



Vol. 4 No. 3 (Mar) (2026)

Transformation And Strategic Shift In Pakistan–United States Relations: Implications For Public Policy And Governance

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ABSTRACT

Pakistan–United States relations have moved through repeated cycles of security alignment, disagreement and selective re-engagement. This article analyses the transformation of the relationship from Cold War military alliances to a more limited, issue-based partnership after the United States withdrew from Afghanistan in 2021. Drawing on its historical and conceptual discussion, the study employs qualitative documentary analysis and a comparative reading of policy periods. Constructivism explains how perceptions of loyalty, sovereignty and threat shape the relationship; neoclassical realism shows how regional power shifts and domestic constraints influence policy choices. The analysis finds that diverging threat perceptions, the legacy of counterterrorism, U.S.–India cooperation, Pakistan–China ties, and domestic economic pressures complicate strategic alignment. At the same time, counterterrorism coordination, trade, energy, climate adaptation, education and digital governance offer practical channels for cooperation. The article argues that neither an unrestricted alliance nor a complete diplomatic rupture is likely to meet both countries' interests. A durable relationship requires realistic expectations, civilian-led economic engagement, clear security boundaries and continuous diplomatic dialogue.

Keywords: Pakistan–US Relations; Strategic Realignment; Afghanistan; Counterterrorism; Geo-Economics; Constructivism; Neoclassical Realism

Introduction

The relationship between Pakistan and the United States has remained one of the most significant, complex, and frequently changing bilateral relationships in South Asian international politics. Since Pakistan's independence in 1947, relations between the two countries have experienced periods of strategic partnership, military cooperation, diplomatic tension, and mutual distrust. These changes have largely resulted from shifting geopolitical circumstances, regional security challenges, competing national interests, and transformations in the international political system. Both countries have maintained cooperation when their strategic objectives converged, particularly during the Cold War, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, and the United States-led War on Terror after September 11, 2001. However, their partnership has also been characterized by disagreements concerning India, nuclear proliferation, Afghanistan, counterterrorism policies, territorial sovereignty, and regional power politics (Cohen, 2004; Haqqani,



Vol. 4 No. 3 (Mar) (2026)

2005; Markey, 2013).

During the Cold War, Pakistan developed close strategic relations with the United States primarily to strengthen its national security and counterbalance India's regional influence. Pakistan joined the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954 and the Baghdad Pact in 1955, which subsequently developed into the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO). These arrangements provided Pakistan with access to military equipment, economic assistance, diplomatic support, and professional training for its armed forces. From Washington's perspective, Pakistan represented an important partner in its broader strategy of containing Soviet influence across Asia and the Middle East. However, the two countries approached the partnership from different strategic perspectives. While Pakistan prioritized its security competition with India, the United States concentrated on containing communism and preserving its wider geopolitical interests. These differences created expectations that were not always fulfilled and contributed to the development of recurring tensions in bilateral relations (Cohen, 2004; Kux, 2001).

The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in December 1979 brought another significant transformation in Pakistan–United States relations. Pakistan became a frontline state in the international effort to oppose Soviet expansion, while the United States provided substantial military and financial assistance to support Afghan resistance groups through Pakistan. This cooperation strengthened Pakistan's strategic importance and enhanced intelligence and military collaboration between the two countries. Nevertheless, the Afghan conflict also produced long-term consequences, including the expansion of militant networks, refugee movements, regional instability, and increased militarization along the Pakistan–Afghanistan border. Following the Soviet withdrawal and the conclusion of the Cold War, relations deteriorated as American strategic priorities changed. The implementation of nuclear-related sanctions under the Pressler Amendment in 1990 reinforced Pakistan's perception that the United States maintained its relationship primarily when Pakistan served immediate American strategic interests (Rashid, 2000; Kux, 2001).

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, created another major turning point in bilateral relations. Pakistan became a central partner in American counterterrorism operations and military intervention in Afghanistan. Under President Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan provided logistical assistance, intelligence cooperation, and operational support to the United States. In return, Pakistan received significant security assistance, economic support, and renewed diplomatic recognition. However, the partnership faced serious difficulties because of differences over the Afghan Taliban, militant sanctuaries, drone operations, and Pakistan's security calculations regarding India. American officials repeatedly expressed concerns about militant groups operating from Pakistani territory, while Pakistani authorities emphasized the enormous human, economic, and political costs of participating in the War on Terror. Consequently, cooperation frequently existed alongside deep institutional mistrust and public criticism (Fair, 2014; Markey, 2013).

