

Strategic Significance of Pakistan: Challenges and Way Forward

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Abstract

Since its very inception Pakistan has been facing multiple strategic, diplomatic and economic challenges. With a significant strategic position Pakistan is situated at the doorway to the oil-rich countries of the Middle East and Central Asia and, therefore, it has great potential of becoming a transit economy. One cannot overlook the two-dimensional impact of geographical location; it has advantages as well as challenges. In order to transform these challenges into opportunities and protect one's own national interests there is always a dire need to devise strategies to maximise the advantages. This article seeks to examine the benefits of Pakistan's strategic location as well as its internal and external challenges on the same basis.

Keywords: Strategic Location, War on Terror, Alliances, US Withdrawal, Peace and Stability, Geo-strategic, Geo-economics.

Introduction

Since its independence, Pakistan has faced multitudes of external and internal threats. A careful analysis reveals that Pakistan's geo-strategic location has imposed more security challenges as compare to that of benefits. While external threat mainly emanated from its eastern neighbour India that has grown significantly in its character and intensity. On the other hand, signing Mutual Defence Assistance Agreement with the US during the early years of independence, making another alliance with the US

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against Soviet invasion in 1980s and joining GWOT (The Global War on Terror) since 2001 posed its own challenges and opportunities.¹

Pakistan decided to join the US-led war on terror against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban as it did not have many choices and it had to pay a huge price for joining this alliance.² “Being aware of geostrategic position of Pakistan, India was prompt in offering its support for a global coalition. Pakistan had always been concerned and it considered the growing Indian influence in Afghanistan as a grave threat to its national security,”³ because it undermines Pakistan’s security and economic interests in South and Central Asia. Furthermore, the “Strategic Partnership Pact” between India and Afghanistan in October 2011 had increased Pakistan’s concerns manifold.⁴ In this context, Pakistan once again is facing post-US Afghanistan — the specter of a hotspot of infighting. Over the last four decades, Pakistan’s security challenges have compounded mainly on three accounts; Firstly, being a frontline state against the Soviet occupation from 1979-89, secondly, post 9/11, for its participation in the US led alliance in GWOT and lastly, post US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Pakistan’s sincere efforts for peace in Afghanistan had always been viewed with suspicion without analysing the fact logically that a peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan is in the favour of Pakistan as it cannot afford a hostile western border. Thus peaceful solution of Afghan issue has always been Pakistan’s strategic compulsion. On the other hand, Pakistan’s participation in GWOT has “planted the seeds of religious intolerance, and a pervasive gun culture that did not exist previously. The war in Afghanistan for the last four decades has caused deep effects on Pakistani society.”⁵

¹ S. Amjad Hussain, “Pakistan Paying for Fallout Soviets’ Afghan Invasion in 1979 Lingers Today,” *The Blade*, 2014, July 7

² Moonis Ahmar, “9/11 and the Changing Paradigm of Conflict Resolution,” *IPRI Journal* vol. III, no. 1 (Winter 2003), Islamabad: 4.

³ Sumit Ganguly and Nicholas Howenstein, “India-Pakistan Rivalry in Afghanistan,” *Journal of International Affairs* vol. 63, no. 1 (2009): 34.

⁴ The pact, which is Afghanistan’s first with any country, outlines areas of common concern including trade, economic expansion, education, security, and politics. Moreover, under the pact, India will also train the “Afghan National Force.” Also see, “Afghan Foreign Minister in India,” *Dawn*, May 2, 2012.

⁵ S. Amjad Hussain, “Pakistan Paying for Fallout Soviets’ Afghan Invasion in 1979 Lingers Today,” *The Blade*, 2014, July 7.

