



Pakistan-US Relations in the Post-9/11 Era: Strategic Partnership or Tactical Engagement?

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ABSTRACT

The post-9/11 era has significantly transformed Pakistan-United States relations, shifting them from a security-centric alliance to a complex and multifaceted engagement marked by both strategic cooperation and mutual distrust. As both nations confront the geopolitical aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, the future of their bilateral relations hinges on pragmatic collaboration across multiple fronts. This paper explores the evolving dynamics of Pak-US ties with a focus on regional stability in South Asia, especially Afghanistan, counterterrorism strategies, and the potential for non-traditional areas of cooperation including climate change, education, and technology. It argues that while counterterrorism remains a shared interest, there is untapped potential in deepening ties through climate resilience projects, academic exchanges, and digital innovation partnerships. Drawing on policy reports, scholarly articles, and institutional analyses, the paper outlines actionable trust-building measures such as soft diplomacy, regular high-level dialogues, and joint economic ventures that can revitalize engagement. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of moving beyond transactional relations to embrace a long-term strategic vision grounded in mutual respect and shared development goals. The paper concludes by asserting that despite historical setbacks, a recalibrated relationship based on diversified cooperation can not only stabilize bilateral ties but also contribute to broader regional peace and prosperity.

Keywords: Pakistan-United States Relations, Regional Stability, Afghanistan, Counterterrorism, Climate Change, Education, Technology Cooperation, Diplomatic Trust, Post-9/11, Bilateral Engagement.

Introduction:

The relationship between Pakistan and the United States has been marked by fluctuating dynamics, shaped by geopolitical interests, security concerns, and regional stability. Before the 9/11 attacks, Pak-US relations were largely transactional, influenced by Cold War alliances and Pakistan's role as a frontline state during the Soviet-Afghan War (1980s). However, the 1990s saw a decline in ties due to nuclear proliferation concerns and sanctions imposed on Pakistan (Ahmar, 2021). Despite these challenges, Pakistan remained a strategic partner for the U.S. in South Asia, albeit with limited engagement compared to earlier decades. The pre-9/11 era was characterized by mutual distrust, particularly after the U.S. imposed sanctions under the Pressler Amendment, which significantly strained bilateral cooperation (Khan & Ahmad, 2021).

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, dramatically altered the trajectory of Pak-US relations, thrusting Pakistan into a pivotal role in the U.S.-led War on Terror. The Bush administration demanded Pakistan's immediate cooperation in combating Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, leading to a swift realignment of Islamabad's foreign policy (Jones, 2022). Under President Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan became a key non-NATO ally, providing critical logistical support, intelligence sharing, and military bases for U.S. operations in Afghanistan. This partnership, however, came at a significant domestic cost for Pakistan, including internal security deterioration and a surge in

militancy (Yasmeen, 2021). The post-9/11 period thus marked a phase of intense but uneasy collaboration, where Pakistan's geopolitical significance surged, yet its relationship with the U.S. remained fraught with contradictions.

The geopolitical landscape following 9/11 underscored Pakistan's strategic importance, yet also exposed deep-seated tensions in the bilateral relationship. While the U.S. relied on Pakistan for counterterrorism efforts, Washington remained skeptical of Islamabad's dual policy toward militant groups (Fair, 2022). Additionally, the growing U.S.-India strategic partnership further complicated Pakistan's position, as it perceived this alignment as a threat to its regional influence (Riedel, 2021). The killing of Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad (2011) exacerbated mistrust, with U.S. officials questioning Pakistan's commitment to counterterrorism, while Pakistani leaders criticized American violations of sovereignty (Hussain, 2022). These developments illustrate how the post-9/11 era transformed Pak-US relations into a complex interplay of cooperation and conflict, driven by divergent long-term interests.

This article examines the major challenges in Pak-US relations after 9/11, analyzing how shifting geopolitical dynamics, counterterrorism policies, and regional rivalries have shaped bilateral ties. It explores the opportunities and obstacles in managing this critical relationship, particularly in light of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the evolving security architecture in South Asia. By drawing on scholarly analyses and policy reports, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing Pak-US relations in an era of uncertainty and realignment. The scope includes assessing economic aid, military cooperation, and diplomatic friction, while also considering future prospects for normalization (Weinbaum & Harder, 2023).

