 2006-2009, expounded that choice of restraint in response to Mumbai attacks was based on strategic calculations that more was to be gained by not attacking Pakistan rather than attacking it. The decision of not going for any overt and covert action by India was due to the likely response of Pakistan and a potential escalation that had not been viewed in favor of India due to a lack of supportive response from the international community by merely looking it as traditional India-Pakistan blame game. According to Shivshankar Menon, India primarily focused on gradually isolating Pakistan by getting exceptional support from the international community especially from Saudi Arab, Gulf Countries, and China for her restrained reaction and obtained counterterrorism cooperation against *Lashkar-e-Tayyaba* (LeT).<sup>9</sup> Since 2004, India strategists while learning from their shortcomings of Operation Parakram, ranging from lack of definite objectives, absence of coordination for a quick mobilization to delay in decision-making which paved grounds for counter mobilization of Pakistani forces and international (specifically the US) mediation, worked on improving their options of Cold Start Doctrine.<sup>10</sup>

Pakistan-India bilateral relations are in deadlock since January 2, 2016, due to a terrorist attack in Pathankot by suspected militant group *Jaish-e-Mohammad* (JeM). In the same year, on September 18, another attack was reported on India military headquarters, Uri in Indian occupied Kashmir. Subsequently, while blaming Pakistan, Indian claimed to carry out surgical strikes inside Pakistani part of Kashmir, however, Pakistan described it as an incident of cross-border firing.<sup>11</sup> The animosity between the two traditional rivals was much intensified after the deadliest suicide attack on Indian paramilitary convoy moving on Srinagar-Jammu national highway in Pulwama district on February 14, 2019, which further escalated the tension. Indian PM Narendra Modi and Home Minister Rajnath Singh immediately responded to the Pulwama attack by warning Pakistan to pay a heavy price without probing any investigation of the incident. Arun Jaitly, the Indian Federal Minister, while claiming about incontrovertible evidence

against Pakistan for its alleged involvement in terrorist attacks, announced to revoke the 'Most Favored Nation' status which was granted to Pakistan in 1996. He also provided that "all diplomatic measures would be taken to isolate Pakistan".<sup>12</sup> Indian claims regarding Pakistan's alleged connections with Pulwama attack, subsequently, translated into so-called Indian airstrikes in Balakot on February 26, 2019. Indian response to Pulwama attack especially the public proclamation of alleged surgical strikes reflected a key shift in her strategic orientations and response towards Pakistan.

- First, it incorporated diplomatic maneuvering which was a time-consuming stratagem and difficult to get hold for the pressing outcomes due to Pakistan's extensive efforts to eliminate terrorism as a non-NATO ally of the US. In line with its diplomatic strategy, another Indian tactic was also devised for immediate upshot by setting up a precedent of exhibiting a military response to the assumed cross-border terrorism. The comparative advantage of India over Pakistan was to build and sustain international pressure on Pakistan.
- Second, this is also viewed as Indian strategic planning to appraise the nature of deterrence between the two countries and also a way to escalate Indian dominance over Pakistan. Indian strategists are more in favor of conventional escalation with a certain level of their confidence about Pakistan for not using the nuclear option as a counter-response.
- Third is the enhanced influence of the Indian strategic community where many are largely suspicious regarding Pakistan's probability of retaliation through nuclear option by calling it a nuclear bluff. The rationale behind the respective strategy is that most Indian security analysts believe that Pakistan's vulnerabilities are far more than India which will make it unaffordable for her to beat the Indian approach of defensive offense.<sup>13</sup>

Although, for the time being, Pakistan deescalated the military crisis which erupted in February 2019 between the two countries by returning captured Indian pilot in March 2019 as a peace gesture while putting pressure on India for the reciprocal measures for restoring peace in the region. The Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) greatly contributed to counter Indian narrative based on aggression and war hysteria. But Pakistan remained less successful to secure diplomatic support despite its vigorous efforts to contain militancy and terrorism on its soil. The political elite and its diplomatic officials needed to develop a network of international support through active diplomacy. Pakistani decisionmakers largely remained focused on the peripheral and conventional threats while overlooking the soft power of India as its economic and cultural influences became key dynamics of her foreign policy approach of isolating Pakistan. There is dire need to understand by the foreign policymakers in Pakistan that diplomatic, economic and cultural expansion of India cannot be dealt with by only enhancing geostrategic and geopolitical domains as a measurement of state power involves various intangible factors. The 2008-terrorist attacks in Mumbai commenced the process of diplomatic isolation of Pakistan as except China other four permanent

members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) agreed to vote to ban *Jamaat-ud-Dawa* (JuD). Although, in March 2019, China has come forward to rescue Pakistan by blocking such kind of move in the UNSC, however, due to economic distress caused by the international reactions along with the global recession led to a decline in the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) to Pakistan. It significantly dropped from \$5.3 billion in 2008 to \$ 851 million in 2015. This also led to depreciate the value of Pakistani currency from 62 rupees against 1 US dollar in 2008 to 156 rupees in 2019.<sup>14</sup>