On the internal front, lack of political stability, illiteracy, religious and ethnic diversity and exponential population growth are the main reasons that hampered Pakistan's path to prosperity. Pakistan, therefore, continues to remain embroiled in internal as well as external security challenges. "The past two decades have been extremely turbulent for Pakistan and it has endured the major burden of the spill-over effect of the US-led war on terror in Afghanistan resulting in huge costs to its economy and loss of over 70,000 lives."⁶ Furthermore, Pakistan was already dealing with the earlier spill over of Afghan refugees of a war in 1980s. Such was the situation when 9/11 happened and the region once again came to limelight as the forces led by the US while blaming Taliban for attacks invaded Afghanistan.

While Afghan conflict has wider security implications for the region, the wars in Iraq, Syria and Yemen have also adversely impacted the security and stability of the entire region. In the Middle East sectarian divide has serious effects on the region and this factor has attracted the forces of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), too. For Pakistan, it is becoming difficult to seek its preferences and even harder to maintain its neutrality in the Middle East.

On its eastern front, Pakistan is confronted with a larger and hostile neighbour India with a history of major wars and legacy of unresolved issues mainly that of Kashmir. The present Modi led BJP government has aggressively pursued to military coercion, malign and isolating Pakistan at regional as well as global levels. Though Pakistan has forcefully countered the malicious efforts of India but even then, it further needs more robust and active foreign policy to deal with the changing dynamics of the region. An objective based foreign policy can maximise the advantage for Pakistan's strategic location despite all challenges. This article seeks to analyse in depth the importance of Pakistan's geographic and strategic location in the region and implications on its security.

Security Challenges in a Geostrategic Context

This region has been a flash point for great power politics for the last four decades. Pakistan's role has remained crucial whether it was the USSR's

⁶ Salma Malik, "Pakistan's Security Challenges and Problems in the Next Decade," *E-International Relations*, 2016, February 4, 2016.

containment campaign or dealing with the aftermath of 9/11. Change in strategic interests of the US towards Pakistan over an extended period of time has numerous implications for the latter and it faced various internal and external pressures in the form of rise in extremism, terrorism acts and economic depreciation. During the “Cold War” the US had aggressively pursued the policy of containment of former Soviet Union and Pakistan remained part of the US alliance at that time. However, soon after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, the US had achieved its ultimate goal and abandoned Afghanistan amidst civil war. In this line of action, Pakistan was also left to deal with the menace of on-going civil war in its immediate neighbourhood and to bear the burden of Afghan refugees’ influx. In the years thereafter, the America’s strategic interests in Pakistan had remained marginal while the Indo-US strategic cooperation got strengthened immensely. In the aftermath of 9/11, Pakistan once again came into the spotlight to protect the security interests of the US and its Western allies. To gain strategic interests in Afghanistan, Pakistan was declared a non-NATO ally by the US. However, the US relationship with Pakistan remained restricted solely to the extent of seeking cooperation in Afghanistan. With the end of the Cold War, in a gradual shift of its strategic orientation, in order to contain and counter China, the US started building strategic ties with India and focused on Asia-Pacific region. To placate India, in a brash move the US renamed the region as Indo-Pacific and has signed several strategic agreements along with supply of major military equipment. Now, with the end of GWOT and the exit of remaining US forces in the August 2021 from Afghanistan, Pakistan is once again left to tackle and deal with the sensitive situation in its neighbourhood. Though Taliban have established control over their entire territory of Afghanistan including the invincible Panjshir valley, but still the chances of civil war are omnipresent because of the multiple groups and war lords who are operating there with support of external actors. A brief over view of the GWOT will further elaborate the case in point.

