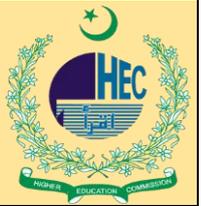



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**The China Factor in Pakistan's Middle East Diplomacy: A Shift from Religious Solidarity to Strategic Realism**

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**Abstract**

*This article investigates the evolving shapes of Pakistan's foreign policy toward the Middle East, focusing on a notable shift from a historically religion-driven framework to one increasingly defined by strategic realism. For decades, Pakistan's engagement with Middle Eastern states particularly Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Iran was shaped by shared Islamic identity and religious solidarity. This ideological orientation found expression in Pakistan's enthusiastic support for the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), participation in Islamic summits, and alignment with Gulf monarchies on key regional issues. However, with the rise of China as a dominant economic and strategic actor in the region, Pakistan's foreign policy priorities are undergoing significant recalibration. The emergence of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), along with Beijing's expanding influence in the Gulf and Iran, has placed Pakistan in a delicate but strategic position, compelling it to balance traditional alliances with emerging partnerships. Using a qualitative methodology grounded in case study analysis, this study critically examines Pakistan's diplomatic postures on the Yemen conflict, its nuanced approach toward Iran, and the evolving dynamics with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The research applies the theoretical lens of strategic realism to argue that economic dependency, security concerns, and geopolitical compulsions now increasingly dictate Pakistan's decisions, often at the expense of religious symbolism. The findings reveal a deeper trend of policy pragmatism driven by China's indirect leverage, which is steadily reshaping Islamabad's engagement with the Middle East. This study contributes to the broader discourse on foreign policy behavior of secondary powers and enriches understanding of how external actors like China influence regional realignments in the Muslim world.*

**Keywords:** Pakistan, China, Middle East, Strategic Realism, Foreign Policy, Religious Solidarity.

**1. Introduction**

Pakistan's foreign policy toward the Middle East has long been influenced by a deeply entrenched narrative of religious solidarity. As a country founded in the name of Islam and home to a significant Sunni Muslim population, Pakistan has historically aligned its diplomatic outlook with Islamic values and identity. This orientation was evident in its consistent support for the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), its vocal advocacy for the rights of Muslim communities globally, and its firm alignment with key Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (Mustafa, 2020). Over the decades, this religious identity-based diplomacy formed the core of Pakistan's relations with the Middle East, often superseding

considerations of geopolitical pragmatism or economic calculus. However, recent developments in global and regional politics suggest that Pakistan's foreign policy priorities are undergoing a significant transformation. The rise of China as a global power, its increasing economic and strategic footprint in the Middle East, and the growing interdependence between Beijing and Islamabad largely embodied in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) are reshaping the foundations of Pakistan's diplomatic engagements. As China forges closer ties with Gulf monarchies, signs long-term agreements with Iran, and positions itself as a strategic counterbalance to Western influence in the region, Pakistan finds itself compelled to recalibrate its approach (Chaziza, 2016). Traditional religious alignments are giving way to a more strategic, interest-driven foreign policy rooted in economic security, regional stability, and great power competition.

This article seeks to investigate how China's growing presence in the Middle East has influenced the evolution of Pakistan's diplomatic behavior, particularly its shift from symbolic religious solidarity toward a framework based on strategic realism. The central research question asks: To what extent has China's strategic and economic engagement with the Middle East transformed Pakistan's foreign policy from an ideological model to one driven by pragmatic national interests? To answer this, the article will analyze Pakistan's policy responses to key regional developments including its neutrality on the Yemen conflict, its ambiguous positioning toward Iran, and its recalibrated relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The primary objective of this research is to unpack the mechanisms through which China's indirect influence manifests in Pakistan's regional diplomacy. It aims to explore how economic dependence, security coordination, and geopolitical shifts shape Islamabad's policy decisions in the Middle East. A secondary objective is to highlight how these developments reflect broader global trends where small and medium-sized states increasingly navigate complex alliances between rising and established powers. Through the theoretical lens of strategic realism, the study evaluates the extent to which material interests and power asymmetries now guide Pakistan's behavior in contrast to the earlier era dominated by ideological posturing.

