REVIEW OF CRIME, PEACE AND SOCIETY
ISSN (O): 3079-6105, ISSN (P): 3079-6091
Vol. 3, No. 4, 2026, 325-339

Evolution of Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Challenges, Continuities, and Emerging Trends (2018–2026)

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Abstract

The evolution of Pakistan's foreign policy from 2018 to 2026, focusing on major challenges, continuities, and emerging trends shaping its external relations. The period witnessed significant shifts in Pakistan's strategic and diplomatic environment, including changing relations with the United States, China, India, Afghanistan, Russia, and Middle Eastern states. The study argues that while Pakistan continued to prioritize national security, strategic partnerships, sovereignty, and regional stability, its foreign policy increasingly incorporated economic diplomacy, connectivity, trade, investment, and geostrategic diversification. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and broader Belt and Road Initiative remained important components of Pakistan's external strategy, while relations with Russia and Gulf countries gained greater significance. At the same time, tensions with India, instability in Afghanistan, economic constraints, and great-power competition created persistent challenges. Using a qualitative and analytical approach, the study explores how domestic political developments and changing international dynamics influenced foreign-policy decision-making. It concludes that Pakistan's foreign policy during 2018–2026 reflects both continuity in strategic priorities and gradual adaptation toward pragmatic, diversified, and economically oriented diplomacy.

Article History
Received 15 June 2026
Revised 05 July 2026
Accepted 14 July 2026
Published 30 July 2026

OPEN ACCESS

Corresponding Author: Madiha Bibi

Keywords
Pakistan Foreign Policy, *Strategic Partnerships*, *Economic Diplomacy*, *Geo-Political Challenges*, *Regional Security*.

Introduction

Pakistan's foreign policy has evolved in response to changing domestic, regional, and international circumstances since its independence in 1947. As a strategically located state at the intersection of South Asia, Central Asia, China, and the Middle East, Pakistan's external relations have been strongly influenced by security concerns, geopolitical competition, economic interests, and regional conflicts. The country's relations with major powers, particularly China and the United States, have remained central to its foreign-policy orientation. At the same time, relations with neighbouring countries such as India, Afghanistan, and Iran have significantly influenced Pakistan's strategic priorities. Consequently, Pakistan's foreign policy has generally sought to protect territorial sovereignty, national security, economic interests, and regional stability while maintaining diplomatic engagement with the international community (Khan, 2022; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, 2026).

The period from 2018 to 2026 represents an important phase in the evolution of Pakistan's foreign policy. The change of government in 2018 brought a new foreign-policy discourse that emphasized sovereignty, peaceful relations, economic development, and greater strategic autonomy. The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government attempted to reduce dependence on traditional security

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partnerships and promote a foreign policy based on national interests and economic diplomacy. During this period, Pakistan strengthened its relations with China, expanded engagement with Russia and Turkiye, and attempted to improve relations with neighbouring countries. The government also sought to play a constructive role in facilitating the Afghan peace process. These developments reflected an effort to diversify Pakistan's external partnerships and increase its diplomatic space (Aslam et al., 2022).

One of the most important characteristics of Pakistan's foreign policy during this period was the continued strengthening of relations with China. The China-Pakistan relationship has developed beyond traditional diplomatic cooperation into a comprehensive strategic partnership involving defence, infrastructure, energy, trade, technology, and regional connectivity. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), launched as a major component of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), became an important pillar of Pakistan's economic and strategic policy. Pakistan viewed CPEC as an opportunity to improve infrastructure, attract investment, enhance energy capacity, and connect the country with regional markets. However, security concerns, economic constraints, administrative problems, and delays in some projects have created challenges for realizing the full potential of CPEC (Irfan, 2025).

