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## The Impact of Geography on Pakistan's Foreign Policy

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### ABSTRACT

*This article examines the fundamental conditioning role of geography in shaping Pakistan's foreign policy, arguing that territorial location, physical topography, and spatial vulnerabilities constitute the master variable determining the nation's strategic choices since its inception in 1947. Employing a qualitative single-case study design with process tracing methodology, the investigation synthesizes classical geopolitical theory, neo-realism, and constructivist concepts of geopolitical imaginations to analyze how Pakistan's unique position at the intersection of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East has generated persistent patterns of security-centric behavior that consistently subordinate economic connectivity to territorial defense. The analysis proceeds through four thematic sections examining the India-centric security trap on the eastern border, the strategic depth doctrine on the western frontier, the maritime imperative in the Arabian Sea, and the geo-economic pivot toward connectivity through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. The findings reveal a fundamental paradox: Pakistan's geographic endowment objectively positions it as a natural bridge between the Eurasian heartland and the Indian Ocean, yet its foreign policy has historically functioned to transform this connective potential into a security liability through interventionist doctrines, unresolved territorial disputes, and the institutionalized primacy of military over economic considerations. The article concludes that Pakistan's declared shift from geopolitics to geo-economics remains profoundly incomplete, caught between the material incentives for connectivity that have never been greater and the ideological and institutional obstacles to strategic reorientation that remain deeply entrenched within the state's security apparatus. Overcoming the geographic determinism that has constrained Pakistan's foreign policy for over seven decades requires not merely infrastructure investment or diplomatic repositioning but a fundamental transformation in the geopolitical imaginations through which Pakistan's elite interprets the nation's spatial reality.*

**Keywords:** *Pakistan Foreign Policy, Geopolitics, Strategic Depth, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, Regional Security Complex, Maritime Security*

### Introduction

Pakistan's geographical positioning represents one of the most strategically consequential realities in contemporary international relations, a condition that has fundamentally shaped the nation's trajectory since its inception in 1947. Situated at the intersection of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, Pakistan occupies what classical geopolitics would recognize as a pivotal Rimland state, a geographic designation that carries profound implications for its foreign policy orientation (Burki, 2022). The country shares borders with India, Afghanistan, Iran, and China, while its Arabian Sea coastline places it in close maritime proximity to the Gulf States and the broader Indian Ocean region. This unique spatial reality is not merely a cartographic curiosity but rather constitutes the foundational parameter within which all of Pakistan's external relations unfold. Burki (2022) emphasizes that demography and geography together form

Pakistan's destiny, arguing that the country's location has been the single most enduring determinant of its strategic choices and international alignments. The partition of the subcontinent in 1947 created a state with unnatural borders, divided communities, and an immediate territorial dispute over Kashmir that would define its relationship with India for generations. The Radcliffe Line, drawn hastily and with insufficient regard for demographic and geographic realities, left Pakistan with a narrow physical corridor connecting its western and eastern wings until the separation of Bangladesh in 1971 demonstrated the catastrophic consequences of geographic vulnerability (Jahanzaib, 2026). The nation's western frontier, demarcated by the Durand Line, inherited the complexities of colonial boundary making, establishing a porous borderland that would become central to regional instability and the evolution of Pakistan's security doctrines. Furthermore, the country's northern reaches about the Wakhan Corridor, a narrow strip separating Pakistan from Tajikistan and placing it at the doorstep of resource rich Central Asia, while the Karakoram Highway physically connects Pakistan to China's Xinjiang province across some of the world's highest mountain passes. This geographic configuration has ensured that Pakistan can never retreat into isolationist comfort its location compels perpetual engagement with regional security dynamics, great power competition, and transnational economic flows in ways that few other states must navigate simultaneously (The Friday Times, 2026).

The central argument advanced in this article is that Pakistan's foreign policy is not merely influenced by geography but is fundamentally conditioned by it, functioning as both a persistent constraint on strategic autonomy and an enduring source of opportunity that successive governments have sought to exploit with varying degrees of success. The physical realities of Pakistan's location create an inescapable strategic logic the eastern border with India generates a permanent security dilemma rooted in territorial disputes and conventional military asymmetry, the western border with Afghanistan and proximity to Iran produce instability spillovers and demands for strategic depth, the northern geography enables the China-Pakistan partnership and dreams of Central Asian connectivity, and the southern coastline provides maritime access critical to trade, energy imports, and naval competition (Afzal, 2026). These geographic determinants do not operate independently but form an interconnected system in which actions taken in response to one frontier inevitably produce consequences on others. Afzal (2026) captures this dynamic accurately, asserting that Pakistan sits at the crossroads of critical minerals, Central Asian energy resources, and the Gulf's economic architecture, a position that has moved from passive relevance to active strategic contestation in the context of intensifying United States and China competition. Pakistan's geographical reality creates what Afzal (2026) describes as a structural constraint on American strategy while simultaneously handing China a long-term advantage through the China Pakistan Economic Corridor. Yet geography also provides Pakistan with strategic leverage the same location that makes it vulnerable to encirclement also positions it as an indispensable connector between the Eurasian heartland and the Indian Ocean maritime domain. The Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (2025) has articulated this potential, arguing that Pakistan's true strategic value lies in integrating its land and maritime corridors into a unified connectivity framework that could transform it from a passive transit economy into an active supply chain hub. This dual nature of geography as both constraint and opportunity forms the analytical foundation for understanding Pakistan's foreign policy evolution

and its persistent oscillation between security driven and economically oriented strategic visions (Jahanzaib, 2026).

