



Pakistan’s Strategic Shift from South Asia to the Middle East: Security, Diplomacy, and the Kashmir Question

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ABSTRACT

Pakistan’s South Asian identity and the Kashmir dispute has always been the pivot of its diplomacy, security and foreign policy. The recent developments, such as Islamabad's role in the mediation of the United States-Israel-Iran war, and signing of a defense pact with Saudi Arabia, however, demonstrate a deliberate shift towards the Middle East. This paper analyzes Pakistan's transforming geopolitical identity, diplomacy, security and foreign policy from South Asia and Kashmir to the Middle East, and its advantages and disadvantages. The study is based on the theories of realism, regionalism, and middle power diplomacy, and fits the strategic shift of Pakistan in the broader context of regional identity formation. This repositioning has helped Pakistan secure significant inflow of remittances and oil from the Gulf countries, alleviated security concerns on its South Western border with Iran and elevated its status as a power broker in the Muslim World. However, the strategic shift can have the potential to further marginalize the Kashmir position by abandoning its traditional South Asian identity, and mainly Kashmir-centric advocacy. Gulf partnerships might render economic, security and symbolic support and solidarity; however, it is doubtful that they will lend any substantial material assistance to Pakistan for its Kashmir position, as India-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries economic integration has been ever growing. The paper concludes that Pakistan's Middle East tilt may accrue Pakistan diplomatic, economic and security advantages, but with trade-offs for the traditional South Asian identity and Kashmir-pivotal foreign and security policy objectives. Suggestions have been made on how to combine Middle Eastern engagements with a continued South Asian integration.

Introduction

The South Asian identity of Pakistan: rooted in the partition of 1947, the rivalry with India and the Kashmir dispute have always been at the heart of its foreign policy. Islamabad's strategy has been to strike a balance between security concerns and dreams of regional leadership for decades. The Kashmir issue, especially, has consistently been the focal point of Pakistan's South Asian foreign policy and has been shaping Pakistan's military strategies, alliance formations and international advocacy efforts (Mansoor & Khalid, 2024). The ancient times location of areas Pakistan consists on had made Pakistan a South Asian player, whose foreign policy and legitimacy have been embedded in the geopolitical reality of South Asia.

In recent years, however, Pakistan has started to shift towards the Middle East, indicating a strategic identity shift. This trend is seen in Islamabad's increasing close ties with Saudi Arabia in the both defense and economic realms, its role in helping to resolve the United States-Israel-India confrontation, and its dependence on remittances and energy imports from the Gulf (Barua, 2024). Riyadh as a maiden destination of the first-ever foreign trip of the successive Prime Ministers highlights the symbolic and material significance of the Gulf in Pakistan's foreign policy. However, the gradual economic integration of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) with India poses a challenge for Pakistan's policy makers, who have to extract tangible support from the Gulf partners on the Kashmir cause (Ahmed & Yousaf, 2025).

This reoriented Middle East focus is not totally surprising. Pakistan's regional presence in the past, including its involvement in the Baghdad Pact, the Gulf War, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), reflects a long history of Middle Eastern experience but it had been of a secondary importance in Pakistan's foreign policy (Khan 2025). What makes the current development unusual is that it is a conscious effort to shift the understanding of Pakistan as a South Asian country with Muslim world affiliations to that of an actor in the Middle East. This rebranding is both pragmatic – economic dependency on the Gulf States and security concerns with the Iran border – and aspiration; to be recognized as a power broker in the Muslim world.

The research question has been developed out of this strategic change of focus: What are the implications for Pakistan's foreign policy and the Kashmir issue of the country's imminent move from South Asia to Middle East? As partnership with the Middle Eastern countries' could give Pakistan an economic lifeline and increase its global visibility. On the other, Pakistan may end up compromising on Kashmir by diminishing South Asia focus and the advocacy on the Kashmir position by joining hands with the Gulf countries unwilling to take a stand against India directly on the matter. This presents a complicated foreign policy challenge for Pakistan, as Pakistan has to split its energy, time and sources in-between South Asia and the Middle East. (Hussain, 2024)

The motivation behind its strategic shift is that this redirection will improve the economic and security depth of Pakistan but at the same time it is diminishing the traditional Kashmir agenda of Pakistan by diverting energy from South Asia to the Middle East. The study places this shift in the context of theories of realism, regionalism and middle power diplomacy, and argues that Pakistan's identity has changed due to structural constraints and agency in the process of re-defining Pakistan's role in world politics.