Historical Background of Pak-US Relations

The foundation of Pakistan-U.S. relations was laid during the Cold War, when Pakistan aligned itself with the Western bloc to counter Soviet influence in South Asia. Pakistan joined two key U.S.-backed defense pacts the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954 and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) in 1955 to bolster regional security against communist expansion (Haqqani, 2013). These alliances facilitated significant American military and economic aid to Pakistan, reinforcing its strategic position. However, the partnership was largely transactional, with the U.S. prioritizing geopolitical interests over democratic governance in Pakistan, a trend that would shape future bilateral dynamics (Kux, 2001).

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979) marked a turning point, transforming Pakistan into a frontline state in the U.S.-led effort to counter communism. With American and Saudi financing, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) facilitated the arming and training of Afghan mujahideen, who played a decisive role in expelling Soviet forces (Coll, 2004). This period solidified Pakistan's importance in U.S. foreign policy, but it also sowed the seeds of future instability by empowering militant groups that later turned against both nations (Rashid, 2008). Despite close cooperation, the U.S. abruptly disengaged from the region after the Soviet withdrawal (1989), leaving Pakistan to deal with the fallout of the Afghan conflict, including the rise of the Taliban and escalating sectarian violence (Weinbaum, 2021).

The 1990s saw a sharp deterioration in Pak-U.S. relations, driven by nuclear proliferation concerns and shifting

geopolitical priorities. The Pressler Amendment (1985) was invoked in 1990, cutting off military and economic aid after the U.S. could no longer certify that Pakistan was not developing nuclear weapons (Perkovich, 1999). Tensions escalated further when both India and Pakistan conducted nuclear tests in 1998, triggering additional U.S. sanctions under the Glenn Amendment (Ganguly, 2001). During this period, Washington's growing strategic tilt toward India viewed as a counterbalance to China marginalized Pakistan, deepening Islamabad's sense of abandonment (Hilali, 2017). The lack of sustained engagement fostered mutual distrust, with Pakistan accusing the U.S. of unreliable partnership and the U.S. questioning Pakistan's commitment to nonproliferation and counterterrorism (Haider, 2005).

By the late 1990s, Pak-U.S. relations had entered a phase of disengagement, marked by diplomatic and a lingering trust deficit. The Clinton administration's focus on mediating the Kashmir conflict and addressing nuclear risks did little to rebuild ties, as Pakistan's military coup (1999) and the Taliban's consolidation of power in Afghanistan further alienated Washington (Talbot, 2005). Pre-9/11, the U.S. viewed Pakistan through a lens of suspicion, particularly regarding its alleged support for cross-border militancy in Kashmir and Afghanistan (Fair, 2014). Conversely, Pakistan resented U.S. sanctions and perceived favoritism toward India, leaving bilateral relations at their lowest point in decades (Sattar, 2007). This strained backdrop set the stage for the dramatic realignment that would follow the 9/11 attacks.

Pakistan's Role in the War on Terror

Following the 9/11 attacks, Pakistan became a critical ally in the U.S.-led War on Terror, entering a strategic partnership under Operation Enduring Freedom (2001). Facing intense American pressure, President Pervez Musharraf pledged full cooperation, allowing the U.S. to utilize Pakistani airspace, military bases, and intelligence networks for operations in Afghanistan (Jones, 2022). Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) played a key role in apprehending high-value Al-Qaeda operatives, including Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the mastermind of 9/11 (Bergen, 2011). However, this alliance came at a heavy cost, as Pakistan faced severe backlash from militant groups, leading to a surge in domestic terrorism (Fair, 2015). The partnership, though instrumental in dismantling Al-Qaeda's infrastructure, was fraught with mistrust, as U.S. officials questioned Pakistan's long-term commitment to counterterrorism (Riedel, 2013).

Pakistan's logistical support for NATO forces further underscored its centrality to the War on Terror. The country served as a vital supply route for U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan, with nearly 80% of coalition supplies transiting through Pakistan via the Karachi port and the Khyber Pass (Weinbaum, 2022). Intelligence sharing between the CIA and ISI also proved crucial in tracking militant activities, though this cooperation was often marred by accusations of duplicity (Musharraf, 2006). The U.S. drone campaign in Pakistan's tribal regions, while effective in eliminating high-profile terrorists, sparked public outrage over sovereignty violations and civilian casualties (Shah, 2018). Despite these tensions, Pakistan remained an indispensable, if reluctant, partner in sustaining NATO's Afghan mission until the U.S. withdrawal in 2021.