At the same time, Pakistan's relationship with the United States underwent significant changes between 2018 and 2026. Although the United States remained an important economic, diplomatic, and strategic partner, bilateral relations became less dependent on the traditional security framework. The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 reduced one major area of direct strategic cooperation but also created new security challenges for Pakistan. Pakistan increasingly attempted to promote relations with Washington on the basis of trade, investment, counterterrorism, climate change, and regional stability. The growing strategic competition between China and the United States, however, placed Pakistan in a difficult position because Islamabad sought to maintain close relations with Beijing while avoiding unnecessary confrontation with Washington (Maqsood, et, al, 2025).

India continued to represent one of the most important security challenges for Pakistan during 2018–2026. The Kashmir dispute, military tensions, terrorism-related accusations, nuclear deterrence, and disagreements over water remained major obstacles to the improvement of bilateral relations. The 2019 Pulwama crisis and subsequent military confrontation demonstrated the continuing risk of escalation between the two nuclear-armed states. Pakistan consistently emphasized the Kashmir issue at international forums and sought international attention regarding developments in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir. Despite occasional efforts to restore dialogue, the broader relationship remained characterized by mistrust and strategic competition. Therefore, India continued to influence Pakistan's defence, diplomatic, and foreign-policy priorities throughout the period under examination (Khan, 2022).

Afghanistan also remained a critical component of Pakistan's foreign policy. Pakistan has historically sought a peaceful, stable, and friendly Afghanistan because instability across the western border directly affects Pakistan's internal security and regional interests. During the PTI government, Pakistan supported negotiations between the United States and the Afghan Taliban and attempted to facilitate a political settlement. However, the Taliban's return to power in August 2021

created both opportunities and serious challenges for Pakistan. While Islamabad initially hoped that a Taliban-led government would contribute to regional stability, relations subsequently became increasingly difficult because of terrorism, border disputes, refugee issues, and attacks attributed to the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Thus, Afghanistan increasingly shifted from an opportunity for regional connectivity to a major security challenge for Pakistan.

Another important development during 2018–2026 was Pakistan's growing engagement with Russia and other emerging powers. Pakistan attempted to improve relations with Moscow through cooperation in areas such as energy, trade, defence, and regional diplomacy. Pakistan's participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization also provided an important platform for interaction with Russia, China, Central Asian states, and other regional actors. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 complicated Pakistan's diplomatic environment because Islamabad had to maintain relations with Russia while also managing its relationships with Western countries. Rather than adopting an uncompromising bloc-based policy, Pakistan generally attempted to emphasize dialogue, peaceful settlement of disputes, sovereignty, and diplomatic engagement. This approach reflected the country's broader effort to preserve strategic flexibility.

Pakistan's relations with Saudi Arabia and Turkiye also gained increasing importance during this period. Both countries have longstanding political, economic, cultural, and defence relations with Pakistan, but cooperation increasingly acquired a strategic dimension. Pakistan sought greater investment and economic cooperation from Gulf countries while maintaining strong diplomatic and defence relations with Turkiye. By 2026, Pakistan's external partnerships had become more diversified, reflecting an effort to strengthen relations not only with major powers but also with influential regional and middle powers. This diversification can be interpreted as part of Pakistan's broader strategy of strategic autonomy and multi-alignment. Rather than relying exclusively on one major power, Pakistan increasingly attempted to develop multiple partnerships to protect its national interests.

The evolution of Pakistan's foreign policy between 2018 and 2026 demonstrates a combination of continuity and transformation**.** Traditional concerns such as national security, India, Afghanistan, sovereignty, and strategic relations with China remained important, while new priorities such as economic diplomacy, geo-economics, climate diplomacy, regional connectivity, and strategic diversification gained greater significance. Pakistan's contemporary foreign policy can therefore be understood through the concepts of neoclassical realism and strategic hedging**,** as Islamabad has attempted to respond to international power shifts while simultaneously considering domestic political, economic, and security conditions. The country's growing engagement with China, the United States, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and regional organizations demonstrates an effort to maximize strategic options in an increasingly multipolar international system (Ali et al., 2024; Jamali & Hussain, 2026). This study therefore examines the major challenges, continuities, and emerging trends that have shaped Pakistan's foreign policy from 2018 to 2026 and assesses the extent to which Pakistan has moved from a predominantly geopolitical approach toward a more diversified and geo-economics foreign-policy strategy.