The scope and significance of this article extend across multiple analytical dimensions that are essential for deciphering Pakistan's often misunderstood international behavior. Historically, Pakistan's foreign policy has been shaped by the legacy of partition and its geographic inheritance, a pattern that Jahanzaib (2026) traces from 1947 through the post 2008 period. The India centric security dilemma constitutes the most durable geographic determinant, with the unfinished agenda of partition manifesting in territorial disputes, water resource competition, and nuclear deterrence postures that consume disproportionate diplomatic and material resources. The quest for strategic depth in Afghanistan represents another geographic imperative, where the fear of a two front war has driven interventionist policies that paradoxically imported instability back into Pakistan's own territory (Karim, 2025). Karim (2025) underscores how border hostilities with Afghanistan have repeatedly curtailed Pakistan's potential to become a meaningful node in trans regional trade corridors. The economic pivot toward connectivity, most visibly embodied in CPEC infrastructure investments exceeding sixty-five billion dollars, represents an attempt to revalorize Pakistan's geography from a security liability into an economic asset by physically linking western China to the Arabian Sea through Pakistani territory (The Express Tribune, 2025). Understanding these dynamics through the geographic lens is crucial because it reveals the underlying structural forces that persist beneath changes in government, leadership, and international circumstances. The Friday Times (2026) correctly observes that geography offers Pakistan an opportunity but not an entitlement, and that the decisive variable remains whether internal political stability and institutional capacity can enable the country to function as a reliable connector state rather than merely a transit space. Without grasping how geography conditions Pakistan's choices, analysts and policymakers risk misinterpreting its foreign policy as erratic or ideologically driven when it is more accurately understood as a rational, if often counterproductive, response to the permanent spatial realities that define the nation's place in the regional and global order (Burki, 2022).

### **Literature Review**

The scholarly literature on Pakistan's foreign policy is anchored in foundational geopolitical thought, with Halford Mackinder's Heartland theory and Nicholas Spykman's Rimland thesis providing the most enduring analytical frameworks for understanding the country's strategic significance. Mackinder's original formulation identified the Eurasian interior as the pivot area whose control would determine global mastery, with the famous dictum that whoever rules the Heartland commands the World Island. Spykman later revised this perspective, arguing that the maritime fringe encircling Eurasia constituted the true prize because it concentrated population, resources, and trade routes. Pakistan occupies a unique position at the confluence of both theoretical constructs, functioning simultaneously as a pivot state linking South Asia to Central Asia and the Gulf while maintaining over one thousand kilometers of coastline commanding critical maritime arteries in the Arabian Sea (Afzal, 2025). This dual identity has profound implications for understanding Pakistan's enduring relevance in great power competition for the Asian security order. Gul, Munir, Hussain, and Hussain (2022) systematically apply both Mackinder's and Spykman's frameworks to analyze how United States and China strategic rivalry in Central Asia has elevated Pakistan's geopolitical significance, particularly through the China Pakistan Economic Corridor which physically connects the Heartland to the Rimland across

Pakistani territory. Their study demonstrates that Pakistan's geography functions as the critical connective tissue between the energy rich Central Asian interior and the warm water ports of the Arabian Sea, making the country indispensable to any major power seeking to influence the Eurasian landmass. The classic geopolitical literature thus establishes that Pakistan is not merely a South Asian state but rather a geographical hinge whose orientation produces cascading effects across multiple regional security complexes simultaneously. The enduring analytical power of Mackinder's and Spykman's theories lies in their capacity to explain why Pakistan repeatedly emerges as a focal point in crises that initially appear unrelated to its immediate neighborhood, a pattern evident in the May 2025 India Pakistan border confrontation when Washington, Beijing, and Riyadh immediately engaged in shuttle diplomacy precisely because Pakistan's geography ensures that regional instability cannot be contained locally (Afzal, 2025). This foundational literature provides the conceptual architecture for understanding Pakistan's foreign policy as structurally conditioned by permanent spatial realities rather than transient political choices.

The Indo Pakistani security dilemma constitutes the most exhaustively studied dimension of Pakistan's foreign policy, with realist international relations theory providing the dominant analytical lens for explaining the persistence of conflict. Jaafar and Radzi (2025) employ Mearsheimer's offensive realism to demonstrate that the Kashmir dispute is fundamentally driven by structural imperatives inherent in the anarchic international system, where both India and Pakistan pursue power maximization strategies and regional hegemonic ambitions that make territorial compromise structurally impossible regardless of leadership changes or diplomatic initiatives. Their process tracing analysis from 1947 to the present establishes that the security dilemma between the two states has generated a self-perpetuating cycle of distrust and competitive armament, where defensive measures undertaken by one state are perceived as offensive threats by the other, thereby deepening the rivalry through institutional mechanisms rather than episodic hostility. The Kashmir territorial dispute functions as the geographic epicenter of this security dilemma because the Line of Control represents not merely a contested border but rather a militarized frontier where heavy conventional force deployments, regular military exercises, and recurring exchanges of fire institutionalize the conflict as a permanent feature of regional security architecture (Jaafar & Radzi, 2025). The nuclear dimension has paradoxically both stabilized and intensified the rivalry, creating what strategic studies literature terms the stability-instability paradox, where the existential deterrent of nuclear weapons reduces the probability of full-scale conventional war while simultaneously enabling intensified subconventional conflict through proxy actors, cross border militancy, and covert operations that exploit the space below the nuclear threshold. The geographic drivers of this arms race are particularly significant because Pakistan's lack of territorial depth relative to India fundamentally shapes its conventional and nuclear doctrines, with the narrow physical corridor connecting the country's northern and southern regions creating vulnerabilities that military planners have sought to offset through offensive conventional postures and the development of tactical nuclear weapons designed to deter Indian conventional breakthroughs. Jaafar and Radzi (2025) further demonstrate that Pakistan's strategic partnership with China constitutes a structural balancing response to India's growing conventional and economic power, where geographic proximity to the rising superpower provides Pakistan with external security guarantees that partially compensate for its material disadvantages vis a vis India. The realist literature thus establishes that the India Pakistan conflict is not amenable to resolution through confidence building