This inquiry holds significant academic and policy relevance. While much scholarship has focused on Pakistan's role in South Asia or its bilateral ties with China, relatively little has been written on how China's regional ambitions indirectly shape Pakistan's relations with the broader Islamic world. By filling this gap, the article contributes to the expanding literature on secondary state behavior under changing global hierarchies and the evolving nature of foreign policy in the Muslim world. Furthermore, as Middle Eastern geopolitics become increasingly multipolar with actors like China, Russia, and India asserting influence the choices of countries like Pakistan become critical in understanding future patterns of alignment, cooperation, and competition. Ultimately, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how Pakistan is reimagining its place in the Middle East, not as a religious interlocutor, but as a pragmatic actor guided by strategic imperatives and shaped by the geopolitical realities of a shifting global order.

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to explore the shifting dynamics of Pakistan's Middle East diplomacy in relation to China's growing influence. The case study method is particularly suited for examining complex phenomena within their presence, allowing for a detailed understanding of how Pakistan's foreign policy adapts to both regional and global changes (Salman & et. al., 2024). By focusing on specific cases, this research aims to identify patterns and explanations that illustrate the broader theoretical argument regarding the shift from religious solidarity to strategic realism. Data for this research is drawn from multiple sources to ensure triangulation and validity. Official speeches and statements by Pakistani policymakers provide insight into the evolving narrative and priorities within Pakistan's diplomatic circles. Policy documents, including white papers and official foreign policy guidelines, offer a formal record of strategic intentions and shifts over time.

Additionally, expert commentary from scholars, diplomats, and regional analysts contributes interpretative depth and contextual understanding. Media analysis of regional and international outlets supplements these sources by highlighting public discourse and diplomatic interactions concerning key regional issues. The selection of cases Yemen, Iran, and the UAE/Saudi Arabia reflects critical arenas where Pakistan's foreign policy has been tested amid competing regional interests and China's expanding footprint. The Yemen conflict represents a complex scenario involving sectarian, political, and security dimensions where Pakistan has maintained a delicate neutrality, balancing its traditional Gulf alliances with broader strategic considerations. Iran's proximity and sectarian ties pose a different set of challenges, requiring Pakistan to navigate between religious affinity and geopolitical pressures. The UAE and Saudi Arabia serve as important economic and political partners, with Pakistan's diplomacy influenced by both religious solidarity and the need to safeguard Chinese investments linked to regional stability.

The temporal scope of this study spans from 2015 to 2024, a period marked by the operationalization and expansion of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) within the broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This timeframe captures significant geopolitical shifts, including escalating regional conflicts and evolving Sino-Pakistani relations, which are crucial for understanding the current recalibration of Pakistan's Middle East policy. Together, this methodological framework enables a comprehensive examination of how China's strategic ambitions indirectly shape Pakistan's diplomatic choices, offering a rich empirical basis to support the theoretical claims presented in this study.

## **2. Literature Review**

Pakistan's foreign policy toward the Middle East has traditionally emphasized its religious and ideological underpinnings. Pakistan's diplomacy in the region was largely shaped by Islamic solidarity, prioritizing cultural and religious affiliations over strategic calculations (Khan, 2025). Pakistan's consistent support for the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and its close ties with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council members reflect this religious identity-based approach. Pakistan's vocal advocacy for Muslim causes globally and its refusal to recognize Israel are also manifestations of this ideological alignment (Khan, 2024). This reveals that while religious solidarity was symbolically important, it lacked the leverage to decisively influence regional outcomes. Furthermore, Pakistan's complex relations with Iran, marked by sectarian and geopolitical divisions, underscore the limitations of an identity-based foreign policy. This has forced Islamabad to reconsider the efficacy of relying solely on religious affinity as a guiding principle.