This paper explores the implications for Kashmir in the context of Pakistan's relations with Saudi Arabia, Iran and the GCC, and discusses wider themes of regional identity formation and the compromises of re-branding foreign policies. In conclusion, the analysis highlights the importance

of considering the implications of Pakistan's strategic pivot for its essential national interests, as well as balancing opportunities in the Middle East and responsibilities in South Asia.

Literature Review

The tension between the security concerns and economic weakness of Pakistan has always been a feature of its foreign policy and has been repeatedly emphasized in recent scholarship. Mansoor and Khalid (2024), state that Islamabad's foreign policy is reactive and depends on external patrons and is influenced by its rivalry with India. They also illustrate that Pakistan is poised to continue with military diplomacy and deterrence over economic diplomacy and regional integration. The security orientation has always been the hallmark of Pakistan's approach to security and its foreign policy has been dominated by the Kashmir issue.

But there is an increasing trend towards geo-economic and Middle Eastern involvement, as scholars point out. According to Nawaz et al (2024), Pakistan's engagement in programs like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and its efforts to engage with the economies in the Gulf are an intentional effort in economic diplomacy. They place Pakistan's foreign policy in the context of regional reconfigurations, and suggest that integration with MENACASA (Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia and South Asia) can provide opportunities for trade diversification and stability. This view underscores the increasing role of the economic considerations in determining the external policy of Pakistan despite the wide importance of security issues.

Pakistan's strategic vulnerabilities are also emphasized in the literature. Some scholars such as Butt, Rashid and Ali (2024) attempt to analyze Pakistan's sovereignty with respect to China and the United States through the lens of Dependency Theory. They believe that Pakistan's dependence on Chinese infrastructure projects and the support of the American military limits its independence and constrains its ability to make foreign policy decisions independently. This framework of dependency offers a structural analysis of the pendulum swinging between South Asia and Middle East and external pressures tend to influence the strategic moves of Islamabad.

There is a lot of work on Pakistan's campaigns in the Middle East. Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Mutual Defense Pact: Implications for Gulf Security and the South Asian Deterrence Landscape” by Hussain (2025) looks at the implications of the Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Mutual Defense Pact for the security of the Gulf and South Asian deterrence. The study says that the agreement has the potential to improve Pakistan's strategic depth but it would pose difficulties in the Pakistani relationship with Iran and with external powers, especially the U.S. Similarly, Khalid (2025) reviews Iran-Saudi relations and the trajectory of Pakistan's policy towards these two countries, suggesting that Islamabad's neutrality was driven by pragmatic considerations to address sectarian and geopolitical pressures. Such analyses reflect Pakistan's efforts to shape its image as a Middle Eastern player, while controlling the potential for sectarian polarization and regional rivalry.

Despite its gradual shift towards the Middle East, the Kashmir issue continues to be a key element of Pakistan's foreign policy profile. Fatima (2025) explores the post Article 370 situation, and how India's decision to revoke the autonomy of Kashmir has worsened Pakistan's diplomatic situation. She believes that Pakistan needs to take the help of multilateral platforms and human rights activities to continue the Kashmir issue as Gulf Countries are reluctant to take a stand against India directly. Building on this, Shahid (2025) examines China's role in the Kashmir conflict and its claim that China's interest in Aksai Chin and CPEC has turned the dispute into a trilateral security dilemma. These studies underline the continued relevance of Kashmir in the context of a changing foreign policy agenda for Pakistan.