War on Terrorism

The US administration held Osama bin Laden responsible for the 9/11 attacks. Laden was a very close and crucial ally of the US in 1980s during war against the former Soviet Union. In response to the Taliban’s refusal to hand him over to them, the US and allies conducted a series of aerial strikes in the regions controlled by the Taliban in Afghanistan. The

US during that era supported the Northern Alliance both militarily and financially, which has traditionally been pro-India in order to defeat the Taliban. After the 9/11 attacks, the government of Taliban in Kabul collapsed in just three months, resulting in displacement of most of the Taliban forces to the South and along the border with Pakistan.”⁷ The then government of Pakistan under Pervaiz Musharraf feared the US action against Pakistan and the prospect of a US-Indian alliance. Pakistan facilitated the US in Afghan war⁸ Hamid Karzai was designated as the President of the interim government in December 2001. The US and the United Kingdom (UK) were enjoined by several NATO alliance forces in order to combat insurgency outbreaks in Afghanistan; France, Germany and Italy being perceptible for supplying the most troops. The fighting continued for all these years, and the Taliban resistance movement continued to fight the occupation forces. The result was loss of thousands of innocent lives, labelled as collateral damage, by the US/NATO forces, besides casualties of the US and allied forces and Taliban.

“Inside Pakistan, newly organised groups known as the ‘Pakistani Taliban’ have gradually emerged on the scene posing a new challenge to the state of Pakistan. In 2007, different Pakistani rouge, criminal and outlaw elements joined some of the banned extremist religious groups and morphed into a single militant outfit namely the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (Taliban Movement of Pakistan or TTP) led by Baitullah Mehsud. With its base in border areas of KPK, FATA and parts of Balochistan, this militant group — TTP and its affiliated organisations are considered responsible for most of the terrorist attacks during the last 15 years, throughout Pakistan, that besides military, also targeted thousands of civilians.

The security forces of Pakistan launched an operation in North Waziristan when the TTP refused to surrender. Terrorists continued to attack troops and civilian targets, including the Karachi airport, killing innocent people before heroically claiming responsibility. The successful military operations against terrorists and their hideouts in North Waziristan proved the capabilities of Pakistani forces and resolve of the civilian government. There was a confusion among the TTP ranks after decisive operations against them by the security forces of Pakistan. In

⁷ Maleeha Lodhi, “Dealing with the Regional Uncertainty,” *News*, June 24, 2014.

⁸ Lodhi, “Dealing with the Regional Uncertainty.”

view of the external environment as well as internal back lash owing to joining GWOT, Pakistan has to adopt a tough border management along with reinforcing its internal lines of defence, and taking decisive steps to contain militancy through military operations.”⁹

Afghan War and Its Aftermath in Pakistan

The opium traffic has remained a major problem of Afghanistan for the past many decades. Also corruption is deep-rooted in Afghan society, and every regime failed to contain it. Being the neighbouring country Pakistan has always been a major sufferer of the mishappenings of Afghanistan.

The drone strikes conducted during GWOT in Pakistan have resulted in massive collateral damage, killing civilians. According to an estimate, about two thousand individuals died as a result of some 200 drone strikes carried out during the GWOT.¹⁰ Statistics revealed that out of all drone attacks, the high value targets killed were only around three per cent which shows extensive collateral damage caused by these drone strikes.¹¹ In this context the UN had also been critical of utilising drones as a weapon of choice in Pakistan’s tribal areas and termed them as illegal, counterproductive and grave violation of human rights. Talking to journalists in Islamabad the then UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR), Navi Pillay said: “I see indiscriminate killing and injuring of innocent people as a clear violation of human rights. Drone attacks do raise serious questions about compliance with international law.”¹²

Despite of the setbacks, Pakistan is cognizant of the underlining imperatives of healthy relations with Afghanistan to tackle ubiquitous terrorism, trade linkages with Central Asian states and to avoid the spillover effects of violence from the porous Pak-Afghan border. A multilaterally mediated peace process including Taliban and other factions could be the

⁹ “Pakistan and Afghanistan,” *Institute of the Study of War*.

¹⁰ “Drone Attack in Pakistan,” South Asia Terrorism Portal, June 11, 2012, <http://www.satp.org/satporstp/countries/pakistan/database/Droneattack.htm>

¹¹ A.S.M. Ali Ashraf, “US Drone Strikes in Pakistan: Increasing Trends, Questionable Legitimacy, and the Issue of Tacit Cooperation,” *Pakistan Journal of International Relations* vol. 1, no. 2 (2010): 26.