Research methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to examine the evolution of Pakistan's foreign policy from 2018 to 2026. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study focuses on understanding changes, continuities, challenges, policy decisions, and emerging trends in Pakistan's external relations. Rather than relying primarily on numerical data, the research examines political developments, diplomatic initiatives, official policy statements, international agreements, and scholarly interpretations. The study particularly focuses on Pakistan's relations with China, the United States, India, Afghanistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkiye.

Theoretical Framework

Neoclassical Realism

Neoclassical Realism developed from the broader realist tradition in International Relations. Classical Realism emphasizes power, national interest, and the struggle for security, while structural realism focuses primarily on the international distribution of power. Neoclassical Realism combines these perspectives by arguing that systemic pressures influence states, but foreign-policy outcomes are also shaped by domestic factors and leaders' perceptions of the international environment (Lobell et al., 2009).

The theory is highly relevant to Pakistan because its foreign policy is influenced by both external and internal factors. Internationally, Pakistan operates within a complex strategic environment involving the rise of China, U.S.–China competition, India's growing regional influence, instability in Afghanistan, Russia's changing global position, and developments in the Middle East. Domestically, political instability, economic difficulties, institutional structures, leadership preferences, and security concerns affect how Pakistan responds to these international pressures.

From a neoclassical realist perspective, Pakistan's close relationship with China can be understood as a response to the regional balance of power. China provides Pakistan with diplomatic, economic, technological, and defence cooperation, while Pakistan provides China with strategic access to the Indian Ocean and a partner in South Asia. CPEC has further strengthened this relationship by connecting strategic cooperation with economic and infrastructure interests.

The theory also helps explain Pakistan's relationship with the United States. Although Pakistan has developed a strong strategic partnership with China, it has not completely abandoned engagement with Washington. Pakistan continues to value its economic, diplomatic, security, and technological relationship with the United States. This demonstrates that Pakistan attempts to respond pragmatically to changing international power structures rather than permanently aligning itself with a single great power.

Neoclassical Realism is also useful for understanding Pakistan's relations with India and Afghanistan. India's military capabilities, nuclear weapons, regional influence, and position in South Asia create significant security pressures for Pakistan. Similarly, developments in Afghanistan directly affect Pakistan's border security and internal stability. Pakistan's foreign-policy decisions toward these countries therefore reflect both systemic security pressures and domestic security considerations.

Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Challenges

Pakistan's foreign policy has faced numerous challenges during the period 2018–2026 due to changing regional and global political dynamics. As a strategically located country between South Asia, Central Asia, China, and the Middle East, Pakistan has had to manage competing security, economic, and diplomatic interests. Relations with India, Afghanistan, China, the United States, Russia, and Middle Eastern countries have required careful diplomatic balancing. At the same time, domestic political instability and economic pressures have constrained Pakistan's ability to pursue an entirely independent foreign policy.

India–Pakistan Rivalry

The enduring rivalry with India remains one of the most significant challenges to Pakistan's foreign policy. The Kashmir dispute, military tensions, terrorism-related accusations, border incidents, and nuclear competition continue to shape bilateral relations. The deterioration of relations following the 2019 constitutional changes concerning Jammu and Kashmir further reduced prospects for sustained diplomatic engagement. The rivalry also limits opportunities for regional economic integration and cooperation within South Asia. Consequently, Pakistan continues to devote substantial diplomatic and security resources to managing its relationship with India.

Afghanistan and Border Security

Afghanistan represents another major foreign-policy challenge. Pakistan has consistently sought a peaceful and stable Afghanistan because instability there directly affects its western border and internal security. However, following the Taliban's return to power in 2021, relations became increasingly complicated by terrorism, cross-border attacks, refugee issues, and disputes concerning the Durand Line. The presence and activities of militant groups, particularly the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), have created serious security concerns. Pakistan therefore faces the difficult task of maintaining diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan while simultaneously demanding effective action against militant organizations.