Relations became particularly strained during the period from 2011 to 2020. The American operation against Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad in May 2011 raised serious questions about Pakistani sovereignty, intelligence cooperation, and mutual confidence. Similarly, disagreements over American drone strikes, counterterrorism strategies, and the future political settlement in Afghanistan complicated diplomatic and military engagement. Washington increasingly strengthened its strategic partnership with India, while Pakistan expanded economic and defense cooperation with China. The development of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), particularly after 2015,



Vol. 4 No. 3 (Mar) (2026)

further highlighted Pakistan's growing economic and strategic relationship with Beijing. These developments reflected a changing regional order in which the United States increasingly viewed South Asia within the broader framework of Indo-Pacific security and strategic competition with China (Small, 2015; Tellis, 2016).

The American military withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 marked a structural transformation in Pakistan–United States relations. Pakistan no longer occupied the same logistical and operational position that it had maintained throughout the American military campaign in Afghanistan. At the same time, the United States shifted greater attention toward competition with China, emerging technologies, regional connectivity, and strategic partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region. For Pakistan, the withdrawal created a complicated security environment involving the return of Taliban rule in Afghanistan, increased concerns regarding cross-border militancy, and renewed challenges associated with border management and refugee movements. Pakistan also faced domestic political uncertainty, economic instability, fiscal pressures, and the need to balance its diplomatic relationships with China, the United States, Afghanistan, and Middle Eastern countries (Majeed, 2025).

The changing international environment has therefore reduced the relevance of the traditional security-centered relationship and encouraged both governments to explore alternative areas of cooperation. Rather than relying exclusively on military assistance and strategic alliances, future engagement may increasingly involve trade, investment, economic development, technology, energy security, education, climate resilience, and targeted counterterrorism cooperation. Pakistan's large population, geographic position, developing digital economy, and connection with regional markets create opportunities for wider economic engagement. Similarly, American financial institutions, universities, technology companies, and private investors can contribute to mutually beneficial cooperation. However, such opportunities depend on consistent diplomatic dialogue, regulatory stability, transparent investment policies, and realistic expectations regarding the limits of bilateral strategic alignment.

One important challenge is the growing influence of China–United States competition on Pakistan's foreign policy choices. China remains a major defense and economic partner of Pakistan, while the United States maintains extensive strategic and economic relations with India. These relationships create a complex regional environment in which Pakistan must protect its long-term partnership with China without unnecessarily restricting cooperation with the United States. An exclusive alignment with either major power could reduce Pakistan's diplomatic flexibility and create additional economic or security vulnerabilities. Consequently, a balanced foreign policy emphasizing national interests, diversified external partnerships, and constructive engagement with competing powers may offer greater strategic flexibility. From the American perspective, maintaining functional relations with Pakistan can also support regional stability, counterterrorism objectives, and diplomatic communication during South Asian crises.

Domestic political and institutional factors further influence the direction of Pakistan–United States relations. Pakistan's foreign policy has historically been shaped by interactions among elected political leadership, military institutions, diplomatic officials, and economic policymakers. Changes in government, political polarization, institutional differences, and economic constraints can affect policy continuity and international confidence. Similarly, changes in American administrations and congressional priorities influence foreign assistance, security cooperation, democracy promotion, and regional diplomatic strategies. These domestic influences demonstrate that bilateral relations cannot be explained entirely through international power politics. Leadership



Vol. 4 No. 3 (Mar) (2026)

perceptions, political narratives, institutional capacity, and economic conditions also determine how foreign policy decisions are formulated and implemented (Rose, 1998; Haqqani, 2005).

Another significant dimension concerns the role of public opinion, political narratives, and historical experiences in shaping bilateral perceptions. In Pakistan, American foreign policy is frequently interpreted through historical experiences of sanctions, military intervention, drone operations, and perceived inconsistencies in security cooperation. In the United States, concerns about militancy, nuclear security, political instability, and Pakistan's relationship with China have influenced policy debates. Such perceptions can create distrust even when governments identify practical opportunities for cooperation. Constructive diplomatic communication, academic exchanges, cultural engagement, and greater transparency regarding bilateral agreements may contribute to improving mutual understanding. Constructivist approaches to international relations emphasize that state identities, historical narratives, and shared expectations influence foreign policy behavior alongside material interests (Wendt, 1999).

Despite these longstanding difficulties, Pakistan and the United States continue to share important interests. Regional security remains a central concern because instability in Afghanistan, transnational terrorism, and tensions between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan can produce consequences beyond South Asia. Economic cooperation also remains relevant because trade, private investment, international financial stability, and technological development can benefit both countries. Furthermore, Pakistan's vulnerability to floods, extreme temperatures, water insecurity, and climate-related displacement provides a strong basis for environmental and humanitarian cooperation. These areas demonstrate that the bilateral relationship retains strategic significance even without the comprehensive military partnership that characterized earlier historical periods.