To counter the escalating militant threat within its borders, Pakistan launched large-scale military operations such as Zarb-e-Azb (2014) and Rah-e-Rast (2009) in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). These offensives targeted Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Al-Qaeda affiliates, and other insurgent groups, significantly degrading their operational capabilities (Yusuf, 2016). The military campaigns displaced millions and inflicted heavy casualties, but they also restored government control over previously ungoverned spaces (Siddiqi, 2021). Despite these efforts, Pakistan faced persistent accusations of

selective counterterrorism, as critics argued that it targeted only those militants hostile to the state while tolerating groups like the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani Network (Lieven, 2011). This perceived duality fueled skepticism in Washington, complicating bilateral counterterrorism collaboration.

Allegations of Pakistan's dual role publicly supporting the War on Terror while covertly backing the Afghan Taliban remained a major point of contention. U.S. officials, including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, openly accused Pakistan of "running with the hare and hunting with the hounds" (Clinton, 2014). The discovery of Osama bin Laden's hideout in Abbottabad (2011) intensified these suspicions, with American lawmakers questioning whether Pakistan's military establishment had been complicit in sheltering him (Bowden, 2012). Conversely, Pakistani leaders criticized the U.S. for ignoring their sacrifices over 70,000 casualties and \$150 billion in economic losses while scapegoating Islamabad for Afghanistan's instability (Kayani, 2013). This trust deficit ultimately undermined the alliance, particularly after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan (2021), which left Pakistan grappling with the resurgence of the Taliban and renewed TTP attacks (Grare, 2022).

US Military and Economic Aid to Pakistan

The United States provided substantial military and economic assistance to Pakistan in the post-9/11 period, primarily through mechanisms such as the Kerry-Lugar-Berman (KLB) Act of 2009 and Coalition Support Funds (CSF). The KLB Act authorized \$7.5 billion in non-military aid over five years, focusing on infrastructure, education, and democratic governance, while CSF reimbursed Pakistan for its counterterrorism operations (Kronstadt & Vaughn, 2012). However, these funds were often subject to strict conditionality, requiring Pakistan to demonstrate progress in combating militancy and preventing nuclear proliferation (Fair, 2014). Despite the influx of aid, tensions arose over delayed disbursements and U.S. concerns about Pakistan's alleged support for militant proxies, leading to periodic suspensions of assistance (Shah, 2018).

Economic aid packages under the KLB Act and other U.S. initiatives aimed to stabilize Pakistan's economy and strengthen civilian institutions. Projects included energy sector reforms, road infrastructure development, and healthcare improvements, with USAID playing a key role in implementation (Weinbaum, 2020). However, the effectiveness of this aid was often undermined by bureaucratic inefficiencies, corruption, and mismanagement within Pakistan (Siddiqi, 2017). Additionally, the heavy emphasis on security-related funding meant that long-term developmental goals sometimes took a backseat to immediate counterterrorism objectives (Grare, 2013). While U.S. assistance provided temporary fiscal relief, critics argued that it failed to foster sustainable economic growth or reduce Pakistan's dependence on foreign aid (Zaidi, 2015).

Compliance concerns and political disputes frequently strained the aid relationship. The U.S. demanded greater transparency in Pakistan's military expenditures and counterterrorism efforts, particularly regarding the alleged use of U.S. funds to support groups like the Haqqani Network (Riedel, 2016). These suspicions led to the withholding of CSF reimbursements multiple times, exacerbating mistrust between the two nations (Markey, 2013). Furthermore, the KLB Act's democracy-building clauses such as requiring civilian oversight of the military faced resistance from Pakistan's powerful security establishment, which viewed them as infringements on sovereignty (Haqqani, 2013). As a result, much of the aid's intended institutional reforms remained unrealized, reinforcing perceptions of Pakistan as an unreliable partner in Washington (Tinkel, 2016).

The impact of U.S. aid on Pakistan's economy and governance was mixed. While it provided short-term

liquidity and supported critical sectors, the aid did little to address structural issues like tax evasion, energy shortages, and industrial stagnation (Husain, 2018). Moreover, the security-focused nature of assistance reinforced the military's dominance over civilian institutions, undermining democratic consolidation (Siddiq, 2021). After the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, aid flows diminished significantly, leaving Pakistan to grapple with economic crises without the previous levels of external support (Malik, 2022). Ultimately, while U.S. assistance helped sustain Pakistan's economy during the War on Terror, it failed to catalyze lasting reform or reduce the country's vulnerability to external shocks (Zaidi, 2023).

