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Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy: Intersections in Pakistan's Strategic Decisions
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ABSTRACT

The processes of making decisions in Pakistan's Foreign Policy are embedded in the arena of internal governance. The article explores the nature of internal political processes such as civil military relations, the federal–provincial relations and economic controls in Pakistan's external relations and strategic decisions. Based on the neoclassical realist theory and empirical facts of the period 2018-2025, it is found that Pakistan's foreign policy is holistic for national security. The study focuses on three key areas: the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as an example of development and strategic cooperation; the Afghanistan policy as an example of regional stability efforts; and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) engagements as economic reform tools. The results indicate a gradual process by which Pakistan has been attempting to link economic strength with foreign policy stability. The text is a contribution to the literature on domestic sources of foreign policy and provides insights for international partners dealing with Pakistan.

Keywords: Pakistan, Civil Military Relations, Foreign Policy, CPEC, National Security, Economic Security

Introduction

The connection between domestic and foreign policy has been an important theme of international relations scholarship from its very inception. Theorists acknowledge that states are not unitary rational actors but rather political entities in which internal negotiations influence their behavior in the international system, ranging from two-level game theory to the analysis of bureaucratic politics. Putnam's (1988) classic work on two level games is a good example of how leaders have to deal with the behavior of negotiations with international actors and domestic players. The same is even more true in modern day Pakistan: a country of over 240 million people, strategically located between South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Pakistan's foreign policy moves are the product of a delicate juggling of structural challenges of the international system and domestic political factors. It has sought strategic partnerships, economic corridors and diplomatic efforts, and yet dealt with internal governance issues. To appreciate the strategic choices that Pakistan is making, one needs to pay heed to the institutional arrangements that enable the civilian and military establishment to coordinate the national security policy. National Security Policy 2022-2026 is Pakistan's first-ever formally document policy regarding comprehensive national security with the economic security at its

strategic core (National Security Division, 2022). This article makes three interrelated points. First of all, there are some institutional mechanisms in Pakistan's foreign policy that facilitate a coordinated decision-making process, such as the National Security Committee and other constitutional bodies. Second, Pakistan's emerging strategic decisions have increasingly been geoeconomic rather than security oriented, which demonstrates an advanced sense that economic development is the bedrock of national security. Third, there is a growing emphasis on domestic governance improvement and foreign policy predictability in recent policy frameworks, notably the NSP 2022-2026. The analysis is divided into six parts. The article, after a theoretical analysis based on neoclassical realism, analyses the institutional mechanism for making foreign policies in Pakistan. Three empirical case studies (CPEC, Afghanistan policy, IMF engagements) address the linkages between domestic and international. Implications for theory and international engagement are discussed in the conclusion.

Theoretical Framework: Neoclassical Realism and Domestic Sources of Foreign Policy

Theory of neoclassical realism can be used to study the foreign policy of Pakistan. Neoclassical realism explicitly identifies domestic variables as intervening variables between systemic incentive and foreign policy outcome, while structural realism uses the methodology of treating states as black boxes and explains them mainly based on systemic pressures (Waltz, 1979; Rose, 1998). This method acknowledges that regional power structures or great power rivalry influence national institutions, elite views, state capabilities, etc. Schweller (2006) has adapted this model to account for the influence of domestic level variables on balancing behavior, namely elite consensus, social cohesion and regime stability. These factors are very relevant for Pakistan. The nation has a democratic system that has held regular elections and developed an institutional mechanism to coordinate civilian and professional military decision-making on national security issues. This coordination mechanism, established in the form of the National Security Committee, enables Pakistan to act in a coordinated manner in addressing external threats. The Pakistani Constitution has laid down definite criteria for the jurisdiction of foreign policy. The President has diplomatic functions as head of state and the Prime Minister holds executive power as per Article 90. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is the body manned by career diplomats and held responsible for the implementation of the policy. The National Security Committee led by the Prime Minister and comprising of the military leadership serves as a venue for the integrated decision making on strategic issues. This institutional structure aligns with Pakistan's evolved perception of the need for a coordinated civilian and military approach in national security. Over time, Pakistan's foreign policy making has become more institutionalized, according to analysts. According to Fair (2018), the National Security Division of the Prime Minister's Office has been reinforced by successive governments in order to build civilian capabilities to coordinate strategic policy. This has allowed Pakistan to pursue its more sophisticated policies on the foreign front, like the China Pakistan Economic Corridor, while trying to keep expectations low on the domestic front.