U.S.–China Strategic Competition

The growing strategic competition between China and the United States presents a major challenge for Pakistan. China is Pakistan's most important strategic partner and a major source of investment and infrastructure cooperation through CPEC. At the same time, the United States remains important for Pakistan's trade, investment, technology, diplomacy, and international financial interests. Pakistan therefore seeks to avoid becoming caught in the rivalry between the two powers. Its approach increasingly reflects strategic hedging, whereby Islamabad maintains close relations with China while preserving pragmatic engagement with the United States (Ali et al., 2024).

Economic Vulnerability

Economic weakness has significantly constrained Pakistan's foreign-policy autonomy. High external financing requirements, debt pressures, inflation, balance-of-payments difficulties, and

dependence on international financial institutions influence the country's diplomatic choices. Pakistan's economic needs make foreign investment, remittances, trade, and financial assistance important components of foreign policy. The National Security Policy 2022–2026 consequently placed economic security at the centre of the country's broader national-security approach (National Security Division, Government of Pakistan, 2022).

Political Instability

Domestic political instability can affect the continuity and credibility of foreign policy. Changes in government, political polarization, institutional tensions, and differences among political actors can produce uncertainty regarding Pakistan's external orientation. Foreign governments and international investors generally prefer predictable and consistent policies. Therefore, sustained domestic political stability is important for strengthening Pakistan's international position.

Implementation of CPEC

CPEC provides Pakistan with significant economic and strategic opportunities, but its implementation has faced challenges. Security threats, bureaucratic delays, financing issues, energy-sector problems, and difficulties in project execution have affected progress. Attacks against Chinese nationals and projects have also increased security concerns. Pakistan needs to ensure greater security and institutional coordination if it is to realize the full economic potential of CPEC.

Balancing Relations with the Muslim World

Pakistan maintains important relations with Saudi Arabia, Turkiye, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Iran, and other Muslim-majority states. However, competition and disagreements among regional powers can create diplomatic difficulties for Islamabad. Pakistan must maintain close relations with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states while also managing its geographic and economic relationship with Iran. This requires a carefully balanced regional diplomacy.

The challenges facing Pakistan's foreign policy demonstrate that Islamabad operates within a highly complex strategic environment**.** India, Afghanistan, terrorism, economic vulnerability, U.S.–China competition, domestic political instability, and climate change simultaneously influence Pakistan's foreign-policy choices. As a result, Pakistan has increasingly pursued strategic autonomy, economic diplomacy, strategic hedging, and multi-alignment rather than relying exclusively on a single major power. The success of this approach ultimately depends on domestic political stability, economic strength, institutional capacity, and Pakistan's ability to transform its geopolitical location into sustainable economic and diplomatic advantages.

Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Continuities

Pakistan's foreign policy has experienced considerable changes in response to domestic political transitions and transformations in the international system. However, several fundamental principles and strategic priorities have remained consistent. These continuities demonstrate that although successive governments have adopted different diplomatic styles and policy priorities, Pakistan's

core national interests have continued to shape its external relations. During 2018–2026, national security, relations with major powers, the Kashmir dispute, Afghanistan, strategic cooperation with China, and the search for economic and diplomatic support remained important features of Pakistan's foreign policy (Hussain, 2019; Khan, 2025).

National Security as a Core Priority

National security has remained one of the most important foundations of Pakistan's foreign policy. Since independence, Pakistan's security environment has been strongly influenced by its rivalry with India, territorial disputes, military competition, terrorism, and instability in neighbouring Afghanistan. Although the foreign-policy discourse increasingly emphasized economic security after 2018, traditional security concerns continued to influence Pakistan's diplomatic and strategic decisions. The National Security Policy 2022–2026 also reflects a comprehensive understanding of security in which economic security is linked with traditional national-security concerns (National Security Division, Government of Pakistan, 2022).