Shifting Alliances and Strategic Calculations

As U.S.-Pakistan relations grew increasingly strained in the post-9/11 era, Islamabad began diversifying its foreign policy by deepening ties with China and Russia. This strategic pivot was driven by Pakistan's need for reliable economic and military partners amid fluctuating U.S. support (Small, 2020). China, in particular, emerged as Pakistan's most steadfast ally, offering unconditional diplomatic backing, arms sales, and infrastructure investments most notably through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Wolf, 2020). Meanwhile, Pakistan also sought to strengthen defense cooperation with Russia, including arms deals and counterterrorism collaboration, marking a significant shift from Cold War-era hostilities (Pant, 2021). These moves signaled Pakistan's intent to reduce its traditional dependence on the U.S. while aligning more closely with Washington's strategic competitors.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), valued at over \$60 billion, has been a game-changer in regional geopolitics, further complicating Pak-U.S. relations. While CPEC promises to transform Pakistan's infrastructure and energy sectors, the U.S. has viewed the project with suspicion, citing concerns over debt sustainability, lack of transparency, and China's expanding military footprint in the region (Chaudhury, 2022). American officials have repeatedly warned that CPEC could lead to a "debt trap" for Pakistan, exacerbating its economic vulnerabilities (Hillman, 2020). Additionally, the U.S. perceives China's growing influence in Pakistan as a direct challenge to its own strategic interests in South Asia, particularly in countering Beijing's regional ambitions (Tellis, 2021). Consequently, CPEC has not only reinforced Sino-Pakistani ties but also widened the rift between Islamabad and Washington.

The U.S.-India strategic partnership, which gained momentum in the 2000s, further alienated Pakistan and reshaped regional dynamics. Washington's deepening defense and economic collaboration with New Delhi including the U.S.-India Civil Nuclear Deal (2008) and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) has been perceived by Islamabad as a direct threat to its security (Basrur, 2022). Pakistan views India's rising global stature, backed by American support, as a deliberate attempt to isolate it diplomatically and militarily (Hussain, 2021). This perception has reinforced Pakistan's reliance on China as a counterbalance, while also pushing it toward closer engagement with Russia and other non-Western powers (Rumer, 2022). The U.S.-India axis has thus accelerated Pakistan's strategic realignment, diminishing prospects for a renewed U.S.-Pakistan partnership in the near term.

By the mid-2010s, Pakistan had begun decreasing its reliance on American support, particularly after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the subsequent decline in military aid. The suspension of Coalition Support Funds (CSF) and increasing U.S. criticism of Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts further motivated Islamabad to seek alternative alliances (Kugelman, 2021). While the U.S. remains a significant partner in areas such as trade

and counterterrorism, Pakistan has increasingly turned to China for military hardware, economic investment, and diplomatic cover in international forums (Shahid, 2023). Additionally, Pakistan's outreach to Middle Eastern powers like Turkey and Saudi Arabia reflects its strategy of multialignment balancing relations with multiple global players to maximize strategic autonomy (Yasmeen, 2022). This shift underscores Pakistan's long-term recalibration away from U.S. dependence, even as it cautiously maintains limited cooperation with Washington on shared security concerns.

Future of Pak-US Relations

Pakistan-United States relations have undergone significant transformations in the post-9/11 era, characterized by periods of strategic cooperation and mutual distrust. As both nations navigate the complexities of regional stability, counterterrorism, and evolving geopolitical landscapes, understanding the multifaceted nature of their bilateral ties is crucial.

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 marked a pivotal shift in regional dynamics, compelling both Pakistan and the United States to reassess their strategic priorities. Pakistan's geographical proximity and historical ties to Afghanistan position it as a key player in ensuring regional stability. The Middle East Institute emphasizes that, despite the U.S. military exit, America's strategic interests in the region necessitate continued engagement with Pakistan to address concerns such as terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and regional security challenges (Middle East Institute, 2023). Collaborative efforts focusing on border security, intelligence sharing, and support for inclusive governance in Afghanistan could serve as foundational pillars for renewed bilateral cooperation. Expanding the scope of Pakistan-U.S. relations beyond traditional security paradigms offers opportunities for sustainable engagement. The Quincy Institute advocates for a "geoeconomic reset," highlighting the potential for collaboration in areas like climate change mitigation, educational exchange programs, and technological innovation (Weinstein, 2023). Joint initiatives in renewable energy projects, climate-resilient agriculture, and digital infrastructure development can address pressing challenges while fostering mutual economic growth. Moreover, academic partnerships and research collaborations can enhance people-to-people connections, building a foundation of trust and shared values.