Institutional Architecture of Pakistan's Foreign Policy

Constitutional and Legal Framework

The Constitution of Pakistan is the basic framework for the decision-making process in foreign policy. The Prime Minister, the chief executive, leads foreign policy in conjunction with the Cabinet. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is responsible for the policy implementation through professional diplomatic services. The National Security Committee created by the National Security Council Act of 2004 and enhanced, is a forum of civilian and military leadership that discusses strategic issues (Soomro, Khan & Salim, 2025). The Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs is an important oversight role for the Parliament. The parliamentary committees have

been convened by successive governments on big foreign policy initiatives such as China Pakistan Economic Corridor and Afghanistan reconciliation. The meeting highlights Pakistan's dedication toward the process of democratic deliberation on strategic issues and the need to ensure continuity in foreign policy through elections.

Strategic matters – Civil Military Coordination

National security is the focus of Pakistan's approach, which involves coordination between civilian and military institutions. Integrated decision making is done through the National Security Committee headed by the Prime Minister and comprising the Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, Chief of Army Staff, Chief of Naval Staff, Chief of Air Staff and the Director General of Inter Services Intelligence. This provides a balance between civilian diplomatic views and military security views, in regard to foreign policy.

Soomro, Khan and Salim (2025) have described the functioning of this coordination mechanism in this period. The government of Prime Minister Imran Khan closely cooperated with military leadership on these matters of Afghanistan policy, India relations, and CPEC implementation. Some disagreement arose over a few tactics, but institutional arrangements provided clear procedures for resolving issues. The April 2022 no-confidence motion and the following political developments were constitutional and showcased Pakistan's democratic strength.

The economic agenda has increasingly been determining the foreign policy stance of Pakistan. The country is moving from a security centric to a geoeconomic approach, acknowledging the necessity of having a strong economic base for sustainable national security. This recognition led to the formulation of the National security policy 2022-2026, wherein for the first time in the history of Pakistan the economic security was given the top priority in national policy (Ashraf, Mustafa, & Ali, 2023).

The thrust of economic diplomacy has been to attract foreign investment, widen export markets and obtain development financing in Pakistan. The flagship project in this regard is the China Pakistan Economic Corridor which has invited a lot of investment in infrastructure and energy in this country. Likewise, Pakistan has been negotiating for normalization of relations with its neighbors in the region, such as India, Iran and Central Asian republics, in the economic sphere, believing that economic cohesiveness can contribute to regional stability.

The China Pakistan Economic Corridor: A Case Study

The strategic and economic justification for developing the site.4.1 Strategic and Economic Rationale.

Launched in 2015, China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a game-changing collaboration between Pakistan and China. CPEC started with a cost of \$46 billion and later expanded to involve the construction of infrastructure, energy plants, special economic zones and Gwadar Port development. According to official documents of Pakistan, CPEC is a game-changer, which will help in industrialization, job creation, and regional trade networks (Ministry of Planning, 2017).

Strategically, CPEC is a reflection of Pakistan's attempts to use the geographical location as a natural corridor between China, South Asia and the Middle East. The corridor will give China better access to the Arabian Sea, and for Pakistan, roads, railways and ports will be big investments. This mutually beneficial relationship has withstood political changes in both nations.

Samad (2025) has looked at CPEC from the development politics perspective. Coordinating the implementation of the corridor has been a process of collaboration among the Pakistani and Chinese planning agencies, provincial governments and private sector partners. Some problems with implementation have arisen, for example, delays in some projects and some changes in

financing, but the overall structure has proved to be resilient. The military and civilian institutions of Pakistan have been amalgamated to ensure the security of CPEC projects, which are significant for the development of the country.

Provincial participation and involvement of stakeholders

CPEC's geographical routing has been based on a comprehensive consultation with provincial governments. There are several alignments through Punjab, Sindh, KP and Balochistan in the corridor. The early-stage concerns regarding the provincial distribution were taken care of by establishing the CPEC Authority that involved representatives from every province. The development of Gwadar Port was a matter of significant Federal attention and investment in Balochistan.