Strategic Partnership with China

The continuity of Pakistan-China relations is one of the clearest features of Pakistan's foreign policy. Successive governments have maintained strong political, economic, diplomatic, and defence relations with China. The relationship expanded significantly through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which connected strategic cooperation with infrastructure, energy, trade, and regional connectivity. Even during changes in Pakistan's domestic politics between 2018 and 2026, China remained a central pillar of Pakistan's external strategy (Small, 2015; Khakwani, 2025).

Strategic Importance of Afghanistan

Afghanistan has remained a permanent feature of Pakistan's foreign-policy agenda because of geographical proximity, historical connections, border security, refugees, trade, and militancy. Pakistan has consistently supported the establishment of a peaceful and stable Afghanistan. However, the nature of this policy has changed according to developments inside Afghanistan. After the Taliban takeover in 2021, counterterrorism and border security became increasingly important components of Pakistan's Afghanistan policy.

Support for the Kashmir Cause

Pakistan's diplomatic support for the Kashmiri people has remained a long-term foreign-policy priority. Islamabad regularly raises the Kashmir issue at international and multilateral forums, particularly the United Nations and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. The issue has remained closely connected with Pakistan's national identity, security concerns, and relations with India. Consequently, despite the emergence of new foreign-policy priorities such as geo-economics, Kashmir continues to represent an important element of Pakistan's diplomatic agenda.

Islamic Identity and Relations with Muslim Countries

Pakistan's Islamic identity has continued to influence its foreign relations. Pakistan maintains close relations with Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and other Muslim-majority countries. Islamabad has also remained active within the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), particularly on issues concerning Palestine and Kashmir. This continuity demonstrates the importance of cultural, religious, economic, and strategic connections in Pakistan's foreign policy.

Nuclear Deterrence and Strategic Stability

Pakistan's nuclear capability remains an important component of its foreign and security policy. The nuclear deterrence relationship with India has influenced Pakistan's strategic calculations and diplomatic behavior. Pakistan continues to emphasize strategic stability and deterrence in South Asia. The nuclear dimension also encourages Pakistan to avoid uncontrolled military escalation with India while maintaining its position on unresolved disputes.

Multilateral Diplomacy

Pakistan has consistently used multilateral institutions to advance its foreign-policy interests. The United Nations, OIC, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and other international organizations provide platforms for Pakistan to address security, development, climate change, Kashmir, and international peace. Multilateral diplomacy allows Pakistan to strengthen its diplomatic position despite the limitations associated with its economic and military capabilities.

The foreign policy of Pakistan during 2018–2026 demonstrates significant continuity despite political and international changes. National security, strategic relations with China, engagement with the United States, India and Kashmir, Afghanistan, relations with Muslim countries, nuclear deterrence, multilateral diplomacy, and strategic autonomy have remained central elements. What has changed is not necessarily the fundamental national interests but the methods through which Pakistan seeks to achieve them. The growing emphasis on economic diplomacy and geo-economics represents an adaptation of longstanding foreign-policy objectives to a changing international environment. Thus, Pakistan's foreign policy during 2018–2026 can be characterized as continuity in core strategic interests combined with adaptation in diplomatic strategy**.**

Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Emerging Trends (2018–2026)

The period from 2018 to 2026 represents an important phase of transformation in Pakistan's foreign policy. Although traditional security concerns, particularly relations with India, Afghanistan, China, and the United States, remained central, Pakistan increasingly attempted to diversify its diplomatic and economic partnerships. The major emerging trend has been the movement from a predominantly geopolitics-oriented foreign policy toward a more geo-economic and multi-aligned approach. The National Security Policy 2022–2026 explicitly emphasized economic security and geo-economics alongside traditional national-security concerns. Recent scholarship similarly identifies Pakistan's foreign policy as increasingly characterized by strategic hedging, multi-alignment, and pragmatic engagement with competing major powers (Hussain, 2026; Jamali & Hussain, 2026).