Counterterrorism remains a central concern in Pakistan-U.S. relations, especially in the aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. While both nations have historically collaborated in combating terrorism, mutual suspicions have occasionally hindered effective cooperation. The Congressional Research Service notes that Pakistan's complex relationships with various regional actors necessitate a nuanced approach to counterterrorism strategies (Kronstadt, 2023). Reinvigorating joint efforts through transparent communication, capacity-building programs, and shared intelligence can enhance the efficacy of counterterrorism operations. Establishing clear frameworks for cooperation can also mitigate misunderstandings and align objectives. Rebuilding trust is imperative for the long-term stability of Pakistan-U.S. relations. Historical events have contributed to a trust deficit, underscoring the need for deliberate diplomatic efforts. Moonis Ahmar emphasizes the importance of soft power and public diplomacy in reshaping perceptions and fostering goodwill (Ahmar, 2021). Initiatives such as cultural exchanges, joint research endeavors, and dialogues on shared challenges can bridge gaps and promote mutual understanding. Furthermore, institutionalizing regular high-level dialogues and establishing bilateral working groups on key issues can ensure sustained engagement and address concerns proactively.

Conclusion

The evolution of Pakistan-U.S. relations in the post-9/11 era reflects a complex interplay of cooperation, mistrust, and shifting geopolitical priorities. Initially, Pakistan emerged as a critical ally in the U.S.-led War on Terror, providing indispensable logistical support, intelligence sharing, and military cooperation. However, the partnership was marred by persistent allegations of Pakistan's dual policy publicly supporting counterterrorism while allegedly harboring militant groups like the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani Network. The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 further strained ties, as Washington accused Islamabad of undermining stabilization efforts, while Pakistan resented being scapegoated for America's failures in the region. Despite periods of high-level engagement, such as the Kerry-Lugar-Berman Act and Coalition Support Funds, the relationship remained transactional, lacking the strategic depth needed for long-term alignment. Ultimately, the post-9/11 years exposed the limits of a partnership built on short-term security interests rather than shared democratic values or economic interdependence.

As U.S.-Pakistan relations deteriorated, Islamabad strategically pivoted toward China, Russia, and Middle Eastern powers to reduce its dependence on Washington. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) became the centerpiece of this reorientation, offering Pakistan much-needed infrastructure investment but also drawing criticism over debt sustainability and sovereignty concerns. Meanwhile, the deepening U.S.-India strategic partnership marked by defense pacts, nuclear cooperation, and the Quad alliance reinforced Pakistan's perception of geopolitical isolation, pushing it further into Beijing's orbit. While the U.S. remains a significant trade and security partner, Pakistan's diversification of alliances underscores its pursuit of strategic autonomy in an increasingly multipolar world. This shift has diminished American leverage over Pakistan, particularly in areas like counterterrorism and nonproliferation, where Washington once held considerable influence. The changing dynamics highlight how great-power competition in South Asia is reshaping traditional alliances, leaving Pakistan to navigate a delicate balancing act between rival blocs.

Looking ahead, the future of Pak-U.S. relations will likely be defined by selective cooperation on shared interests, such as regional stability and counterterrorism, rather than a return to the strategic alignment of the post-9/11 years. The U.S. may seek Pakistan's assistance in managing Afghanistan's Taliban regime or containing China's regional ambitions, but mutual distrust and competing priorities will limit deeper collaboration. For Pakistan, the challenge lies in sustaining its multialignment strategy without over-relying on any single power, particularly China, whose economic and strategic demands could constrain Islamabad's policy flexibility. Meanwhile, the U.S. must reconcile its desire for Pakistan's cooperation with its commitment to India as a primary regional partner. In this evolving landscape, both nations face the paradox of needing each other in crises but lacking the foundation for enduring partnership. The legacy of their post-9/11 relationship serves as a cautionary tale one where tactical alliances, absent shared long-term visions, inevitably give way to strategic divergence.

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