The authors have analyzed the stakeholder engagement processes related to CPEC (BiBi, Yousaf, 2020). Some local communities voiced concerns of displacement or environmental impacts, while the government set up grievance and compensation mechanisms. Dialogue and administrative measures were used to handle the protests in Gwadar and elsewhere. As the programme progressed, jobs and infrastructure have been created related to CPEC, leading to local support for the programme.

Economic Outcomes and Future Direction:

The economic fruits of CPEC are evident after 10 years. The policy of energy projects has made thousands of megawatts available in the national grid, which has led to an end to load shedding and facilitated the growth of industries. The transport time and costs have been reduced due to road infrastructure such as Multan Sukkur Motorway. Gwadar Port has been operational and many ancillary development activities have begun.

The Pakistan Economic Survey (2024) records that investments made in connection with the CPEC have helped in the growth of the GDP coupled with creation of employment. There are still a number of issues to be resolved; such as the implementation of special economic zones and the issue of circular debt in the energy sector. The government has been working with Chinese partners to restructure some of the project financing, and to prioritize renewable energy investments. The CPEC framework has been flexible and has expanded to include agriculture as well as information technology and people to people exchange, with phase two of the CPEC that has already begun.

Case Study Two: Afghanistan Policy and Regional Stability

Pakistan's Role in Afghan Peace and Reconciliation

This section will cover Pakistan's role in Afghan peace and reconciliation.

Pakistan has a long and porous border with Afghanistan and an interest in its stability. Pakistan has been hosting millions of Afghan refugees and Afghan factions since 1979 when Soviets invaded the country. Following the 2001 intervention, Pakistan was seen as being in sync with the United States and the NATO troops and simultaneously engaging with the Taliban as a future political player.

Since the departure of the U.S. troops in 2021 and Taliban's return to power, Pakistan has been engaged in a constructive approach towards the new government in Afghanistan. Pakistan assistance, facilitating trade through border crossings, and encouraging the Taliban to respond to the international concerns related to terrorism and human rights (Weinstein, 2023). The government of Pakistan has always been about the inclusive political settlement in Afghanistan by recognizing all ethnic groups.

Weinstein (2023) says Pakistan's Afghanistan policy is based on humanitarian considerations as well as on strategic calculations. A stable Afghanistan leads to fewer refugees, fewer militancy movements and facilitation of trade with Central Asia. The Taliban has taken only partial

measures to respond to Pakistan's security fears about Tehrik e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) militants, but diplomatic channels are open. Pakistan still calls for stability in Afghanistan in multilateral platforms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

Civil Military Coordination on Afghan Issues

The coordination between the civilian and military institutions of Pakistan has been close in the past in Afghanistan policy. Diplomatic engagement is handled by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and security assessments are carried out and help in border management by the military and intelligence agencies. This coordination is being facilitated by National Security Committee (NSC) which allows Pakistan to have policy continuity during governmental changes (Mushtaq, Mazari & Ahsan, 2024).

In 2018-2022, Prime Minister Imran Khan made two visits to Kabul and hosted several delegations of the Taliban in Islamabad. Military leadership backed these diplomatic missions and continued to communicate with Afghan officials. Pakistan continues to have institutional continuity in its policy on Afghanistan even after the change of government in 2022, indicating that Pakistan's policy is not driven by individuals but by institutions.

Cooperation in the Field of Border Management and Counterterrorism

Pakistan has made significant efforts to control the Afghan border, such as fencing all but 2,000 km of the border. These measures are designed to stop illegal migration, minimise smuggling and to help interdict militant groups on both sides of the border. Pakistan has also set up border terminals for the legitimate trade and movement of goods.

The issue of cross border terrorism is also a matter of concern as the TTP militants often launch attacks on the Pakistani security forces from the Afghan territory. Pakistan has provided intelligence to the Taliban government and asked them to act on the Taliban leadership. So far, there have been mixed results, but there is ongoing diplomacy. The security forces of Pakistan have proven to be capable and capable of responding to terrorist attacks, safeguarding the lives of the people and ensuring public peace and security.