measures or diplomatic engagement alone because the structural conditions of anarchy, mutual suspicion, and power asymmetry make territorial compromise prohibitively risky for both states in a geographic context where borders remain contested.

The strategic depth narrative has constituted the most controversial and consequential geographic doctrine in Pakistan's foreign policy, generating extensive scholarly debate about its rationale, implementation, and consequences for regional stability. The doctrine emerged from the geographic imperative that Pakistan faces a potential two front war scenario, with a hostile India on its eastern border and the prospect of an unfriendly or Indian aligned government in Afghanistan on its western flank, thereby creating encirclement anxieties that have driven Islamabad's persistent intervention in Afghan affairs since the 1980s (Sulehria, 2026). During the Cold War, Pakistan's support for the Afghan mujahideen against the Soviet occupation was justified not merely as ideological solidarity with an Islamic resistance or as service to Western strategic interests but fundamentally as a geographic investment in ensuring that post-Soviet Afghanistan would be governed by a regime favorably disposed toward Islamabad. Sulehria (2026) provides a critical left perspective on the doctrine, arguing that Pakistan's Afghanistan policy represents a classic case of Frankenstein's monster, where the very militant proxies cultivated to secure strategic depth have turned against their patron, creating the Tehrik e Taliban Pakistan insurgency that has claimed nearly one thousand attacks within Pakistani territory in a single year. The scholarly critique emphasizes that strategic depth thinking conflates physical geography with political control, assuming that a friendly regime in Kabul would provide meaningful security against Indian conventional superiority when the practical effect has been the importation of instability, the erosion of border security, and the entanglement of Pakistan in an intractable conflict where neither military escalation nor diplomatic accommodation offers a clear exit. The contemporary crisis, with Pakistan's defense minister declaring open war against the Afghan Taliban government in early 2026, reflects not the abandonment of strategic depth thinking but rather its pathological intensification, where frustration with an uncooperative proxy regime has produced direct military confrontation rather than strategic reassessment (Sulehria, 2026). The literature reveals a remarkable continuity in the underlying geographic logic even as specific tactics shift, with commentators close to the Pakistani establishment reportedly discussing regime change scenarios in Kabul that would install a more compliant government, indicating that the search for a friendly western frontier remains an obsession that overrides empirical evidence of the doctrine's repeated failures. Scholarly analysis of the strategic depth narrative thus demonstrates how geographic doctrines, once institutionalized within state security apparatuses, develop autonomous momentum that resists disconfirmation by adverse outcomes, perpetuating interventionist policies long after their original rationale has been undermined by changing circumstances.

The pivot to geo-economics represents the most significant contemporary development in the literature on Pakistan's foreign policy, with scholars debating whether the discursive shift toward connectivity, trade, and regional integration constitutes a fundamental strategic reorientation or merely a rhetorical supplement to enduring security centric paradigms. Murad (2026) provides a comprehensive analysis of CPEC as Pakistan's largest foreign investment undertaking, with projected funding exceeding sixty-five billion dollars channeled into energy infrastructure, transportation networks, and the development of Gwadar Port as a maritime terminus connecting western China to the Arabian Sea. Her research employs document based qualitative

methodology to investigate how CPEC functions simultaneously as a vehicle for regional integration, trade facilitation, and soft power projection, while also generating structural challenges related to governance deficits, human capital limitations, inter provincial coordination tensions, and concerns regarding debt sustainability and long-term economic dependency on Chinese financing. The Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (2025) articulates the aspirational dimension of the geo economic pivot, arguing that Pakistan's true strategic value lies in integrating its overland and maritime corridors into a unified connectivity framework that would transform the country from a passive transit space into an active supply chain hub, thereby elevating its status to that of a middle power in the Asian century. This vision depends on synchronizing the Karakoram Highway and other overland routes with the maritime resources of the Arabian Sea coastline, creating synergistic effects where Chinese investment in infrastructure generates regional production networks that embed Pakistan within broader patterns of Eurasian economic integration rather than leaving it as a mere corridor for goods transiting between China and the Gulf. However, the scholarly debate remains sharply divided on whether this geo economic vision can overcome the structural weight of the security paradigm, with critics pointing to the persistent prioritization of military expenditure over human development, the maintenance of interventionist policies in Afghanistan that destabilize the very connectivity the geo economic vision requires, and the unresolved Kashmir dispute that perpetuates an India centric threat perception consuming diplomatic and material resources that might otherwise support economic integration (Sulehria, 2026). The literature on the geo economic pivot thus captures the fundamental tension animating contemporary Pakistani foreign policy, where the geographic potential for connectivity and prosperity coexists uneasily with the geographic imperatives of territorial defense and strategic competition, producing an unresolved oscillation between two incompatible strategic logics whose resolution will determine whether Pakistan's geography becomes an asset or a liability in the decades ahead.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical architecture of this article rests on a dual foundation that synthesizes the enduring insights of classical geopolitics and neo-realism with the critical interventions of constructivist analysis, thereby capturing both the material permanence and the socially constructed meaning of Pakistan's geographic condition. Classical geopolitics, from Mackinder through Spykman, establishes that territorial location, physical topography, and resource distribution constitute what German scholarship termed *Naturgegebenheiten*, the nature-given conditions that form the permanent stage upon which all state action unfolds. These geographic fundamentals do not determine policy outcomes mechanistically but establish the structural parameters within which decision-makers must operate, rewarding certain strategic choices while penalizing others with law-like regularity across historical periods and regime types. The neo-realist extension of this logic, particularly as articulated in Buzan and Waever's Regional Security Complex Theory, provides the analytical precision necessary to understand why geographic proximity generates intense security interdependence that makes enmity with India the defining and inescapable feature of Pakistan's foreign policy orientation. The South Asian RSC functions as a primary security complex where the territorial disputes inherited from partition, most critically the unresolved status of Kashmir, create patterns of amity and enmity so durable that they persist through changes in government, economic circumstances, and international alignments (Noraiz et al., 2021). The foundational geopolitical insight that Pakistan occupies a