¹² “Drone Raids Violate Human Rights,” *Dawn*, June 8, 2012.

only coherent and sensible way forward in bringing peace and stability in Afghanistan. Continuous unrest in Afghanistan would bring in other terrorist organisations as the presence of ISIS has reportedly been documented in other war-ravaged countries.

Post US Withdrawal from Afghanistan

The outcome of the American withdrawal from Afghanistan resulted into complete takeover by Taliban. The Afghan security forces did not show any resistance in relinquish the control of Kabul. For Pakistan it is not only about the stability in settled areas of KPK and former FATA region but also peace in Balochistan is largely linked to a stable Afghanistan.¹³ So, Pakistan's geographical proximity does not allow it to remain aloof. Afghanistan has become a war zone for the last four decades and these wars have had huge fall out on Pakistan in terms of maintaining security and stability especially when it has turbulent eastern border with a hostile neighbour. The deteriorated security situation in Afghanistan adversely affects Pakistan's security as well as economy. Therefore, the importance of Pakistan for the peace process in Afghanistan cannot be denied.

During Afghan war, Pak-US cooperation was essential and both the countries have been seeking cooperation to address their core strategic interests in the mutually beneficial partnership.¹⁴ Ironically, during all the years of Afghan war, Pak-US relations had always been in a topsy turvy state since the desired objective of the US to exterminate terrorism has not been achieved. On the contrary the void between the US demands and expectations from Pakistan and our willingness to comply with has been ever expanding between Pakistan and the US. Thus, the consistent euphuism – 'do more,' the US mantra for Pakistan, continued to reverberate throughout the last two decades. With the change in global and regional geopolitical and geo-economics, and the ensuing world order, the Indo-US strategic alliance becoming stronger, to address its vulnerabilities in South Asian region, Pakistan had to lean towards China.¹⁵

¹³ Safia Aftab, "The 2014 ISAF Pull out from Afghanistan: Impact on Pakistan," *NOREF*, Report, December 12, 2013.

¹⁴ Naeem Ahmed, "Pakistan-US Relations: Threats and Responses," in *US Policy Towards the Muslim World: Focus on the post-9/11 Period* ed., Saleem Kidwai (Maryland: University Press of America, 2010), 230.

¹⁵ Ahmed, "Pakistan-US Relations: Threats and Responses."

In spite of the current tensions, it will be beneficial if Pakistan and the US align their strategic objectives. Both countries may devise a strategy for maintaining peace and stability in a post-US Afghanistan, preventing the spread of Islamic State IS into the country, and South Asian strategic stability. Simultaneously, it is important that both countries must also address the pending areas of divergence which include the US intent to give India greater role in region against China and the US opposition to the Chinese CPEC project and other development projects like oil and gas pipelines from Iran and CARs etc.

Security Situation on the Eastern border

Following the 9/11 war on terrorism, India has concentrated on a military-based solution to the Kashmir problem, attempting to link the Kashmir dispute to terrorism and diverting the attention away from Afghanistan to cross-border terrorism in Kashmir. Similarly, India has attempted to link Pakistan's support for the Kashmir freedom movement to terrorist actions.¹⁶

Pakistan's efforts to use its leverage as a US ally, to resolve Kashmir conflict have not been successful. However, the international community which is more concerned with the Pakistan-India nuclear race has pressed both countries to initiate CBMs on nuclear front post 2001-02 escalation. As a result, on June 20, 2004, both countries "agreed to extend a nuclear testing ban and to set up a hotline between their foreign secretaries aimed at preventing misunderstandings that might lead to a nuclear war."¹⁷ For the time being prospects of meaningful measures to resolve the Kashmir dispute through peaceful means appears to be a bleak idea because of the various incidents have further dented the India-Pakistan relations in the last 15 years. With Uri and Pulwama attacks, alleged to be perpetrated by Kashmiri freedom fighters, military tensions between the two nuclear neighbours touched new heights. To take revenge from Pakistan for its alleged involvement in February 14, 2019 Pulwama attack, that left 40 Indian paramilitary soldiers dead, on February 26, 2019, Indian Air Force crossed the Line of Control and launched airstrikes against Pakistan's territory at Balakot. Since, the airstrikes failed to cause any damage, Pakistan's response was measured. To keep the conflict limited, Pakistan Air Force