Shift from Geopolitics toward Geo-economics

One of the most significant emerging trends is Pakistan's increasing emphasis on geo-economics**.** Rather than viewing foreign relations primarily through military and strategic competition, Pakistan has increasingly connected foreign policy with trade, investment, connectivity, energy, infrastructure, and economic development. This approach became particularly visible after the formulation of the National Security Policy 2022–2026. Pakistan has sought to use its geographical position between South Asia, Central Asia, China, and the Middle East to promote economic connectivity and attract investment. The emerging geo-economic orientation therefore represents an attempt to transform Pakistan's strategic geography into an economic advantage (Hussain, 2026).

Strategic Hedging between the United States and China

A second important trend is the development of strategic hedging between China and the United States**.** Pakistan has maintained its long-standing strategic partnership with China while simultaneously attempting to preserve constructive relations with Washington. Instead of completely aligning with one great power, Islamabad has increasingly pursued pragmatic engagement with both. Jamali and Hussain (2026) describe this approach as pragmatic hedging, through which Pakistan seeks to obtain economic, diplomatic, and security benefits from both China and the United States. This strategy has become particularly important as U.S.–China competition has intensified in the Indo-Pacific.

Deepening China–Pakistan Strategic Partnership

The third emerging trend is the further institutionalization of Pakistan's relationship with China. China remains one of Pakistan's most important strategic and economic partners, particularly through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). During 2018–2026, the relationship increasingly expanded beyond infrastructure toward industrial cooperation, technology, agriculture, energy, security, and regional connectivity. The development of CPEC Phase II demonstrates the effort to move from infrastructure-centered cooperation toward broader economic and industrial collaboration. Thus, Pakistan's China policy increasingly combines traditional strategic cooperation with geo-economic objectives.

CPEC and Regional Connectivity

CPEC has increasingly become an important component of Pakistan's external economic diplomacy. During the period under study, Pakistan attempted to connect CPEC with wider regional connectivity involving Central Asia, the Middle East, and other parts of Asia. The emphasis has gradually shifted from the construction of individual infrastructure projects toward industrialization, investment, trade, agriculture, and broader economic integration. This trend demonstrates Pakistan's attempt to convert its geographical location into a platform for regional economic connectivity. However, the success of this strategy depends on political stability, economic reforms, security, and effective governance.

Expansion of Relations with Turkiye and Gulf States

Pakistan's relations with Turkiye and Gulf countries have gained increasing strategic importance. Economic, diplomatic, defence, and political cooperation with Turkiye has expanded, while relations with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states have increasingly involved investment, energy, defence, and strategic cooperation. A major development in 2026 was the Makkah Joint Defence Agreement among Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkiye. The first Strategic Political and Defence Committee meeting under the agreement was held in Istanbul in August 2026, followed by an agreement to establish a secretariat in Saudi Arabia. These developments indicate that Pakistan is seeking a more institutionalized role in emerging regional security arrangements.

Greater Emphasis on Economic Diplomacy

Economic diplomacy has become another major feature of Pakistan's foreign policy. Pakistan increasingly seeks to attract foreign investment, expand exports, develop trade partnerships, and promote infrastructure and connectivity through diplomatic engagement. Foreign policy is therefore becoming more closely connected with domestic economic requirements. The country's economic vulnerabilities have encouraged policymakers to prioritize relationships that can provide investment, energy cooperation, market access, and development opportunities. Consequently, economic diplomacy has emerged as an essential instrument for strengthening Pakistan's international position.

Greater Focus on Regional Security and Counterterrorism

Regional security remains an important dimension of Pakistan's foreign policy, particularly because of developments in Afghanistan and continuing militant threats. Pakistan has increasingly emphasized border management, counterterrorism cooperation, regional stability, and diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan. At the same time, Pakistan has attempted to internationalize concerns about terrorism and security threats while seeking cooperation from regional and international partners. The persistence of security challenges demonstrates that the emerging geo-economic orientation has not replaced traditional security priorities; rather, economic and security objectives increasingly operate together.