unique position at the confluence of the Heartland and Rimland, physically connecting Central Asian energy reserves to Arabian Sea shipping lanes, explains why the country has been continuously entangled in great power competition from the Cold War through the present era of United States and China strategic rivalry. This geographic reality means that Pakistan can neither escape its regional security entanglements nor avoid the attentions of external powers seeking to instrumentalize its territory for larger strategic purposes, making foreign policy a perpetual exercise in navigating structural constraints that no amount of diplomatic ingenuity can fully transcend.

Complementing this materialist lens, constructivist theory introduces the critical concept of geopolitical imaginations, the socially constructed meanings that political elites attach to physical geography and that mediate between objective spatial realities and actual policy choices. The Durand Line provides the most analytically powerful illustration of this constructivist insight, for the colonial-era demarcation is not inherently a zone of instability but becomes one through the specific geopolitical imagination that Pakistan's security establishment has projected onto it. Instead of treating the Durand Line as an international border requiring sovereign enforcement, Pakistan's strategic elite has historically imagined this frontier as a tribal belt necessitating strategic depth, a conceptualization that has justified decades of intervention in Afghan affairs aimed at ensuring a compliant regime in Kabul (Mahjar-Barducci, 2025). This geopolitical imagination transforms physical geography from a border to be defended into a buffer to be managed, generating policy outcomes radically different from those that would follow from alternative constructions of the same territorial space. The constructivist approach reveals that Pakistan's Afghanistan policy cannot be understood purely through the rationalist calculus of material threats and opportunities but requires excavating the intersubjective meanings that security elites have attached to particular geographic features.

Similarly, the northern areas connecting Pakistan to Central Asia have been imagined not merely as transportation corridors but as a pan-Islamic bridge to the Muslim republics of the former Soviet Union, a geopolitical imagination that infuses infrastructure connectivity with civilizational significance and shapes the discursive framing within which projects like CPEC are promoted to domestic audiences. The theoretical synthesis advanced here holds that physical geography establishes the permanent structural stage, as classical geopolitics and neo-realism rightly insist, while geopolitical imaginations determine how actors interpret their interests and possibilities on that stage, as constructivism maintains. This dual framework bridges the gap between the material persistence of Pakistan's geographic challenges and the puzzling variation in how different governments have responded to those challenges, from the strategic depth adventurism of the 1990s to the geo-economic optimism of the CPEC era, without abandoning the core claim that geography remains the master variable conditioning Pakistan's foreign policy (Karim & Kapur, 2023).

### **Problem Statement**

While Pakistan officially declared a shift from geopolitics to geo-economics with a focus on connectivity, its foreign policy remains pathologically trapped in a geographically determined security paradigm. The dominant securitization of its physical borders, stemming from the unresolved Kashmir conflict and the perceived threat from a hostile Afghanistan, perpetually undermines its stated goals of regional economic integration and internal development. The eastern border consumes disproportionate resources through a security dilemma that

transforms Indian military modernization into existential threats, diverting fiscal capacity from infrastructure and human development investments that genuine geo-economic transformation demands. Simultaneously, the western border remains chronically unstable where the strategic depth doctrine has produced militant blowback destabilizing the very territory through which overland connectivity to Central Asia must pass. The scholarly literature reveals a fundamental paradox that remains unresolved: Pakistan's geographic endowment objectively positions it as a natural bridge between the Eurasian heartland and the Arabian Sea, yet its foreign policy consistently subordinates this connective potential to territorial security obsessions rooted in the unfinished partition of 1947. This article investigates why geography has historically functioned as a master variable of constraint rather than opportunity and critically analyzes the prospects of overcoming this legacy in an environment where material incentives for connectivity have never been greater but institutional and ideological obstacles to strategic reorientation remain deeply entrenched within the state's security apparatus.