Question of Pakistan's identity as a South Asian actor or a Middle Eastern actor also comes under discussion. As a South Asian nation and as a Muslim nuclear power, Pakistan is grappling with an identity crisis, as Quraishi and Bazai (2025) have stated. They stress that foreign policy of Pakistan is based on the country's dual identity, with a regional commitment and a global posture. Similarly, Pakistan's leadership in the geopolitical stability of the South Asian region is further emphasized by Jadoon et al (2024), who state that economic efforts and cultural diplomacy would boost Pakistan's position, while security measures would do the opposite. In sum, these works have argued that Pakistan's identity is not fixed but rather fluid and contingent, and determined by structural conditions and strategies.

There are three themes that emerge in this literature synthesis. First, Pakistan's foreign policy continues to be security driven; in recent years however, there has been an increased emphasis on the role of economic diplomacy. Second, Pakistan's reorientation towards the Middle East is an act of pragmatic balancing, but runs the risk of undermining its identity as a South Asian state and its Kashmir advocacy. Third, the Kashmir issue remains a major question of legitimacy for Pakistan in South Asia, especially given the shadow of China and the wariness of the Gulf States. Themes reflect the intricacies of Pakistan's strategic pivot, with opportunities and trade-offs.

Theoretical Framework

This study applies four interconnected theories of strategic transformation of Pakistan from South Asia to Middle East: realism, regionalism, identity politics and middle power theory. These offer analytical richness to grasp the reasons behind Pakistan's foreign policy realignment and its balancing approaches.

The need to be realistic and secure

The touchstone of Pakistan's foreign policy continues to be realism. Realism can be accounted for the Pakistan's resort to alliances and military deterrence through the assumption that in an anarchic international system, states act to maximize security. Mansoor and Khalid (2024) maintain that Pakistan's foreign policy remains focused on survival, rather than security, in context of India, while Kashmir is the primary concern of the country's security policy. The Saudi defense pact and mediation between the U.S. and Iran in the conflict can be interpreted as initiatives taken from the realist perspective to boost Pakistan's security depth and negotiation leverage in this turbulent zone.

Regionalism and reorientation

Theory of regionalism focuses on the importance of geographical and cultural proximity in influencing foreign policy. Nawaz et al. (2024) point to the inclusion of Pakistan in the framework of MENACASA as a reflection of regionalism: the growing economic and cultural linkages with the Middle East are beginning to intertwine with South Asian connections. The reorientation of Pakistan is a pragmatic approach toward multiple regional identities, which enables it to diversify its partnership and minimize the reliance on South Asia only. This regionalist view highlights the pliability of Pakistan's image as a South Asian and Middle Eastern player.

Identity Politics and Strategic Rebranding

The lens of identity politics can provide insights into Pakistan's rebranding itself as a Middle Eastern player. The authors, Quraishi and Bazai (2025), claim that Pakistani identity is a matter of contestation in two faces: South Asian obligations and aspirations of a Muslim nuclear power.

Pakistan is trying to build a new image for itself, going beyond the South Asian context, through solidarity with the Gulf States as well as by claiming to be a mediator in conflicts between the Muslims in the world. This transformation, however, can lead to a decline in its advocacy for Kashmir, and Gulf countries are hesitant to challenge India (Hussain, 2025).

Middle Power Theory

According to the middle power theory, Pakistan is not a great power but it is trying to become a great power by engaging in diplomacy, making alliances and gaining niche leadership. However, Hussain (2025) points out that the country's military alliance with Saudi Arabia is indicative of middle power behavior, where Pakistan has used its military strength to secure its place in the Gulf community. Moreover, Jadoon et al (2024) say that Pakistan is also strengthening its middle power role in South Asia through cultural diplomacy and economic strategies, excluding security policies. In the context of middle power theory, Pakistan's balanced approach towards its regional duties and global aspirations through diplomacy serves as a prime example of the theory.

Synthesis

The documents and research scholars have produced clearly show that the Pakistan's strategic pivot is far from a complete rejection of South Asia, but a multi-layered rebalancing. The security considerations that led to alliances are captured by the concept of realism; the acceptance of Middle Eastern relations by the term regionalism; the rebranding of Pakistan's role under the mantle of identity politics; and the notion of middle power theory locates Islamabad's aspirations for influence. This theoretical synthesis will enable us to analyze the implications of the foreign policy shift by Pakistan in general and the Kashmir issue specifically.