Case Study Three: IMF Engagements and Economic Reform

Pakistan's History of IMF Arrangements

Since the 1980s, Pakistan has been able to successfully conclude several IMF programs, due to structural issues in its economy, such as low tax to GDP, import dependent manufacturing, and susceptibility to external shocks. In each case, conditional pledges have been made for fiscal consolidation, tax reform, reducing energy subsidies, and exchange rate flexibility. Some programs were successfully finished, others faced implementation challenges.

Sarfraz (2022) has studied the effect of IMF packages on Pakistani economic growth. The analysis reveals that IMF programs generally bring rapid stabilization of external accounts and re-establishment of investor confidence in the short term. Pakistan's Extended Fund Facility (2019) for instance, has assisted the country to tackle balance of payments concerns and structural reforms. The government finished the program in spite of the challenges faced such as the Covid-19 pandemic and commodity price shocks.

Policy Coordination Between Economic and Security Institutions

Economic diplomacy is a process of coordination between the Ministry of Finance, State Bank and security institutions on matters of strategic nature in Pakistan. When negotiating with the IMF, the fiscal deficit has to be lowered, which may have implications for defense and security spending. These pledges are checked by the National Security Committee to guarantee that economic changes will not affect the country's security forces' capabilities.

According to the staff report of the International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2023), Pakistan has been cooperating actively with the IMF demands and ensured crucial security and development expenditure. Such an equilibrium has helped Pakistan to keep its defense preparedness, while simultaneously undertaking social protection measures and infrastructure projects. Military involvement in economic decision-making guarantees that reforms are sustainable, nationally.

Tax Reform and Revenue Mobilization Activities

Pakistan's tax-GDP ratio (around 10%) is low when compared to international standards. Repeated governments have tried to expand the tax base, decrease exemptions, and enforce tax compliance. Federal Board of Revenue has adopted digitalisation programmes, facilitation centres for taxpayers, and actions for non filers. Income from agriculture has been encouraged to be taxed at the provincial level, which has been a priority to taxpayer reform.

A number of structural issues like the size of the informal sector, the political sensitivity of direct taxation, and limited administrative capacities are identified reasons behind the slow progress of tax reform in developing countries (Khan, 2022). The Government has taken steps forward in incremental steps and has seen an overall increase in tax revenue in nominal terms. The IMF and the World bank have undertaken technical assistance on revenue mobilization matters from an international perspective. The reform effort is expected to be continued to gradually raise the ratio of taxes to GDP in future.

The National Security Policy 2022-2026: A Geoeconomic Pivot

Policy Content and Conceptual Innovation

National Security Policy (NSP) 2022-2026 is a historic policy in Pakistan's strategic history. The first time in Pakistan's history that a national security strategy is formally enunciated, which puts economic security at its core. The NSP identifies eight dimensions of national security that are interwoven: economic security, human security, traditional security, internal security, food security, water security, energy security and climate security (National Security Division, 2022). The NSP's Citizen Centric approach has been laid on the foundation that national security is ultimately for the welfare of Pakistan's people. The policy recognizes vertical inequality, horizontal inequality, regional development differentials and service delivery gaps as drivers of instability. Pakistan's efforts to resolve these domestic issues are geared towards fostering a sense of unity and security within the nation, while also protecting it from external threats. The NSP's framework of implementation has been studied by Ashraf, Mustafa and Ali (2023). The policy inculcates monitoring and evaluation processes with civilian ministries, provincial governments and the security institutions. Progress reports are given to the Cabinet and the National Security Committee. This institutional structure is designed for accountability and continual improvements.

Assessment of the outcomes, results, and impacts of the implementation

The NSP has been implemented in various aspect. Regarding economic security, Pakistan has been engaging with the IMF, the second phase of CPEC, and trade normalisation with its neighbours. In the field of human security, the social protection schemes like Ehsaas have increased the coverage to millions of families. In the area of water security, the government has been hastening the construction of dams, such as Diamer Bhasha and Mohmand. Pakistan has prepared its National Adaptation Plan, and has initiated efforts to utilize international climate finance following the floods in 2022.

Implementation obstacles include resource limitations, administrative capacity limitations, and external factors such as global inflation and regional uncertainty. The NSP framework offers a pathway to take a systematic approach to these challenges, however. The cross sectoral approach of the policy allows trade offs and prioritizing the allocation of resources.