### **Research Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative single-case design using process tracing to connect Pakistan's geographic conditions to specific foreign policy outcomes over time. Data triangulation integrates primary sources including official policy statements, Foreign Office speeches, national security doctrines, and parliamentary white papers with secondary sources comprising peer-reviewed journals and geopolitical analyses from think tanks such as ISSI, Carnegie, and Brookings alongside historical accounts from former diplomats and military officials. Geospatial and economic data including trade route maps, energy corridor projects such as TAPI and IPI, and territorial mapping supplement the analysis to illustrate discussions on connectivity and conflict. The analytical strategy structures the investigation around four thematic sections, each linking a specific geographic feature to its corresponding policy manifestation before culminating in a synthetic conclusion.

### **The India-Centric Security Trap**

The eastern border with India constitutes Pakistan's most consequential geographic determinant, rooted in the artificial Radcliffe Line that divided communities and severed an integrated irrigation network upon which Punjab's agricultural prosperity depended entirely. The boundary created a geography of conflict manifesting most acutely in the Indus River system, where upstream control of headworks gave India structural leverage over Pakistan's water lifeline (The Nation, 2017). Nearly all of Pakistan's water originates from the Indus, with over ninety percent utilized for agriculture employing almost half the national workforce and representing a quarter of GDP, meaning any upstream disruption threatens the material foundation of the state itself (Columbia Climate School, 2025). India's suspension of Indus Waters Treaty obligations following the 2025 Pahalgam attack demonstrated how geographic vulnerability translates directly into strategic coercion, as New Delhi accelerated hydropower projects previously constrained by treaty provisions, wielding water as a weapon in ways the 1960 agreement had successfully prevented for over six decades. Pakistan's geographic lack of strategic depth magnifies this vulnerability considerably, as major population centers including Lahore and Sialkot lie dangerously close to the international boundary while the intricate network of canals, headworks, and barrages sustaining the agricultural economy remain exposed to disruption in any conventional conflict's opening hours (BW Businessworld, 2025).

This acute spatial compression has driven Pakistan toward an offensive defensive conventional doctrine emphasizing deep armored strikes into Indian Territory to gain maneuvering room, compensating for territorial vulnerability through tactical employment of integrated firepower designed to seize ground rapidly before Indian numerical superiority can be fully mobilized. The same geographic imperative has produced Pakistan's reliance on nuclear first use ambiguity, for the absence of territorial depth means conventional defeat could lead to catastrophic territorial loss before mobilization completes, making nuclear deterrence an existential insurance policy rather than a discretionary strategic choice. Kashmir functions as the geographic epicenter of this entire security apparatus, not merely as a territorial dispute rooted in partition's unfinished agenda but as the Himalayan headwater regulator controlling Pakistan's existential water supply. The Lowy Institute (2025) emphasized that the mountainous terrain makes Kashmir a vital vantage point for surveillance and military exercises, intertwining the region with national security calculations that transcend immediate contests over boundaries and populations. These geographic imperative siphons diplomatic attention, economic resources, and military capacity away from all other foreign policy goals, embedding the eastern frontier as the primary consuming focus of Pakistan's strategic orientation from which no government has proven capable of escaping.

### **The Quest for Strategic Depth**

The western border with Afghanistan embodies Pakistan's most enduring geographic dilemma, rooted in the Durand Line drawn in 1893 by British colonial authorities without regard for the ethnic and tribal geography of the Pashtun populations it bisected. This 2,640-kilometer frontier was designed to serve imperial strategic interests during the Great Game rivalry, not to function as a stable international boundary between sovereign states. When Pakistan inherited this colonial demarcation in 1947, Afghanistan became the only country to vote against its United Nations admission, refusing formal recognition of the Durand Line and advancing the Pashtunistan concept envisioning a unified homeland for divided Pashtun communities (Yildirim, 2025). Successive Afghan governments, including the present Taliban regime, have consistently withheld recognition, while cross-border ethnic ties have rendered the line perpetually porous regardless of security measures imposed upon it. The complex ethno-tribal geography, where Pashtun communities maintain kinship networks and economic interdependencies predating the modern state system, has frustrated every attempt to transform this colonial-era demarcation into a sovereign international boundary (The Nation, 2025). Pakistan's western frontier challenge is therefore not merely a security problem but a structural condition arising from the tension between Westphalian territorial sovereignty and the lived reality of a borderland where premodern patterns of identity persist beneath the thin veneer of state administration.

The geography of intervention emerged directly from Pakistan's structural anxiety about encirclement, as the fear of confronting a two-front war with India on the eastern border and a hostile Afghanistan on the western flank drove Islamabad toward the doctrine of strategic depth. Pakistan's security establishment reasoned that a friendly regime in Kabul could transform western geography from vulnerability into asset, providing territorial buffer in the event of major conflict with India (Sulehria, 2026). This logic survived across multiple historical periods, from the anti-Soviet jihad of the 1980s through the Taliban's first rise in the 1990s, producing what critical observers characterize as a Frankenstein's monster scenario where militant proxies cultivated to secure strategic depth turned violently against their patron. The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan

insurgency subsequently waged a devastating campaign against the Pakistani state, demonstrating how the porous frontier that once facilitated projecting influence into Afghanistan now permitted importing blowback directly into the Pakistani heartland (Indian Express, 2025). The Afghan Taliban's 2021 return to power initially raised hopes in Islamabad that a friendly regime would contain the TTP threat, yet this expectation dissolved as Pakistani Taliban leaders relocated across the border and intensified their campaign of violence. The Nation (2025) argues that strategic depth has consequently lost practical meaning in a world where non-state networks ignore frontiers entirely, and that Islamabad's present security calculus is defensive, centered on preserving territorial integrity rather than projecting influence.