## Role of the US and Saudi Arabia

Pakistan's bilateral relations or strategic convergence with the US always remained uncertain and subjected to diplomatic constraints largely stemming from US strategic thought where long-term mutual interests had never been a policy priority. President Donald Trump in his address on August 2, 2017, with a strong tone for Pakistan, continued with 'Do More' while demanding measures to eliminate networks of terrorist groups if interested to sustain her partnership with the US. However, President Trump is keenly interested in the Afghan peace process for complete pull out of US troops from the region ahead of his electoral campaign for the second tenure. Despite his various aggressive proclamations of 'Do More', Pakistan's relevance as a facilitator for the peace process in Afghanistan especially negotiations with the Taliban is apparent. It is noted that Trump's claims of being tough on Pakistan would not be incorporated until US troops sustain in Afghanistan.<sup>15</sup> The US like India views its relationship with Pakistan as negative as abandoning Pakistan which will bring severe consequences for its strategic goals in the Asian region. It can further tense regarding Chinese influence on Pakistan which is not acceptable for both the US and India.

In the backdrop of negotiations for the potential peace agreement between the US and the Taliban, Pakistan was in a position to take leverage to mitigate diplomatic constraints. For instance, Pakistan's name in the grey list of Financial Action Task Force (FATF) was more a political matter rather than its structural deficiency to diminish terror financing.<sup>16</sup> It is not unwarranted to view Pakistan's name in the FATF grey list within the context of ups and downs of Pakistan-US relations and its traditional rivalry with India. Furthermore, India as Co-Chair of the joint group of FATF and Asia Pacific Group (APG) tabled a resolution against Pakistan in June 2019 to put her in the blacklist of FATF, however, China, Turkey, and Malaysia opposed the move.<sup>17</sup> This is evident from the fact that thinking of a strategic partnership or convergence-based relationship with the US would be a mere illusion. Pakistan needs to calculate its strategic options on ground realities. To avoid potential blacklisting from FATF or to evade more strict measures by the IMF, which can lead towards further isolation of Pakistan, policymakers need a cautionary but a bargain-based policy with the US. However, for long-term sustainability, Pakistan needs to work on other options as well.

Saudi Arabia has always remained very close to Pakistan due to the two factors. First is the religious association between the two countries which significantly enhanced from the Zia regime in Pakistan. Secondly, Saudi Arabia is also a close associate of the US. Apart from Saudi Arabia as a job market for almost 1.9 million Pakistanis, it always

rescued Pakistan in the time of economic crisis. However, the relations between the two countries were little affected when Pakistan did not send its troops in the war in Yemen (2015). Although the later developments, such as Pakistan's participation in the North Thunder exercises conducted in the northern part of Saudi Arabia (2016) and appointment of former Pakistan's Military Chief, General Raheel Sharif, as Commander of Islamic Military Alliance indicated the normalization between the two states. PM Imran Khan followed the policy of Saudi Arabia First.<sup>18</sup> This privilege to Saudi Arabia is causing little diplomatic constraints on Pakistan as its decisions for not attending the Kuala Lumpur conference due to Saudi Arabia's reservations can drift away Pakistan from Turkey and Malaysia which seem credible support in the region as well as on international forums like FATF. Pakistan's policymakers needed to assess their policies on rational grounds to maintain relations with the US and Saudi Arabia are crucial for Pakistan's economic stability. However, to counter the international isolation, maintaining strategic autonomy and long-term economic sustainability, there is a need to diminish diplomatic constraints as potential strategic, economic, and regional partners for Pakistan are China, Russia, Turkey, and Malaysia.

### **Policy Option towards Afghanistan**

The notion of strategic depth was evolved in the late 1980s in the backdrop of withdrawal of Soviet forces, however, declining US interests in the region paved way for a proxy war in Afghanistan. The Indian-centric policy of Pakistan led to institutionalizing its ideological guardianship by viewing strategic space in Afghanistan vital to its regional strategy by making its western front as a second defense line against India. It has been noted that this policy though remained effective for maintaining strategic balance with India but in the long run, the fallouts emerged extensively for Pakistan making it a costly strategy. Pakistan's support for a friendly regime in Afghanistan and indigenous movement in Indian occupied Kashmir brought several challenges including militancy, terrorist attacks, the proliferation of drug networks, and an unchecked influx of refugees to Pakistan.<sup>19</sup> It brought severe domestic consequences ranging from terrorist attacks, worsened law and order situation and deteriorating socio-economic conditions.