Parallel to these analyses, a growing body of literature examines China's global rise and its ambitions in the Middle East. Beijing's approach is characterized by strategic neutrality combined with long-term economic investments and non-interventionist diplomacy (Chen, 2023). China's Belt and Road Initiative, particularly the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, serves as a key instrument for expanding its influence in energy markets, trade networks, and strategic infrastructure. While earlier scholarship viewed China's role in the Middle East as primarily commercial, recent Chinese engagements reflect a more assertive political and strategic posture (Fulton, 2023). For example, China's mediation efforts between Iran and Saudi Arabia and its military cooperation with Gulf states indicate a shift towards proactive regional involvement. Despite extensive research on China-Pakistan relations, especially regarding the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, the indirect influence of China's Middle East ambitions on Pakistan's regional diplomacy remains underexplored. The bilateral China-Pakistan relationship has been documented (Wolf, 2018), but deeper analysis on how China's presence in the Middle East shapes Pakistan's policy choices is lacking. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Pakistan's diplomatic moves such as neutrality on the Yemen conflict, cautious engagement with Iran, and balancing relations between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab

Emirates are increasingly shaped by its desire to align with Chinese strategic interests and protect Chinese investments.

Theoretically, the debate between religious solidarity and strategic realism provides a useful lens for analyzing Pakistan's foreign policy evolution. Constructivist theories emphasize identity, norms, and shared beliefs as primary drivers of state behavior (Wendt, 1999). This perspective explains Pakistan's early diplomatic conduct, rooted in Islamic fraternity and normative commitments. In contrast, realism focuses on power, security, and national interests as determinants of foreign policy (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2014). Pakistan's recent caution in engaging sectarian conflicts and its prioritization of economic and security interests align more closely with realist assumptions. However, the literature rarely integrates these perspectives to explain Pakistan's shift from an identity-driven to an interest-driven foreign policy in the Middle East. Moreover, the role of a rising external power, such as China, as a catalyst for this transition is seldom analyzed. This study fills that gap by examining how China's strategic footprint indirectly incentivizes Pakistan to adopt a more pragmatic and stable diplomatic posture in the region. Such a framework enriches broader debates on how smaller states adapt their foreign policies amid shifting global power dynamics. In sum, this article builds on existing scholarship by focusing on the triadic relationship between Pakistan, China, and the Middle East. It highlights the nuanced ways in which China's rise affects Pakistan's diplomatic behavior, moving beyond traditional explanations of ideology or pure interest to account for complex multi-level influences shaping Pakistan's foreign policy in the contemporary era.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

Strategic realism provides the primary theoretical lens through which Pakistan's shifting foreign policy in the Middle East can be understood. Rooted in the realist tradition, strategic realism emphasizes the centrality of power, security, and national interest in shaping state behavior (Waltz, 1979). For Pakistan, a state facing multiple security challenges both domestically and regionally, this framework explains why pragmatic considerations have increasingly taken precedence over ideological commitments. Realism suggests that states must prioritize survival and the maximization of their power within an anarchic international system, which helps to illuminate Pakistan's recalibration of its Middle East diplomacy in response to changing regional dynamics and the growing influence of external actors such as China. In contrast, constructivism focuses on the role of identities, norms, and shared beliefs in informing foreign policy decisions (Wendt, 1999). This approach has been useful in explaining Pakistan's earlier Middle East diplomacy that was largely driven by religious solidarity and Islamic identity. Constructivist scholars argue that Pakistan's foreign policy was historically influenced by its self-perception as a defender of the Muslim ummah and the promotion of Islamic causes internationally. However, constructivism alone does not fully account for the recent pragmatic shifts, especially when ideological alignment conflicts with strategic interests or the protection of critical economic projects such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

Strategic realism is more suited to explaining the current shift in Pakistan's Middle East diplomacy because it captures the interplay between power politics and pragmatic statecraft. The rise of China as a strategic partner with significant investments in Pakistan and the broader region creates new imperatives for Islamabad to align its policies in ways that safeguard these interests. Pakistan's cautious stance on conflicts like the Yemen war, its nuanced engagement with Iran despite sectarian differences, and balancing acts between Gulf states exemplify realist behavior aimed at maximizing national interest and ensuring regional stability (Scobell & Nader, 2016). These decisions underscore a move away from ideational motivations toward a calculus based on geopolitical realities. The justification for applying this combined framework lies in its ability to encompass the complexity of Pakistan's foreign policy evolution. By integrating strategic realism with constructivism, this study

recognizes that state behavior is shaped both by material interests and ideational factors. This dual perspective allows for a more nuanced analysis of how Pakistan negotiates its traditional religious ties while adapting to the structural constraints imposed by the changing global order and China's growing influence in the Middle East. Such a theoretical approach is essential for understanding the multidimensional nature of Pakistan's diplomacy in a region marked by competing power rivalries and shifting alliances. In summary, strategic realism provides the core explanatory framework for analyzing Pakistan's foreign policy shift in the Middle East, while constructivism offers a valuable contrast by highlighting the legacy of ideological motivations. Together, they provide a comprehensive foundation for investigating how Pakistan balances its religious identity with pragmatic strategic interests in an evolving international environment.