The principal challenge is therefore not whether Pakistan and the United States should maintain relations, but how they can develop a stable and sustainable partnership despite differences in strategic priorities. Historical experiences suggest that relationships centered exclusively on temporary security requirements often weaken when those requirements disappear. A more durable framework would recognize that both countries possess independent national interests and cannot be expected to agree on every regional or international issue. Regular diplomatic engagement, carefully defined counterterrorism cooperation, economic partnerships, educational exchanges, and joint initiatives addressing nontraditional security challenges could provide a more realistic foundation for future relations.

This study examines the transformation and strategic shift in Pakistan–United States relations by connecting historical developments with emerging political, economic, and security challenges. *Transformation and Strategic Shifts in Pak–US Relationship: Challenges and Opportunities* (2025), together with relevant scholarly literature, the research explores how bilateral cooperation has evolved from Cold War alliances and counterterrorism partnerships toward a more selective, issue-based form of engagement. It further investigates the influence of regional geopolitics, domestic political conditions, economic vulnerabilities, strategic narratives, and changing security priorities on relations between Islamabad and Washington.

The study employs qualitative documentary analysis and interprets these developments through constructivism and neoclassical realism. Constructivism provides an explanation of how historical experiences, national identities, and perceptions influence bilateral expectations, while neoclassical realism highlights the combined influence of



Vol. 4 No. 3 (Mar) (2026)

international power structures, leadership decisions, and domestic political constraints. By integrating these perspectives, the research seeks to explain why cooperation and mistrust have repeatedly occurred together and how future engagement might become more predictable.

Ultimately, the study argues that the transformation of Pakistan–United States relations should not necessarily be interpreted as the termination of their strategic importance. Instead, it represents a transition from broad security dependence toward a potentially more diversified relationship based on specific common interests. The future direction of bilateral relations will depend on both governments' ability to manage strategic disagreements, strengthen diplomatic confidence, expand economic cooperation, and establish realistic mechanisms for addressing regional and nontraditional security challenges. A pragmatic, mutually respectful, and economically sustainable relationship could contribute not only to Pakistan's national development and American regional interests but also to the broader stability of South Asia.

Literature Review

Cohen (2004) situates Pakistan's external relationships within its enduring security concerns, especially its asymmetry with India. Haqqani (2005) emphasizes the importance of ideology, the military and competing strategic priorities in Pakistan's foreign policy. Markey (2013) describes the difficulty of managing a relationship in which both partners need each other on some issues but question each other's reliability on others.

Rashid (2000) documents the long regional consequences of the Afghan conflicts. Fair (2014) evaluates Pakistan's security establishment and its understanding of regional militancy, while Small (2015) details the significance of China for Pakistan's external options. These perspectives are necessary to explain why U.S. and Pakistani priorities may diverge even when formal cooperation continues.

For theoretical interpretation, Wendt (1999) argues that state identity and expectations are socially constructed, and Rose (1998) demonstrates that international pressures operate through domestic institutions and leadership perceptions. Read together, these approaches help explain why bilateral relations are influenced both by material security interests and by narratives about sovereignty, betrayal, dependency and reliability.

This research brings these strands into conversation and traces how the relationship became narrower after 2021. Its discussion of geo-economics, digital security, energy and climate cooperation suggests that the relationship can be redefined outside the customary military-aid framework. Yet these possibilities should be treated as opportunities to pursue, not as evidence that extensive new programs have already been implemented.

Research Questions

How has Pakistan–US cooperation evolved from Cold War alliances to post-2021 issue-based engagement, and what are its implications for public policy and governance?

How do regional dynamics, domestic political factors, and institutional governance influence foreign policy formulation and strategic relations between Pakistan and the United States?

What policy and governance opportunities could strengthen bilateral cooperation, institutional coordination, and long-term diplomatic relations?

Aims and Objectives

To examine the major historical transformations in Pakistan–US relations and their implications for public policy and governance



Vol. 4 No. 3 (Mar) (2026)

To analyze changing strategic priorities, foreign policy decision-making, and institutional governance through constructivism and neoclassical realism.

To identify major diplomatic, economic, security, and governance challenges and suggest practical policy measures for strengthening bilateral cooperation.

Methodology

The article uses a qualitative historical-comparative and documentary approach. Evidence is organized into five phases: early Cold War alignment; cooperation during the Soviet–Afghan conflict; post-Cold War sanctions; the post-9/11 counterterrorism partnership; and post-2021 recalibration. Thematic categories are security, regional power politics, domestic constraints, economic engagement and non-traditional cooperation. Tables summarize analytical classifications, not original numeric datasets. This paper reports no interviews, quantitative surveys or independently verified effects beyond the documentary material.