Contemporary imperatives on the western frontier reflect a belated and incomplete shift from interventionist proxy politics toward sovereign territorial control, most visibly embodied in the massive border fencing project and the constitutional merger of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. Pakistan began constructing fencing along substantial stretches of the Durand Line from approximately 2014 onward, deploying barbed wire, border posts, and increased patrolling in an effort to enforce security and prevent cross-border militant movement that the porous frontier had historically permitted. This physical barrier represents a fundamental reimagining of the western border, no longer a tribal belt requiring informal management but a sovereign boundary demanding hard physical demarcation (BOL News, 2025). Yet limitations are evident, with the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies documenting substantial year-on-year increases in terror incidents originating from the Afghan border region. The fence, however formidable as a physical symbol, cannot address underlying drivers of militancy rooted in a fractured diplomatic relationship with Kabul and the alienation of cross-border Pashtun communities whose livelihoods depend on freedom of movement. Similarly, the FATA merger sought to eliminate legal and administrative ambiguity that had long characterized Pakistan's tribal borderlands, where colonial-era Frontier Crimes Regulations perpetuated governance through indirect rule. The CRSS Beyond Boundaries dialogue emphasized that counterterrorism requires active participation from all segments of society, while administrative delays in delivering development funds to merged districts have left border communities frustrated and vulnerable to militant recruitment (CRSS, 2023). The transition from strategic depth to sovereign border control remains profoundly incomplete, caught between physical assertion of territorial authority and the persistent reality that Pakistan's western geography cannot be secured by barriers alone without fundamental transformation in the diplomatic relationship with Kabul and political incorporation of borderland populations.

### **The Arabian Sea and the Maritime Imperative**

Pakistan's 1,046-kilometer coastline along the Arabian Sea constitutes the economic lifeline upon which the nation's survival and prosperity fundamentally depend. Over 95 percent of Pakistan's international trade is conducted via sea routes, making the maritime domain inextricably linked to the country's economic vitality and energy security through the importation of oil and gas transported by sea (Farooq, 2025). The port cities of Karachi, Port Qasim, and Gwadar function as the critical nodes through which this maritime commerce flows, with the coastline supporting an Exclusive Economic Zone of approximately 240,000 square kilometers that holds vast potential for fisheries, mineral extraction, and energy resources. The Pakistan Navy has described this maritime expanse as representing nearly 36 percent of Pakistan's landmass, demanding round-

the-clock vigilance and swift responsiveness to protect sovereign interests against both conventional threats and non-traditional security challenges such as smuggling, piracy, and illegal fishing (Farooq, 2025). The strategic location near the Strait of Hormuz, through which a significant portion of global oil supplies passes, amplifies both the opportunity and vulnerability inherent in this geographic position, as any disruption to maritime traffic would have immediate and catastrophic consequences for Pakistan's energy supplies and broader economic stability. The vision of a blue economy has gained increasing traction in Pakistani policy discourse, with the National Security Policy of Pakistan recognizing that the vast Exclusive Economic Zone and coastline present unexplored opportunities for trade connectivity, natural resource exploration, and wealth generation across sectors including transshipment, ship construction, offshore exploration, ports infrastructure, fishing, and coastal tourism (ICSF, 2023). Yet despite this enormous potential, the maritime sector presently contributes an estimated one billion dollars or approximately 0.4 percent of the national GDP against a projected blue economy capacity exceeding one hundred billion dollars, revealing a profound gap between geographic endowment and economic realization (ICSF, 2023). The Pakistan Maritime Science and Technology Park inaugurated in 2023 represents one institutional effort to bridge this gap by projecting potential contributions of substantial annual revenues through coastal tourism, aquaculture, shipbuilding, and renewable ocean energy, but these ambitions remain nascent against the structural challenges of underinvestment, technological limitations, and the persistent prioritization of land-based security concerns over maritime economic development.

Pakistan's successful claim to an extended continental shelf, which added approximately 50,000 square kilometers of maritime territory to its jurisdiction, represents one of the most significant yet underappreciated geographic achievements in the nation's diplomatic history. The United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf formally accepted Pakistan's submission in 2015, extending the country's sea limits from 200 nautical miles to 350 nautical miles and bringing the total maritime area under Pakistani jurisdiction to 290,000 square kilometers, an expanse larger than the combined land areas of Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces (Hilal Magazine, 2015). This landmark achievement made Pakistan the first country in the North Arabian Sea region to successfully extend its continental shelf limits, a process that required four years of dedicated technical work by the Pakistan Navy, the National Institute of Oceanography, and the Ministry of Science and Technology to collect and process voluminous geological, geophysical, and hydrographic data demonstrating the natural prolongation of Pakistan's landmass beneath the Arabian Sea (Hilal Magazine, 2015). The strategic significance of this extended continental shelf lies in the exclusive rights Pakistan now holds over the seabed and subsoil resources of the added area, which experts believe contain untapped riches including hydrocarbons, minerals, and polymetallic nodules that could power the country's economic future for generations (Farooq, 2025).