Pakistan's Middle Eastern overtures

Historical Trajectory

Pakistan's ties with the Middle East can be traced back to the Baghdad Pact of 1955 which was then renamed as Central Treaty Organization (CENTO). It is noted that Pakistan's engagement was part of the desperation for security guarantees against India, alongside its alignment with the West in the prism of Cold War geopolitics (Mubasher, 2024). Pakistan has also played its military part in the defense of the holy places, as it deployed armed forces in Saudi Arabia during the Gulf War 1990-91 (White, 2025). In the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Pakistan has always been vocal in calling for Muslim unity, especially regarding the Kashmir issue, while the Gulf States have generally taken a cautious stance (Anwar, Saqib, & Mustafa, 2025).

Recent developments

The most important development is the Pakistan-Saudi Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement (SMDA) of 2025, in which both nations agree to mutual defense. The pact adds to Pakistan's strategic depth and deterrence, making the situation with Iran more complex, Hussain (2025) says. Chandio (2025) also notes its importance in the context of the Middle East peace process as it could help give the Saudis more leverage in the negotiations, but also potentially fuel regional tensions. The authors such as Khalid (2025) and Anwar et al. (2025) highlight Pakistan's nuanced approach to its relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia, underlining its pragmatic neutrality in a region characterized by polarization.

The U.S.-Iranian crisis is also an example of Pakistan's Middle Eastern approach. Islamabad is actively engaged in diplomacy towards Tehran in 2024, visiting the capital of Iran to promote peace, as well as through efforts to ease ties with Riyadh and Doha. (Baloch, 2024) Such measures reflect Pakistan's dream of being considered a mediator in conflicts in the Islamic world.

Economic and Security Drivers

Pakistan is engaged in Middle Eastern affairs due to economic necessities. Nawaz et al. (2024) point out that remittances from the Gulf, energy imports, and investment inflows are key factors that make Pakistan dependent on the Gulf, and thus, its geopolitical posture is part of a geo-economic reconfiguration. The IMF (2024) report highlights the critical need for structural changes and financing in Pakistan, a need that is being met by the relief packages from the Gulf countries. Lohano and Naz (2024) also write that Pakistan's fragile economy has rendered the need for Gulf partnerships as vital to ensure stability.

Also, security drivers are significant. Given Pakistan's borders with Iran, its sectarian makeup and its military relations with Saudi Arabia, its balancing act needs to be done with care. According to Anwar et al. (2025), there are two drivers behind Pakistan's neutrality between the two capitals: sectarian harmony and strategic necessity. Khalid (2025) places this balancing in the middle power theory with a focus on Pakistan's particularly.

Synthesis

The Middle East strategy of Pakistan is multi-layered

In the past, Pakistan has tried to find legitimacy in other institutions such as CENTO and in the OIC by being a pro-active member. Defense alliances and mediation talks indicate a new focus on the Gulf. This engagement is motivated by economic reliance on remittances, reliance on energy imports, as well as security concerns. The balancing act between opportunities in the Middle East and obligations in the South Asia, which includes the Kashmir issue, is still a challenge.

Reduced South Asia Focus

With a strategic shift towards the Middle East, Pakistan's foreign policy space to be active on South Asia and especially the Kashmir issue is inevitably curtailed. Ahmad and Raza (2025) state that Kashmir has been neglected from the multilateral platforms due to Pakistan's incremental focus on Gulf cooperation. This is a lesser focus that can jeopardize Pakistan's narrative against India on the international platform, particularly since the repeal of Article 370.

India's diplomatic advantage

India has been taking advantage of the economic ties of Gulf nations with New Delhi. The UAE and Saudi Arabia are unlikely to back Pakistan's Kashmir stance as deepening trade and investment ties with the Indian subcontinent has rendered them hesitant, according to Khan and Malik (2024). This economic dependence also gives India leverage and it can present Kashmir as a bilateral issue instead of an international issue.