International Reception and Cooperation

The Pakistan's NSP is welcomed with enthusiasm by international stakeholders. The United States, China, the European Union and multilateral institutions have recognized the comprehensive approach Pakistan has taken towards its security. The policy has enabled development assistance for climate change, food security and counterterrorism (Weinstein, 2023). International partners have matched NSP priorities in terms of assistance programs.

The NSP has also played the role of a diplomatic advocate for Pakistan on subjects such as the situation of the Afghan people, Islamophobia and climate change. Pakistan's national security framework has been articulated, giving it more credibility in international forums. This policy is a testament to Pakistan's commitment to responsible statecraft and constructive multilateralism.

Implications and Pathways Forward

Strengthening Institutional Coordination

The experience of Pakistan has shown the need for institutional coordination between civilian and military institutions in foreign policy matters. The model of the National Security Committee has proved to be effective in uniting different viewpoints and to guarantee coherence for policy. In the future, Pakistan may need to further build the capacity of its civilians for strategic analysis and foreign policy planning.

Malik (2024) has proposed that the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House be briefed more often and receive specific research assistance. In the same vein, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs can increase its strategic planning capacity in order to be able to predict future challenges and opportunities. These institutional changes would be in addition to current coordination arrangements.

Sustaining the Goeconomic Pivot

The shift in Pakistan's security-centric to goeconomic approach is full of both opportunities and challenges. The NSP has set out the conceptual framework but ongoing implementation will need ongoing commitments at the political level through government changes. Development assistance, market access, and technology cooperation are ways the international community can help this transition.

The China Pakistan Economic Corridor is a key part of Pakistan's goeconomic agenda. The agriculture, IT and export-oriented industries in phase two of CPEC will be in line with Pakistan's comparative advantage. The successful establishment of SEZs and industrial cooperation will create jobs and foreign exchange earning. Pakistan also wants to diversify its economic ties with other nations, such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey and the United States.

Cooperation and stability in the region. Cooperation and stability in the region

The goals of Pakistan's foreign policy demand peace and stability in the region. Afghanistan's stability is a priority and Pakistan is continuing to provide humanitarian assistance and inclusive governance. Although politically touchy, normalizing India-Pakistan trade relations may have economic consequences for both nations. Pakistan is in the geopolitically advantageous position of being a natural trade route between Central and South Asia, presenting opportunities for regional integration.

Mushtaq, Mazari and Ahsan (2024) have studied the impact of the developments in the Indian politics on Pakistan's foreign policy. Tensions have also emerged in 2019 following the revocation of Article 370 from the Kashmir region of India and related policies, while Pakistan has engaged in diplomatic efforts via back-channel talks. Continued developments in the India Pakistan relations will rely on each country's desire to solve fundamental issues.

Conclusion

This is a clear indication of Pakistan's strategic choices, which are far from immature and undue to the relationship between internal governance and foreign policy. The country has established institutional arrangements, especially in the form of the National Security Committee, to combine civilian and military views on national security issues. The NSDP 2022-2026 has been a conceptual leap and has put economic security and citizens' welfare at the heart of Pakistan's strategic thinking.

The three case studies discussed in this article - CPEC, Afghanistan policy and engagements with IMF - tell the case of how Pakistan deals with the nexus between domestic and external elements. CPEC is an example of Pakistan's efforts in strengthening infrastructure building and regional connectivity in the framework of strategic partnership with China. Afghanistan policy is about Pakistan's interest in regional stability and humanitarian outcomes which is being achieved through diplomacy and border management. IMF engagements reflect Pakistan's resolve to implement tough economic reforms without compromising key national security interests.

However, challenges remain such as limitations in implementation capacity, shocks to the system and the difficulty of maintaining policy coherence over electoral and administrative transitions. But Pakistan has proven to be resilient in dealing with these challenges. The NSP framework offers a blueprint for ongoing efforts in economic security, human development, and institutional capacity development.

Pakistan provides an opportunity, an opportunity as an international partner, to Pakistan as a strategic location but more importantly to Pakistan as a constructive engagement partner. International partners can design cooperation frameworks that help achieve Pakistan's development goals, in addition to regional stability and prosperity, if they understand its domestic governance context.

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