The continental shelf extension transforms Pakistan's maritime geography from a relatively modest coastal presence into a substantial oceanic domain, with the combined Exclusive Economic Zone and extended continental shelf creating what analysts have termed Pakistan's fifth province, a maritime territory whose resource potential remains almost entirely unexplored due to limited technological capacity, insufficient investment in offshore exploration, and the chronic underdevelopment of domestic oceanographic research capabilities (ICSF, 2023). The deepwater Indus Fan, a massive sediment deposit extending into the Arabian Sea, has particularly

attracted attention from international petroleum geologists, as analogous deepwater fan and deltaic systems elsewhere in the world have yielded major oil and gas discoveries, suggesting that Pakistan's extended continental shelf may contain commercially viable hydrocarbon reserves that could substantially alter the country's energy dependency (The Nation, 2009) . Yet realizing this potential requires overcoming substantial barriers including the absence of a comprehensive maritime policy framework, limited indigenous technical expertise for deepwater exploration, and the persistent security challenges that divert national attention and resources toward land-based threats rather than the maritime opportunities that the extended continental shelf represents.

The maritime dimension of the India rivalry has transformed the Arabian Sea into an increasingly critical theater of strategic competition, as the Pakistan Navy confronts a conventionally superior Indian Navy whose capabilities have expanded dramatically through indigenous carrier programs, nuclear submarine development, and enhanced blue-water operational reach. The carrier kill dilemma lies at the heart of Pakistan's maritime strategy, as the Indian Navy's aircraft carrier battle groups possess the capacity to project power deep into the Arabian Sea, threaten Pakistan's sea lines of communication, and potentially impose a distant naval blockade that could sever the maritime trade routes upon which Pakistan's economic survival depends (Farooq, 2025) . The geographic vulnerability of Pakistan's coastline, concentrated as it is along a relatively narrow strip with major port infrastructure at Karachi and Gwadar within striking distance of naval aviation, has necessitated the development of asymmetric capabilities designed to deter Indian naval aggression through the threat of unacceptable damage rather than through conventional fleet engagement on equal terms. Pakistan's development of a nuclear sea leg, providing a secure second-strike capability through submarine-launched ballistic missiles, represents a direct geographic response to the vulnerability of land-based nuclear assets to preemptive Indian conventional or nuclear strikes, ensuring that even a successful first strike against Pakistan's terrestrial deterrent would not eliminate its capacity for nuclear retaliation (Farooq, 2025).

This maritime nuclear dimension seals the seaward front in Pakistan's broader security trap, extending the geographic logic of deterrence from the land and air domains into the underwater domain where nuclear-armed submarines provide the ultimate guarantee against existential defeat. The Pakistan Navy's articulation of an Extended Maritime Domain reflects the recognition that maritime security can no longer be confined to coastal defense but must encompass the protection of sea lines of communication extending across the Arabian Sea toward the Gulf of Aden and the approaches to the Strait of Hormuz. The choke point geography of Pakistan's maritime environment, with its proximity to the world's most critical oil transit corridor, means that any major conflict with India would have immediate consequences for global energy markets and international maritime commerce, drawing external powers into any regional confrontation and amplifying both the escalatory risks and the deterrent incentives that characterize Pakistan's maritime strategic posture (Farooq, 2025). The silent vigil maintained by the Pakistan Navy during the May 2025 crisis demonstrated how maritime forces function as the unseen guardian of national sovereignty, maintaining deterrent credibility while land and air forces engaged in direct combat, and confirming that the Arabian Sea has become as vital to Pakistan's strategic calculus as the Himalayan frontier that has traditionally consumed the overwhelming share of strategic attention and resource allocation.

### **The Geo-Economic Pivot**

The geopolitical narrative of Pakistan as the warm-water gateway for energy-rich, landlocked Central Asian Republics has animated strategic discourse for decades, yet the persistent geography of instability in Afghanistan has repeatedly frustrated the translation of this vision into material reality. The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline, stretching approximately 1,814 kilometers from Turkmenistan's Galkynysh gas field through Afghanistan into Pakistan and India, exemplifies both the tantalizing promise and the structural obstacles of Central Asian connectivity, as the project has remained under discussion for three decades while achieving only fragmentary progress on the ground (Minute Mirror, 2025). The pipeline is designed to deliver 33 billion cubic meters of natural gas annually, with 14 billion cubic meters each allocated to Pakistan and India and five billion cubic meters to Afghanistan, promising to address Pakistan's chronic energy shortages while generating substantial transit revenues for Kabul and export earnings for Ashgabat (Minute Mirror, 2025). Yet despite Turkmenistan completing its domestic section and beginning construction on Afghan territory, with a ceremonial inauguration of the Serhetabat-Herat segment, the project's financial closure and final investment decision remain suspended due to geopolitical sanctions related to Afghanistan, reduced interest from international lenders and export credit agencies concerned about shifting global energy investment policies away from fossil fuels, and the persistent instability along the pipeline's Afghan route that makes securing long-term financing prohibitively difficult (Minute Mirror, 2025). The scholarly literature has identified multiple compounding obstacles to TAPI's realization, including insecurity along the project route, the absence of adequate technical and institutional infrastructure in Afghanistan, the Taliban government's ambiguous and inefficient political structure, competition between regional and trans-regional actors, and ongoing doubts about Turkmenistan's capacity to sustainably supply the contracted gas volumes (Hussaini & Hedayati Shahidani, 2025). Pakistan's geographic position as the natural corridor between Central Asian energy supplies and South Asian energy markets thus remains more potential than actual, with the geography of instability in Afghanistan functioning as a persistent bottleneck that no amount of diplomatic commitment or preparatory groundwork has proven capable of overcoming.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor represents the most ambitious attempt to revalorize Pakistan's geography from a security liability into an economic asset, physically materializing geographic theory by cutting through the Karakoram and connecting Kashgar to Gwadar through a network of highways, railways, and energy pipelines. The corridor stretches approximately 3,000 kilometers from Gwadar Port in southwestern Pakistan to China's northwestern autonomous region of Xinjiang, with overall construction costs estimated at forty-six billion dollars channeled into energy projects, transportation infrastructure, and the development of Gwadar as a deep-water maritime terminus (CRSS, 2015). This massive undertaking is not merely an infrastructure project but a strategic reimagining of Pakistan's geographic function, potentially transforming the country from a buffer state defined by its role in great-power competition into a bridge state whose territory facilitates the flows of goods, energy, and capital between the Eurasian heartland and the Indian Ocean maritime domain (Naz, 2024). The corridor follows the ancient Silk Road through some of the world's most formidable terrain, traversing the Karakoram Highway at elevations exceeding 4,500 meters before descending through Gilgit-Baltistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab, and Balochistan to reach the Arabian Sea, physically