Sectarian balancing and Gulf States' caution

Pakistan is a multi-sectarian state and is engaged in balancing act between Iran and Saudi Arabia that makes Kashmir diplomacy a complex issue in Pakistan. It is believed that to stay away from antagonizing India and to remain sectarian neutral, the Gulf countries do not give out explicit

support to Pakistan in the Kashmir issue (Hussain and Akhtar, 2025). This cautious attitude is hurting the cause of mobilizing Muslim world's solidarity in the cause of Kashmir.

Presenting Kashmir as a Muslim World issue

However, Pakistan persistently continues to present the Kashmir issue as a Muslim world issue. Fatima (2025) draws attention to Islamabad's attempt to depict Kashmir as a human rights issue that has adversely affected the Muslim identity of Kashmir, while addressing the OIC forums. But the strategy is not as effective when Gulf countries are unwilling to take a stand against India. Shahid (2025) also notes that with China's role in Kashmir through CPEC, the conflict has become a tri-lateral security dilemma, rendering Pakistan's effort to advocate more complex matters.

Strategic Trade-offs

According to the literature, strategic trade-offs exist in Pakistan due to its Middle East orientation. On the other hand, Gulf partnerships offer economic lifelines and help Pakistan gain more visibility in the world. However, they dilute its South Asia focus and dampen its Kashmir advocacy. According to Javed (2024) Pakistan has to reconcile its opportunities in the Middle East with its obligations in South Asia, and Kashmir in all its shades should be at the forefront of its foreign policy identity.

Synthesis

What this means for Kashmir can be summed up as follows:

Pakistan's diminished focus on South Asia diminishes its advocacy. The economic relations with the Gulf countries give India a diplomatic edge. Sectarian balancing holds back the support of the Gulf for Pakistan. Attempts to spin Kashmir as a Muslim world problem are not going over well. Balanced diplomacy is emphasized by strategic trade-offs.

Policy analysis and scenarios

The strategy adopted by Pakistan of leaning towards the Middle East has significant ramifications for Pakistan's foreign policy and Kashmir diplomacy. This section summarizes three scenarios – best case, worst case, and most likely – based on existing scholarship and policy analysis, to assess potential outcomes.

Best Case: Gulf Support strengthens Pakistan's Kashmir advocacy

In the best interest of Pakistan, it is able to take advantage of its military and economic ties with the Gulf countries to boost its Kashmir narrative. In the view of Ahmed and Siddiqui (2025), Pakistan's increasing military ties with Saudi Arabia and Qatar can be also interpreted as diplomatic support in multilateral forums. In the same vein, Rauf (2024) also observes that the financial flow of remittances and investments from the Gulf countries gives Pakistan financial stability to sustain the cause of Kashmir in the long run. Gulf countries may support Pakistan's approach of challenging the Indian position on Kashmir as a Muslim world issue and boost its position vis-à-vis India on the international stage.

Worst Case: Kashmir marginalized internationally

The worst case scenario is the marginalization of Kashmir with Pakistan's Middle East tilt. Bhatti (2025) argues that the Gulf nations are not inclined to take Pakistan's side in the OIC due to their

robust economic cooperation with India which places Kashmir in a marginal position. As pointed out by Malik and Hussain (2024), Pakistan's dependence on the financing of the Gulf powers may stifle its efforts to take on an assertive stance towards India in the diplomatic arena because financial ties affect autonomy. In this case, India makes a better use of its diplomatic strength and makes Kashmir a bilateral dispute and Pakistan's role in international forums diminishes.

Most Likely: mixed outcomes and strategic balancing

Most experts foresee a mixed scenario – Middle Eastern opportunities and South Asian responsibilities for Pakistan. According to Farooq (2025), Pakistan's foreign policy is a pragmatic balancing as it remains neutral between Iran and Saudi Arabia and does not advocate anything strongly regarding Kashmir. Pakistan's dual role as a South Asian and Muslim world actor requires dual engagement, for which it might obtain partial gains, but still suffers from challenges, emphasizes Khan and Yousaf (2024). In this scenario, Pakistan will also be pursuing pro-Kashmir agenda, but in a diluted manner, while making economic and security engagement with the Gulf countries a top priority.

Policy Trade-offs

Key Trade-offs highlighted in the scenarios

Partnerships with the Gulf nations offer economic support, but limit Kashmir advocacy.