¹⁶ Shireen M. Mazari, "Indo-Pak Relations after 9/11," *Newsline*, November 10, 2001.

¹⁷ Gurmeet Kanwal, "India's Military Modernization: Plans and Strategic Underpinnings," *National Bureau of Asian Research*, September 24, 2012.

(PAF) deliberately avoided the India military targets, and the bombs fell in the vicinity. However, the chasing Indian aircraft were effectively engaged, that resulted into shooting down of an Indian MiG-21 aircraft with debris falling inside the territory of Azad Kashmir and its pilot captured. The other aircraft, a SU-30 that PAF claimed to have shot down, fell within Indian Held Kashmir. An India helicopter was also shot down as a fratricide. With tensions running high between the two nuclear powers, key international players jumped in to diffuse the crisis that had the potential to escalate. In the same spirit, as a demonstration of an act of good faith, Pakistani Prime Minister, Imran Khan immediately announced handing over the captured Indian pilot. However, New Delhi showed little interest in settling their differences any further and continued with its belligerent posture against Pakistan. On August 5, 2019, Indian government revoked Article 370 with 35A the constitutional basis that connects Kashmir's complex relationship with India. Since then, the Kashmir valley remains under repressive Indian military control and lock down. These repressive measures have turned Jammu and Kashmir into a no-go area. It is worth considering that there are around 900,000 police, security and military personnel in the Indian occupied Kashmir. In fact, it is the most militarised region in the world. Indiscriminate firing across the line of control by India is a regular feature. Civilians residing close to the border on Pakistan's side incur heavy losses in terms of life and property. On the other hand, Pakistani forces are very careful in responding Indian firing because of the presence of civilian in the bordering areas. The mayhem that has been created by the Modi government due to the changes in the constitutional status of Kashmir has also been linked to Pakistan and labelling it as a perpetrator of the strong reaction in the population. Despite erecting electric fencing of the entire Line of Control (LoC) by India and also presence of huge number of forces whenever there is unrest in the valley the blame is always put on Pakistan.

Over the last two decades, Indian activities in Afghanistan to destabilise and marginalise Pakistan have remained a key national security concern for Pakistan. In the post-9/11 period, Indian participation in Afghanistan, in terms of money, training, and subversion of anti-Pakistan elements, rose dramatically, greatly to Pakistan's harm. Taking advantage of its strategic ties with the US and the Afghan government, Indian Intelligence Agency (RAW) has been jointly working against Pakistan. Now post the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and control of Taliban over Afghanistan, it poses serious problems for India. As the Taliban have gained control of 60

per cent districts, India has evacuated its intelligence agency operatives, along with their weapons and equipment etc. through special airlifts. Having failed to woo Taliban through discrete contacts, India in concert with other inimical forces is likely to continue extending support to all anti-Taliban forces in Afghanistan, including war lords, ISIS, TTP and other hostile elements. In order to respond effectively to an uncertain situation in the neighbourhood and to the fallout of fast-evolving dynamics in the wider region, Pakistan must secure itself at home. Only by establishing peace within, will the country be able to manage any instability that might be fuelled from outside.¹⁸ All security related initiatives can only be carried and sustained on the basis of economic strength.