#### **4. Historical Context: Pakistan's Middle East Diplomacy and Islamic Solidarity**

Since the 1970s, Pakistan's Middle East diplomacy has been deeply intertwined with its identity as a Muslim-majority state, placing significant emphasis on Islamic solidarity. This period marked a turning point as Pakistan actively aligned itself with the broader Muslim world, seeking to consolidate political alliances through shared religious identity. Hajj diplomacy emerged as a unique dimension of Pakistan's engagement with the Middle East. The annual pilgrimage to Mecca provided Pakistani leaders with opportunities to interact with Gulf rulers and other Muslim heads of state, fostering goodwill and cooperation beyond formal diplomatic channels (Tijjani, 2023). These religious summits and pilgrimages reinforced Pakistan's image as a committed member of the Muslim ummah and served as informal venues to discuss bilateral and regional concerns. The country's role in supporting Muslim causes resonated domestically, bolstering its legitimacy as a state grounded in Islamic values. However, the intensification of the Iran-Saudi rivalry from the 1980s onward introduced significant complications for Pakistan's Middle East policy. Both countries are major regional powers representing different sectarian and geopolitical interests Saudi Arabia as the Sunni-led kingdom and Iran as the Shia Islamic Republic (Modebadze, 2018). Pakistan's geographic proximity to Iran and its close ties with Saudi Arabia placed it in a difficult position, compelling Islamabad to adopt a policy of dual alignment (Alam, 2004). This balancing act sought to maintain cordial relations with both powers while avoiding overt support for one side over the other. The ongoing rivalry, fueled by proxy conflicts and ideological contestations, challenged Pakistan's capacity to promote religious solidarity without becoming entangled in sectarian conflicts.

Over time, the effectiveness of religious solidarity as the foundation of Pakistan's Middle East diplomacy has visibly declined. The geopolitical realities of the region, shaped by power competition and shifting alliances, have rendered ideational unity less influential. Conflicting national interests among Muslim states often outweigh shared religious identity, limiting the scope for collective action based purely on faith. Pakistan's economic imperatives and security concerns have further pushed the country toward pragmatic diplomacy that prioritizes strategic partnerships and economic benefits over ideological alignment. The rise of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) during the 2010s added a new dimension to Pakistan's foreign policy calculations (Hoh, 2019). As Islamabad seeks to secure Chinese investments and regional connectivity, it has had to reassess its traditional diplomatic orientations, particularly in the Middle East. This has accelerated the gradual shift away from reliance on religious solidarity toward a more strategic, interest-based approach, highlighting the limitations of ideological diplomacy in a complex and rapidly changing geopolitical environment. It is true that historically, Pakistan's Middle East diplomacy since the 1970s has been shaped by a strong emphasis on Islamic solidarity, facilitated through mechanisms like the OIC and Hajj diplomacy (Faheem & et. Al., 2020). Yet, the persistent Iran-Saudi rivalry and evolving regional dynamics have exposed the constraints of this approach, leading Pakistan to increasingly adopt a strategy grounded in

pragmatic realism. This historical context is essential for understanding the contemporary transformation of Pakistan's foreign policy in the Middle East.