The 'Reaching Out' policy of Pakistan should be exclusively focused on economic and trade-based measures between the two countries as this economic strategy can effectively counter the increasing Indian influence on Afghanistan. However, this policy requires enhanced interaction between civilian stakeholders of both countries to expand cultural and educational cooperation rather than confining Afghan policy as a matter of security. The strategic persuasion by Pakistan towards Afghanistan unnecessarily involves other regional and global actors into this relationship which primarily restrain the policies of both states to nurture their bilateral relations through trust-building and mutual consensus. To curtail the diplomatic constraints on its policy towards Afghanistan, Pakistan needs to initiate joint economic ventures with Afghanistan to connect South Asia with the Central Asian region and preferential trade and transit agreements. Pakistan also needs to furnish its economic

ties with Afghanistan to deal with its potential energy security rivalry in Central Asia with India.

It is evident from the fact that whosoever comes into power in Afghanistan will maintain relations with neighboring countries. However, Pakistani decision-makers should work on the confirmation of assured steps from the Afghan government for not letting her land used against Pakistan. An effective implementation of the peace agreement between the Taliban and the US will strengthen Pakistan's longstanding relevance with peace and stability in the South Asian region. Pakistan needs vigorous efforts through diplomacy to realize Afghan leadership about the unparalleled possibilities and opportunities of trade and transit for Afghanistan which Pakistan can foster. India's influence can only be countered by developing close economic interdependence of Afghanistan on Pakistan. In this regard, there is a need to carefully observe the policies and statements of Afghan leadership. Pakistan needs to promote confidence-building measures for developing cordial relations with Afghanistan while taking Afghan leadership in confidence and enhancing its stakes in a definite peace agreement to diminish the impression that Pakistan is still interested to carry out its previous strategic policies in Afghanistan.

## **Recommendations and Conclusion**

It is epitomized that CPEC and leading development projects between Pakistan and China are potentially able to stun the Indian strategic planning for naval hegemony in the Indian Ocean. This scenario is ranging from making Pakistan a potential labour market by generating opportunities for jobs and industrial development to building infrastructure and trade routes for the transportation of goods and energy resources. However, Pakistan needs to straighten up things at home because CPEC could lose its momentum domestically as there is no extensive debate at legislative forums to lead the project to the operational level. The completion of CPEC projects will take approximately 15-20 years which makes it imperative for Pakistan to extend the plans uninterrupted because delay and occasional hampering for multiple reasons are paving grounds for uncertainties.

Furthermore, delay in the operationalization of CPEC projects is limiting Pakistan's economic and strategic options whereas Indian efforts of internationally isolating Pakistan are in full swing. The outcomes of Indian efforts are quite conspicuous and Pakistani policymakers need to rationally review their 'Pro-American' and 'Saudi First' policies. In the wake of emergent tension between the US and Iran due to the assassination of Iranian General, Qasem Soleimani, Pakistan should adopt a cautionary approach by avoiding any possibility of siding with any party to the conflict. Pakistan's decision making must be on rational grounds by evaluating each of its options with reference to its potential cost in the long run while keeping in mind the unintended consequences of the 1979-Afghan war and the war on terrorism in post-9/11. The strategic partnership with China is also significant to counter Indian attempts of isolating Pakistan. The rationale behind is that CPEC is not just about Pakistan and China as in the case of development of Gwadar Port, it will include various regions, such

as the Persian Gulf, Central Asia, UAE, and East Africa, etc., while stretching almost 70 states which can provide potentially more international partners to Pakistan by enhancing economic interdependence.

Keeping in view the history of Indo-Soviet relations and Pakistan's association with capitalist bloc during the cold war period, Russia largely remained on the Indian side in regional conflicts. However, in recent years, some of the prospects of cooperation emerged between Moscow and Islamabad with regard to the new defense market and strategic interests in Afghanistan. These potential areas of mutual collaboration between the two states are not yet enough strong to outshine Russian diplomatic support to India. However, it is a matter of fact that India-Russia bilateral relations are lacking the warmth which was previously the core of their association. In the backdrop of growing US-India strategic partnership and US sanctions on Russia over its policy in Ukraine, search for new energy markets are important for Russia like Pakistan as a potential South Asian partner. In February 2019, Russians announced a potential investment of 14 billion in the energy sector of Pakistan.

The prospects of cooperation between Pakistan and Russia were elaborated by their negotiations in March 2019 for the potential involvement of Russia in CPEC and increasing trade as part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).<sup>20</sup> It has also been noted that the next potential rivalry between Pakistan and India apart from their traditional animosity in South Asia will be developed on energy security within the context of their geopolitics in the Central Asian Region.<sup>21</sup> However, due to the geographical immediacy to the respective region and sharing similarity of cultural patterns, Russia, China, Turkey and Iran seem comparatively influential players and Pakistan needs to strengthen its ties with these states.

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