Findings and Discussion

Table 1. Major phases in Pakistan–United States relations (analytical summary)

Period	Main basis of cooperation	Principal source of tension
1950s–1970s	SEATO/CENTO alignment, military support	Different priorities: Soviet containment versus security against India
1979–1989	Afghan resistance and intelligence coordination	Long-term spillovers of conflict and external dependence
1990s	Limited diplomacy and regional engagement	Nuclear concerns, sanctions and declining trust
2001–2020	Counterterrorism, Afghanistan logistics and peace diplomacy	Militant sanctuaries allegations, drone strikes, sovereignty
2021–2025	Selective security dialogue and potential economic cooperation	Reduced strategic centrality, China–India dynamics, Afghanistan instability

From military alliance to conditional partnership

Early cooperation was based less on a shared regional worldview than on overlapping but distinct goals. Washington sought partners to contain Soviet influence; Islamabad sought external assistance that could strengthen its position against India. The mismatch later encouraged disappointment when Pakistan expected commitments that the United States did not understand as guarantees against India (Cohen, 2004).

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 renewed cooperation, but it did not resolve underlying differences. Intelligence collaboration and external resources increased Pakistan’s strategic importance, while the war also produced enduring regional and social costs. With the Cold War’s end, nuclear-related U.S. sanctions exposed the fragility of a relationship dependent on a single geopolitical mission (Rashid, 2000; Haqqani, 2005).

Counterterrorism and the problem of trust

After September 2001, Pakistan became central to U.S. operations in Afghanistan. The



Vol. 4 No. 3 (Mar) (2026)

relationship combined substantial operational coordination with disagreements over militant networks, drone operations, domestic casualties, political legitimacy and the regional balance of power. These tensions reveal that tactical cooperation does not necessarily amount to agreement on long-term strategic outcomes (Fair, 2014; Markey, 2013).

The 2011 Abbottabad operation and repeated controversies over sovereignty illustrate how mistrust acquired public as well as official significance. Once bilateral cooperation became tied to the Afghan war, the withdrawal of U.S. forces in 2021 sharply narrowed the old framework, creating pressure to define new shared goals.

The post-2021 strategic shift

This discussion identifies the period after 2021 as one of selective engagement rather than formal alliance renewal. Washington retained an interest in counterterrorism and regional stability, while Pakistan sought to diversify diplomatic and economic relationships in an increasingly competitive regional environment. Such a shift is best understood as recalibration: some common interests remain, but the breadth and political weight of the partnership have changed.

Afghanistan remained a major challenge for Pakistan because instability and militancy across its western border affect internal security and economic planning. For Washington, the absence of a large ground presence changed its operational priorities. Consequently, cooperation on particular threats may be possible even where the two states disagree about wider regional policies.

China, India and regional balance

U.S. engagement with India and Pakistan's extensive partnership with China create structural constraints. Islamabad sees its relationship with Beijing as important for security and infrastructure, while Washington assesses Asian policy in the context of India's growing weight and competition with China. This does not automatically require a zero-sum Pakistan-U.S. relationship; however, it reduces the likelihood of a return to the exclusive strategic assumptions of earlier decades (Small, 2015).

A viable Pakistani policy would distinguish economic partnership from military alignment and avoid treating every engagement with one state as rejection of another. Correspondingly, a workable U.S. approach would recognize that Pakistan's security concerns and Chinese connections cannot simply be wished away.

Domestic economic and institutional constraints

Economic vulnerability shapes foreign-policy choices. Pakistan's fiscal pressures and investment needs make market access, technology transfer, education and energy investment relevant to national security. However, external cooperation will yield limited benefits unless domestic regulatory predictability, governance and project implementation improve.

Domestic narratives further constrain diplomacy. In Pakistan, memories of sanctions and military intervention can influence perceptions of American intentions. In the United States, skepticism about Pakistan's security policies complicates arguments for closer cooperation. Transparent commitments and regular civilian-level contact could reduce the gap between official agreements and public expectations.

Emerging areas of cooperation

Counterterrorism remains an area of potential overlap, particularly intelligence dialogue,



Vol. 4 No. 3 (Mar) (2026)

border-security capacity and action against transnational threats. Any security collaboration would require agreement on objectives, lawful operational boundaries and protection of national sovereignty. Vague promises of renewed strategic partnership would risk reproducing past disputes.