### **5. The Rise of China and the Strategic Realignment**

China's ascendancy as a dominant global economic and geopolitical actor has brought profound shifts in Pakistan's foreign policy, especially concerning its relations with the Middle East. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a major initiative under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), stands at the heart of this transformation. CPEC has not only injected much-needed investment into Pakistan's infrastructure and energy sectors but also strategically linked Pakistan's economic future with China's regional ambitions (Hussain, 2024). This growing economic interdependence has prompted Pakistan to recalibrate its foreign policy priorities in a way that aligns closely with Chinese interests. Parallel to the development of CPEC, China has expanded its engagement across the Middle East through multifaceted economic and diplomatic initiatives. Beijing has secured crucial energy agreements with Iran, bypassing Western sanctions while ensuring its long-term energy security (Tashjian, 2020). At the same time, China has pursued substantial investment and trade relations with Saudi Arabia, encompassing sectors such as oil, infrastructure, and military cooperation (Fulton, 2020). This dual engagement enables China to maintain a neutral yet influential stance in the region's enduring Iran-Saudi rivalry, reflecting Beijing's pragmatic approach to balance competing regional interests.

Pakistan, deeply invested in maintaining the success of CPEC, has demonstrated an increasingly cautious but clearly aligned stance within this evolving China-centric geopolitical framework. The reliance on Chinese investment and diplomatic support has encouraged Islamabad to temper its previous emphases on religious and ideological connections with Middle Eastern countries in favor of pragmatic state interests. This shift is particularly notable in Pakistan's diplomatic messaging and policy choices, which now prioritize sustaining harmony with China's Middle Eastern partners over symbolic religious solidarity. This evolving foreign policy posture has involved a gradual transition from overt expressions of Islamic unity to strategic restraint. Pakistan's diplomatic engagements in regional conflicts now reflect a heightened awareness of China's broader regional relationships and the necessity to avoid discord that could jeopardize economic and strategic gains. Such caution marks a significant departure from earlier decades when Pakistan's Middle East policy was heavily influenced by sectarian and religious considerations, reinforcing instead a realist orientation prioritizing national interest and geopolitical pragmatism.

Moreover, the strategic realignment under China's influence compels Pakistan to navigate a complex regional environment marked by shifting alliances and power rivalries. As the United States scales back its direct involvement in the Middle East, China's growing influence provides Pakistan both opportunities and challenges. Islamabad must delicately balance its relationships with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, Iran, and China without undermining its strategic autonomy or regional credibility. This evolving diplomatic calculus underscores the challenges faced by Pakistan as it attempts to integrate its traditional religious diplomacy with the imperatives of emerging great power politics. China's rise and the expansion of its strategic and economic interests in the Middle East have fundamentally reshaped Pakistan's foreign policy landscape. The economic leverage provided by CPEC, combined with China's nuanced engagement with regional powers, has encouraged Pakistan to shift from symbolic religious diplomacy towards a more pragmatic, strategic approach. This realignment highlights Pakistan's increasing integration into a China-led geopolitical framework, reflecting broader transformations in regional power dynamics and the evolving nature of international relations in the 21st century.

### **6. Case Studies**

#### **6.1 Pakistan's Position on the Yemen War**

Pakistan's stance on the Yemen conflict has been marked by an official policy of neutrality, as reflected in a parliamentary resolution passed in 2015. This resolution underscored Islamabad's commitment to non-interference, emphasizing humanitarian concerns and advocating for a peaceful resolution through dialogue. The decision to abstain from participating militarily was influenced by the need to balance competing pressures from Saudi Arabia and its growing ties with China. Saudi Arabia, as a key financial and religious partner, exerted considerable pressure on Pakistan to join the coalition led against the Houthi rebels. However, Pakistan's leadership recognized the risks associated with entering a complex regional conflict that could exacerbate sectarian tensions domestically and strain relations with Iran.

At the same time, Pakistan's burgeoning economic partnership with China through CPEC introduced new strategic calculations. China's cautious but increasing engagement in the Middle East, particularly its constructive ties with Iran, encouraged Islamabad to adopt a neutral position to safeguard its relationship with both Beijing and Riyadh. Public discourse within Pakistan reflected mixed sentiments, with some factions emphasizing solidarity with Saudi Arabia as the custodian of Islam's holiest sites, while others called for a more balanced approach aligned with Pakistan's national interests (Ali, 2021). Elite-level discussions prioritized maintaining strategic autonomy and leveraging China's influence to mediate between competing regional powers, thus preventing Pakistan from becoming embroiled in the Yemen conflict.