embodying the geographic theory that Pakistan's location constitutes the optimal overland route connecting western China to global maritime trade networks (Naz, 2024). The extension of CPEC into Afghanistan, discussed during high-level trilateral meetings between the foreign ministers of China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, would further amplify the corridor's geographic logic by integrating Kabul into the network and potentially extending toward Iran, reviving portions of the ancient Silk Road and creating a comprehensive connectivity architecture linking South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East through Pakistani territory (News18, 2025).

Yet the corridor's route through contested territory, particularly Gilgit-Baltistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir, has drawn sustained Indian objections that the project constitutes a violation of Indian sovereignty claims, embedding CPEC within the unresolved territorial disputes that have historically prevented Pakistan from realizing the connective potential of its geography (News18, 2025). Internally, the corridor has generated interprovincial tensions as less privileged regions including Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan protest the routing decisions that concentrate benefits in Punjab and Sindh, while militant groups target power pylons, gas pipelines, and construction crews, demonstrating how domestic political fragmentation and security challenges threaten to undermine the very connectivity the corridor seeks to establish (CRSS, 2015). The core tension that CPEC exposes is whether Pakistan's geographic centrality can be exploited for cooperative gain through infrastructure-led development and regional integration, or whether the gravitational pull of territorial security obsessions, internal political fragmentation, and great-power rivalry will ensure that the corridor becomes another theater of competition rather than the transformative bridge that its architects envision.

### **Conclusion**

This article has demonstrated that geography functions as the single most durable and constraining independent variable in Pakistan's foreign policy, operating not as a mere backdrop against which political choices unfold but as the structural stage that establishes the permanent parameters within which all strategic decision-making must occur. The analysis of the eastern border revealed how the artificial Radcliffe Line created a geography of conflict that transformed Kashmir from a territorial dispute into an existential question, with Himalayan headwaters controlling Pakistan's water lifeline and spatial compression producing an offensive-defensive military doctrine and reliance on nuclear first-use ambiguity that no government can escape regardless of its ideological orientation or diplomatic preferences. The examination of the western frontier exposed the pathological logic of the strategic depth doctrine, where geographic anxiety about encirclement drove interventionist policies that cultivated militant proxies who ultimately turned against their patron, importing blowback directly into the Pakistani heartland and demonstrating how attempts to manipulate geography through proxy warfare produced consequences precisely opposite to those intended. The maritime analysis established that the Arabian Sea has become as vital to Pakistan's strategic calculus as the Himalayan frontier, with the extended continental shelf adding vast resource potential, the nuclear sea leg providing existential deterrence, and the concentration of over 95 percent of trade through vulnerable ports rendering maritime security an economic imperative that is inextricably linked to national survival. The geo-economic investigation exposed the fundamental tension between Pakistan's geographic potential as a connectivity hub and the persistent obstacles of unresolved territorial conflicts, internal political fragmentation, and the institutionalized dominance of security paradigms over economic rationality. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor represents the most

ambitious attempt to revalorize Pakistan's geography from a security liability into an economic asset, yet its realization depends on resolving the very geographic dilemmas, including the instability of the western frontier, the intractability of the eastern border dispute, and the interprovincial tensions that the connectivity vision claims to transcend, that have historically prevented Pakistan from capitalizing on its spatial position.

The central finding that emerges from this investigation is that Pakistan's geography is not destiny in any deterministic sense but rather a permanent structural condition whose policy consequences depend fundamentally on the geopolitical imaginations through which national elites interpret spatial reality and formulate strategic responses. The same Karakoram passes that present formidable obstacles to overland connectivity also provide the physical foundation for the China-Pakistan partnership that has become the cornerstone of Pakistan's contemporary foreign policy orientation. The same Arabian Sea coastline that exposes Pakistan to Indian naval encirclement simultaneously provides access to global maritime trade networks and an extended continental shelf whose resource potential remains almost entirely unexplored. The same western frontier that has generated decades of instability through the strategic depth doctrine could, under conditions of regional peace and political normalization, become the corridor through which Central Asian energy supplies reach South Asian and global markets. The resolution of Pakistan's geographic predicament therefore lies not in overcoming geography, for spatial reality cannot be transcended by any act of political will, but in transforming the geopolitical imaginations that have consistently interpreted geographic conditions through the lens of threat rather than opportunity, constraint rather than connectivity, and territorial defense rather than regional integration. Whether the material incentives embedded in CPEC and the broader geo-economic discourse can overcome the institutional and ideological obstacles to strategic reorientation remains the decisive question for Pakistan's foreign policy in the decades ahead, a question whose answer will determine whether the nation remains a victim of its geography or finally becomes the master of its spatial destiny.

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