Pakistan's foreign policy during 2018–2026 demonstrates a combination of continuity and transformation. Traditional priorities such as national security, India, Kashmir, China, Afghanistan, and strategic stability have continued to influence foreign-policy decision-making. However, new priorities—including geo-economics, strategic hedging, multi-alignment, economic diplomacy, regional connectivity, climate diplomacy, and diversified partnerships—have become increasingly important. The emerging foreign-policy model can therefore be described as pragmatic, multi-aligned, geo-economic, and security-conscious. Its long-term success, however, depends on Pakistan's ability to strengthen economic capacity, political stability, governance, and domestic institutional resilience. Recent scholarship similarly concludes that strategic hedging provides Pakistan with diplomatic flexibility, but economic and political weaknesses can limit the country's ability to achieve genuine strategic autonomy (Jamali & Hussain, 2026).

Conclusion

The evolution of Pakistan's foreign policy from 2018 to 2026 demonstrates a complex combination of continuity, adaptation, and emerging strategic priorities. During this period, Pakistan operated in an increasingly uncertain international environment characterized by great-power competition, regional conflicts, economic instability, terrorism, and changing geopolitical alliances. Despite these challenges, the fundamental objectives of Pakistan's foreign policy remained focused on national security, territorial integrity, economic development, regional stability, and the protection of national interests. At the same time, Pakistan increasingly attempted to adjust its diplomatic strategies according to changes in the regional and global balance of power.

A major finding of this study is that Pakistan's foreign policy has gradually moved from a predominantly geopolitical and security-oriented approach toward a more geo-economic and multidimensional approach**.** Economic security, foreign investment, trade, regional connectivity, energy cooperation, and infrastructure development have become increasingly important elements of foreign-policy decision-making. The National Security Policy 2022–2026 reflected this shift by emphasizing economic security as an important component of national security. However, the continuing importance of India, Afghanistan, terrorism, Kashmir, and strategic stability demonstrates that the traditional security dimension has not disappeared. Instead, Pakistan's foreign policy increasingly combines geo-economic and geo-security objectives.

China has remained the most consistent strategic partner throughout the period under study. The China–Pakistan relationship has continued to develop through CPEC, defence cooperation, diplomatic coordination, and economic engagement. CPEC has increasingly been presented not only as an infrastructure project but also as a platform for industrialization, investment, connectivity, and regional economic integration. Pakistan's continued commitment to China demonstrates a strong element of foreign-policy continuity. Nevertheless, Pakistan has also attempted to avoid excessive dependence on a single power by maintaining engagement with the United States and expanding relations with other regional and global actors.

Relations with the United States have remained complicated but strategically important. Pakistan has attempted to manage its relationship with Washington while simultaneously deepening its partnership with Beijing. The resulting strategy can increasingly be understood through the concept of strategic hedging**,** whereby Pakistan seeks to preserve flexibility rather than align completely with either major power. This approach has become particularly important because of intensifying U.S.–China competition. Pakistan's objective has increasingly been to protect its national interests by maintaining constructive relations with competing powers rather than becoming permanently attached to one geopolitical bloc (Ali et al., 2024; Jamali & Hussain, 2026).

India–Pakistan relations continue to represent one of the most persistent challenges to Pakistan's foreign policy. Kashmir, military competition, terrorism allegations, border tensions, and the absence of sustained political dialogue have constrained opportunities for regional cooperation. The study finds that despite Pakistan's growing emphasis on geo-economics, its foreign-policy calculations remain significantly influenced by India-related security concerns. The continuation of this rivalry also limits the potential for greater South Asian economic integration and regional

connectivity. Sustainable improvement in Pakistan's regional position therefore requires a long-term strategy combining deterrence, diplomacy, conflict management, and support for peaceful dialogue.

Afghanistan has remained another major foreign-policy challenge. Pakistan's geographical proximity to Afghanistan, historical ties, refugee concerns, border management issues, and militant threats make developments in Afghanistan directly relevant to Pakistan's national security. The post-2021 Afghan situation has created both opportunities and challenges for Islamabad. Pakistan seeks a peaceful and stable Afghanistan that can contribute to regional connectivity and trade, but continuing security concerns have complicated bilateral relations. Therefore, Pakistan's Afghan policy increasingly requires a balance between diplomatic engagement, border security, counterterrorism, and economic cooperation.