Conclusion

With the changing geopolitical and geo-strategic landscape of South Asia, Pakistan's role has become even more critical in all respects. It is generally believed that Afghanistan is facing more or less same situation of post-Soviet withdrawal of late 80s. The US left Afghanistan high and dry, India was covertly involved in anti-Pakistan and malicious activities which were the source of instability in the region. So owing to divergent interests of the regional countries civil war in Afghanistan ensued.¹⁹ Pakistan, on the other hand, made a concerted effort to bring together the leaders of various Afghan factions in order to create an acceptable-to-all government. These efforts were proved unsuccessful since every faction had its own priorities and objectives. It is widely assumed that whosoever controls Kabul will be having government in the entire Afghanistan. Pakistan accepted the Taliban government along with the UAE and Saudi Arabia.²⁰

Due to current geo-political situation, mainly the US rivalry with Russia and China, there is convergence of interest. Also, due to the One Belt One Road Initiative (OBOR) of China along with Russia, Central Asian Republics, Iran and Pakistan want peace in Afghanistan. Pakistan's

¹⁸ Lodhi, "Dealing with the Regional Uncertainty."

¹⁹ Author's one to one interview with Nasim Rana, Rawalpindi, September 1, 2021, Rawalpindi.

²⁰ Author's one to one interview with Nasim Rana.

concerns and role as a major neighbouring country may not be ignored for the greater peace and security in the region.²¹

Dividend of peace in Afghanistan will be in the shape of opening of economic activities, trade, and oil and gas pipelines among the regional countries. Also, peace in Afghanistan would allow the Chinese mega development project, One Belt and One Road Initiative and CPEC to become a reality.

On the eastern front these challenges have become more complicated after India revoked the special status of India-held Kashmir on August 5, 2019 which was granted under Article 370 of the Indian constitution. Pakistan tried hard to raise the issue to the international community and on the relevant platforms — especially focusing on human rights abuses in the valley. These efforts yielded partial results and international media and human rights organisations took the atrocities in the Indian occupied Kashmir seriously. Pakistan, however, need to generate enough political and diplomatic efforts to push India to put an end to its cruel actions in Kashmir and to resolve the conflict. China backed Pakistan's position in the UN Security Council. Nevertheless, from the platform of OIC, Pakistan gained considerable support on the issue of Kashmir. In this regard recent visit of special envoy of OIC Secretary General is worth mentioning.

Maintaining stability in Pakistan's relations with China and the US is another challenge for Pakistan. Pakistan is not going to be part of any alliance when it comes to global powers as per the current government's official policy. A rational approach for Pakistan would be to remain focused on economic uplift, striving for political stability and bringing an end to extremism and terrorism vis a vis its internal challenges.

Pakistan needs to exploit the benefits of its strategic location in the region and beyond. For this purpose, a pragmatic foreign policy is required which serves the country's overall national interests. Pakistan needs to enhance its engagement with the international community. Although, financial constraints place stringent limits on options that Pakistan can exercise, yet a proactive and pragmatic foreign policy can pay greater dividends. However, it must be ensured that strategic stability must not be

²¹ Syed Fazl-e-Haider, "The Doha Accord and Taliban Legitimacy," *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, November 29, 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/>

compromised. For instance, we need to have a tranquil western border and any peace process with India should be done on reciprocal basis, as part of a comprehensive solution. For economic development the CPEC Project, which is part of Chinese BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) project, provides a unique opportunity, albeit due to advantages of Pakistan's geo-strategic location. While ensuring to safeguard Pakistan's strategic interests, maximum benefits be gained from the regional connectivity. Since Indo-US strategic partnership is ominous and Pakistan's tilt towards China is growing, there is a need for Pakistan to have a careful balanced relationship with both China and the US. As far as Afghanistan is concerned, Pakistan has always maintained that, there is no military solution to the Afghan imbroglio and only political solution has to be negotiated between the stakeholders. Same is view in case of Indian occupied Kashmir, India to learn from the US experience in Afghanistan and avoid any military solution of the Kashmir issue.