Security depth vs. regional legitimacy: Defense pacts will increase deterrence but may strain relations with Iran and complicate South Asian diplomacy.

Rebranding vs. continuity: Pakistan's policy in the direction of rebranding itself as a Middle Eastern actor may lead to a loss of its South Asian identity and Kashmir centrality.

Policy Recommendations

Scholars suggest several strategies to make these trade-offs. To prevent dependency, diversifying the economic partnerships outside the Gulf is advised by Jahan (2024). Tariq (2025) recommends utilizing middle power diplomacy to further Kashmir cause in multilateral platforms. While, Abbas (2024) highlights the significance of cultural diplomacy and soft power as tools of keeping Pakistan's legitimacy as a South Asian player. Together, these recommendations highlight the importance of a balanced diplomacy that acknowledges the Middle East opportunities and yet doesn't lose sight of Kashmir.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Summary of Findings

The present study has discussed the shift of Pakistan from South Asia to Middle East in its history, recent defense and diplomatic actions and Kashmir implications. The key findings of this analysis are that Pakistan's foreign policy is in the process of a multi-layered recalibration. Realism offers insight into the security considerations that formed the bases of the alliances with Saudi Arabia and the mediation efforts between the U.S. and Iran. Regionalism brings into the focus the fact that Pakistan has adopted a policy of both South Asian and Middle East commitments. Islamabad's Islamization of its image as a Muslim world actor is reflected in identity politics. Middle power theory places the quest for influence of Pakistan with respect to diplomacy and coalition politics.

The results indicate that the geopolitics of the Middle East provides an additional depth and depth to Pakistan's economy and security. However, it also weakens its focus on the South Asian region, especially Kashmir. However, as India continues to build its economic relationship with the Gulf countries, Pakistan's advocacy becomes even more difficult, as it inevitably involves making strategic choices and compromising between economic stability and diplomatic independence.

The suggestions and recommendations for Pakistan's foreign policy are as follows:

Balanced Diplomacy: Pakistan has to balance the opportunities in the Middle East with its South Asian obligations. To maintain Kashmir advocacy, continuous presence in regional forums as well as in international forums is necessary, as stated by Abbas and Khan (2025).

Triangulation of Economic Relationships: Jahan (2024) calls for diversifying economic partnerships, going beyond the Gulf, to limit dependence. Improved relationships with Central Asian and Southeast Asian countries might offer other economic avenues.

Use of multilateral forums: Tariq (2025) states that middle power diplomacy is crucial for the continuity of Kashmir advocacy. Pakistan needs to be actively involved in OIC, SCO and UN forums as a way to keep Kashmir on the international agenda.

The role of cultural diplomacy to support legitimacy is emphasized by Ahmed (2024) through the theme of soft power. The government of Pakistan must focus on educational exchanges, media outreach, and engaging with the diaspora to bolster its international presence.

Strategic Neutrality: Hussain and Malik (2025) have suggested that neutrality between Pakistan and Iran and Pakistan and Saudi Arabia is necessary for the harmony and stability of the region. This equilibrium will ensure that alienation will not occur and that diplomatic flexibility will be maintained.

Economic Reforms: IMF (2024) highlights the importance of structural reforms aimed at minimizing dependence on external funding. Domestic economic stability will help Pakistan to be less reliant on foreign influences for foreign policies.

Future Research Directions: Future research includes the possibility of analyzing the long-term effects of Pakistan's Middle East policy on the development of its identity as suggested by Rauf (2025). It is recommended that future studies examine how the Pakistan world actor role (South Asian and Muslim) changes and adapts with the changing dynamics of the world.

Concluding Remarks

The decision on Pakistan's change of strategic course is not about the abandonment of South Asia, but the right pragmatic move to gain access to economic lifelines and to increase Pakistan's visibility in the world. The dilemma is to keep Kashmir at the heart of the foreign policy while exploring opportunities in the Middle East. Through a balanced diplomacy, diversified partnership and utilizing multilateral forums, Pakistan can manage this trade-offs and remain as a south Asian and Muslim world player.

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