Another important conclusion is that Pakistan has increasingly diversified its diplomatic relationships. Relations with Turkiye, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Russia, Central Asian countries, and other emerging partners have gained greater importance. This diversification reflects Pakistan's effort to expand its diplomatic and economic options and strengthen strategic autonomy. The growing importance of economic diplomacy demonstrates that Pakistan increasingly views foreign relations as an instrument for addressing domestic economic challenges. The development of investment, trade, energy, defence, and connectivity partnerships has therefore become an important component of Pakistan's external strategy.

The study also demonstrates the growing importance of non-traditional security issues. Climate change, water insecurity, food security, energy shortages, economic vulnerability, and environmental degradation have increasingly entered Pakistan's foreign-policy agenda. Pakistan's experience of catastrophic floods and climate-related vulnerabilities has encouraged greater international advocacy for climate finance and climate justice. This development indicates that Pakistan's foreign policy is gradually expanding beyond traditional military and diplomatic concerns toward a broader understanding of human and national security.

The theoretical analysis based on Neoclassical Realism demonstrates that Pakistan's foreign policy is shaped by both systemic international pressures and domestic factors. The changing distribution of power, particularly U.S.–China competition, regional instability, and India's strategic position, creates external pressures on Pakistan. However, Pakistan's responses are also influenced by economic limitations, political instability, institutional capacity, leadership preferences, and domestic security conditions. Strategic hedging further explains Pakistan's effort to maintain flexibility between competing powers rather than adopting a rigid alliance strategy (Ali et al., 2024; Jamali & Hussain, 2026).

In conclusion, Pakistan's foreign policy between 2018 and 2026 can best be characterized as continuity with strategic adaptation. The core objectives of national security, China partnership, India-related security, Kashmir, Afghanistan, and strategic stability have remained largely consistent. However, significant changes have occurred in the methods through which Pakistan seeks to achieve these objectives. Geo-economics, economic diplomacy, strategic hedging, multi-alignment, regional connectivity, climate diplomacy, and diversified partnerships have become

increasingly prominent. Pakistan's future foreign-policy effectiveness will depend on its ability to transform diplomatic opportunities into sustainable economic and strategic gains. Stronger political stability, economic reforms, institutional coordination, good governance, and a consistent long-term foreign-policy vision will therefore be essential for Pakistan to achieve greater strategic autonomy and a more influential role in regional and international affairs.

Policy Recommendations

- **Strengthen economic diplomacy:** Pakistan should place trade, investment, exports, technology, and economic partnerships at the centre of foreign policy.
- **Maintain balanced relations with China and the United States:** Pakistan should avoid becoming part of an exclusive great-power bloc.
- **Improve CPEC implementation:** Greater transparency, security, institutional coordination, and private-sector participation are necessary to maximize CPEC benefits.
- **Prioritize regional connectivity:** Pakistan should strengthen economic relations with Central Asia, China, Iran, Afghanistan, Turkiye, and the Gulf.
- **Improve relations with Afghanistan:** Counterterrorism cooperation, border management, diplomatic engagement, and economic interaction should be pursued simultaneously.
- **Promote dialogue with India:** Despite continuing disputes, crisis-management mechanisms and limited economic cooperation should remain available.
- **Strengthen relations with the Muslim world:** Pakistan should expand cooperation with Saudi Arabia, Turkiye, Qatar, the UAE, Malaysia, and other Muslim-majority countries.
- **Enhance climate diplomacy:** Climate vulnerability should be integrated into Pakistan's foreign-policy agenda.
- **Strengthen institutional foreign-policy coordination:** Civilian institutions, parliament, diplomatic services, economic institutions, and security agencies should develop greater coordination.
- **Reduce economic dependence:** Sustainable foreign-policy autonomy requires stronger domestic economic foundations.

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