### **6.2 The Iran Factor**

Pakistan's policy towards Iran has been characterized by strategic ambiguity, a delicate balancing act shaped by geographic proximity, sectarian dynamics, and competing external influences. Border security remains a primary concern due to frequent cross-border militancy and smuggling, which have complicated bilateral ties (Tehsin, 2017). China's significant investments in Iran, especially in the energy sector and the development of the Chabahar and Gwadar ports, have introduced new dimensions to Pakistan's Iran policy. Beijing's stakes in Iranian stability and regional connectivity through the Belt and Road Initiative have prompted Islamabad to adopt a cautious but pragmatic approach, aiming to avoid antagonizing either Tehran or its Gulf Arab partners.

Sectarian sensitivity plays a critical role in Pakistan's Iran policy, as the country hosts significant Shia and Sunni populations. Islamabad's leadership seeks to prevent spillover effects of the Iran-Saudi rivalry from destabilizing its own internal security environment. Thus, Pakistan often avoids overt alignment with either side in regional conflicts, maintaining a policy that emphasizes dialogue and regional cooperation. The strategic ambiguity enables Islamabad to maintain workable relations with Iran while simultaneously upholding its commitments to Gulf allies, reflecting the complexities inherent in managing sectarian and geopolitical tensions. China's role as a neutral economic partner further supports Pakistan's efforts to strike this balance, underscoring Beijing's indirect influence on Islamabad's Middle East diplomacy.

### **6.3 Relations with the UAE and Saudi Arabia**

Pakistan's relations with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia remain pivotal, anchored in historical ties, economic assistance, and shared religious and cultural values. The concept of "loan diplomacy" has been a recurrent feature, with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi providing financial support to Pakistan during economic crises (Radulovic, 2022). However, these economic conditionalities often come with expectations regarding Pakistan's foreign policy alignment, particularly in regional conflicts and diplomatic stances. In recent years, tensions have emerged, particularly between Riyadh and Islamabad, over Pakistan's reluctance to fully endorse the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen and its balanced approach to Iran. China's silent leverage in this dynamic has subtly shifted the balance of power. The strategic and economic partnership between Islamabad and Beijing provides Pakistan with

greater bargaining power vis-à-vis its traditional Middle Eastern allies. This relationship allows Pakistan to navigate Riyadh's demands more cautiously, prioritizing economic development and infrastructural projects tied to CPEC over unconditional political support to Saudi agendas. Despite these tensions, Pakistan continues to value its ties with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, given the large Pakistani diaspora in these countries and their role as sources of remittances.

Balancing the interests of these long-standing allies with those of emerging economic partners like China requires nuanced diplomacy. Pakistan's foreign policy now reflects an effort to harmonize traditional religious and economic linkages with pragmatic considerations driven by China's growing influence in the region. This balancing act underscores Islamabad's shift toward a more strategic realism-based foreign policy, where economic interests and geopolitical calculations increasingly guide decisions over symbolic religious solidarity.

### **7. Analysis and Discussion**

Pakistan's Middle East diplomacy has undergone a significant transformation when comparing its historical and contemporary approaches. Traditionally, Pakistan's foreign policy in the region was heavily influenced by religious ideology, emphasizing Islamic solidarity and brotherhood. The country's engagement in forums such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and its active participation in religious summits and Hajj diplomacy reflected a commitment to a shared Muslim identity as the foundation of its regional diplomacy. This ideological approach often guided Pakistan's alignment in Middle Eastern conflicts, positioning it alongside Saudi Arabia and other Sunni-majority states based on sectarian and religious affiliations.

However, recent diplomatic behavior reveals a distinct shift toward pragmatic, geopolitically-driven economics, where strategic interests and economic partnerships take precedence over religious ideology. Pakistan's cautious neutrality in conflicts like the Yemen war and its balanced stance between Saudi Arabia and Iran underscore this transition. The traditional rhetoric of Islamic unity has been increasingly sidelined as Islamabad seeks to navigate a complex regional environment marked by intense rivalries and competing interests. This recalibration demonstrates a move toward strategic realism, where national interests and economic security dominate foreign policy considerations. Central to this shift is China's growing influence in Pakistan's Middle East diplomacy. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and China's expanding presence in the Middle East have introduced new dynamics that reshape Pakistan's diplomatic options. Beijing's extensive economic investments and its policy of non-interference in regional sectarian disputes provide Pakistan with an alternative framework that prioritizes economic cooperation and stability over ideological alignment (Noor, 2023). China's pragmatic diplomacy allows Islamabad to engage with various Middle Eastern actors without being constrained by traditional sectarian loyalties. Consequently, Pakistan's foreign policy has evolved into a balancing act that leverages Chinese support to maintain autonomy and maximize economic benefits while managing complex regional relationships.