Economic opportunities are potentially more sustainable. Trade facilitation, investment in export-oriented sectors, educational exchange, skills development and support for more resilient energy systems can generate benefits without requiring identical regional security agendas. Cooperation in cyber capacity, digital public administration and infrastructure protection is also possible, subject to institutional capacity and agreed safeguards.

Pakistan's exposure to floods, heat and water stress adds another practical agenda. Climate adaptation and disaster preparedness create openings for technical exchange and humanitarian collaboration. These activities have the advantage of producing visible civilian benefits even when high-level geopolitical differences persist.

Table 2. Challenges and corresponding policy opportunities

Challenge	Likely consequence	Practical response
Divergent threat perceptions	Misaligned security expectations	Define limited, measurable areas of cooperation
Afghan-border insecurity	Persistent mistrust and regional risk	Targeted counterterrorism dialogue and crisis channels
China–U.S. competition / U.S.–India ties	Pressure on Pakistan's diplomatic choices	Non-exclusive, issue-specific partnerships
Economic fragility	Reliance on short-term external support	Trade, investment and economic governance
Negative historical narratives	Public resistance and low trust	Academic exchange and transparent public diplomacy
Climate and cyber risks	Rising non-traditional security costs	Technical and institutional cooperation

Interpretation and policy priorities

The findings suggest a two-level problem: bilateral ties are shaped by international structures but also by how leaders and institutions interpret them. Security-first engagement may be necessary in crises, yet it is unlikely to produce a broad, durable partnership on its own. Establishing modest and verifiable objectives would improve predictability more than attempting to revive the language of an unrestricted alliance.

A phased agenda is therefore advisable. Officials could maintain diplomatic and crisis-management channels, agree on narrowly defined counterterrorism priorities, identify commercially credible projects and develop joint technical exchanges in areas such as climate resilience and digital administration. Progress should be evaluated by concrete outcomes rather than the frequency of high-level visits.

Theoretical Framework

This study combines constructivism and neoclassical realism. The two approaches address different elements of the same relationship and prevent either power politics or political narratives from being treated as a complete explanation.



Vol. 4 No. 3 (Mar) (2026)

Table 3. Theoretical approaches and their application

Approach	Central proposition	Application
Constructivism	Identities, language and shared expectations shape behavior	Explains mutual suspicion, ally narratives and sovereignty discourse
Neoclassical realism	External pressures filter through domestic politics and leadership	Explains responses to India, China, Afghanistan and fiscal constraints
Combined interpretation	Material pressures and perceptions reinforce each other	Explains cyclical alignment, rupture and selective re-engagement

Constructivism: identity, sovereignty and strategic narratives

Constructivism holds that actors interpret interests through shared ideas and social interaction (Wendt, 1999). Bilateral memories of cooperation, sanctions, sovereignty disputes and perceived abandonment influence what each government expects from the other. Political statements that describe one partner as unreliable can narrow the space for pragmatic bargaining even when material interests overlap.

Neoclassical realism: international and domestic constraints

Neoclassical realism emphasizes how leaders respond to external power configurations through domestic institutions and perceptions (Rose, 1998). Pakistan's security relationship with India, its partnership with China, its economic limitations and the changing U.S. focus in Asia create incentives and constraints. Domestic political contestation, civil-military relations and policy capacity influence which diplomatic choices become practical.

Integrating the approaches

The combined framework explains why a change in regional security conditions does not automatically produce a predictable policy response. For example, reduced U.S. military engagement in Afghanistan altered Pakistan's geopolitical value to Washington, but historical suspicions and domestic political narratives also shaped reactions. Productive diplomacy must therefore address both substantive interests and communication about intentions.

Conclusion

Pakistan-United States relations have evolved from Cold War military alignment through intense Afghan-focused cooperation to a narrower and more pragmatic post-2021 relationship. The study identifies a persistent mismatch between Pakistan's regional security priorities and the United States' changing global objectives as a central source of mistrust. These disagreements are amplified by historical narratives, domestic policy pressures and the strategic importance of China and India.

The transformation nevertheless creates opportunities. The strongest basis for future cooperation is not an attempt to restore the past alliance, but carefully designed work on counterterrorism, investment, trade, education, technological capacity and climate resilience. Policymakers should set realistic expectations, keep crisis channels open, evaluate programs against public outcomes and avoid turning every bilateral disagreement into a test of loyalty.

As a qualitative synthesis of an existing thesis and associated literature, this paper does



Vol. 4 No. 3 (Mar) (2026)

not establish causal relationships through original fieldwork or statistical testing. Future studies should evaluate bilateral trade and investment trends, trace specific joint projects and compare official Pakistani and U.S. policy statements after 2025.

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