This strategic realignment carries profound implications for Pakistan's identity and its role within the Muslim world. While religious solidarity once served as a cornerstone of Pakistan's foreign policy, the prioritization of geopolitical economics raises questions about the country's ideological commitments and its perceived leadership role among Muslim nations. Some scholars argue that this shift might weaken Pakistan's influence in the Islamic world by signaling a move away from collective religious causes toward national self-interest (Murad, 2023). Conversely, others contend that adapting to the realities of global power politics and economic dependencies is essential for Pakistan's survival and growth in an increasingly multipolar world (Abbasi, 2023). Ultimately, Pakistan's evolving Middle East diplomacy illustrates the complexities faced by a state striving to reconcile its historical identity with contemporary strategic imperatives. China's role as a stabilizing economic partner and

geopolitical actor has enabled Pakistan to redefine its approach from one rooted primarily in religious solidarity to one emphasizing strategic realism. This transformation not only broadens Pakistan's diplomatic maneuverability but also reflects broader trends in international relations, where ideology is often subordinated to pragmatic state interests in pursuit of national security and development goals.

### **8. Conclusion**

This study highlights a clear evolution in Pakistan's Middle East diplomacy, moving from a foundation deeply rooted in religious solidarity toward a more pragmatic approach shaped by strategic realism. Historically, Pakistan's foreign policy was strongly influenced by its Islamic identity, positioning itself as a leading voice within the Muslim world through active participation in religious summits and alliances based on sectarian affiliations. However, the changing geopolitical landscape, coupled with the rise of China as a major global and regional actor, has prompted Islamabad to recalibrate its diplomatic strategy.

Strategic realism now increasingly defines Pakistan's engagements in the Middle East, where economic interests, security concerns, and geopolitical calculations take precedence over ideological commitments. Religious solidarity, while still maintained symbolically to uphold Pakistan's image and historical ties, no longer serves as the primary driver of policy decisions. Instead, Pakistan balances its relationships carefully, particularly in the context of the Iran-Saudi rivalry, reflecting a shift toward *realpolitik* and pragmatic diplomacy. China's expanding economic footprint and growing influence through initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor have introduced a new layer of complexity to Pakistan's foreign policy. This growing entanglement provides Pakistan with vital economic opportunities but also risks increasing Beijing's indirect control over Islamabad's diplomatic choices. This dynamic reshapes Pakistan's foreign policy landscape, compelling Islamabad to navigate carefully between traditional allies and emerging economic partners.

Overall, Pakistan's Middle East diplomacy exemplifies how states adapt their foreign policies in response to shifting global power dynamics, balancing ideological legacies with the imperatives of contemporary geopolitics. To strengthen its position, Pakistan should pursue a diversified foreign policy that balances economic, security, and ideological considerations with strategic clarity. While China's role is vital, Islamabad must avoid overdependence on Beijing to maintain diplomatic autonomy and flexibility. Expanding partnerships with other regional actors and global powers can mitigate risks associated with a single dominant partner. Pakistan's policymakers should enhance institutional capacity to analyze and respond to the rapidly changing Middle East landscape, incorporating nuanced understanding of regional rivalries and global shifts. Investing in diplomatic outreach beyond traditional allies, including emerging economies and multilateral forums, will provide Islamabad with greater leverage and options. Future research could explore comparative studies involving countries like Turkey and Malaysia, which also balance Islamic identity with pragmatic foreign policies, to offer valuable insights for Pakistan. Additionally, further examination of Gulf geopolitics and its impact on South Asian diplomacy can deepen understanding of the region's evolving dynamics and help shape more informed strategies for Pakistan's engagement.

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