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**An In-depth Examination of Pakistan's Endeavors to Establish an Autonomous Foreign Policy from 2018 to 2022**

Farah Sarwar\*<sup>1</sup>, Summaya Khan Safi<sup>2</sup>

**Original Article**

1. Department of International Relations, International Islamic University Islamabad  
Email: farahsarwar66@gmail.com
2. Department of International Relations, International Islamic University Islamabad  
Email: summayaa14@gmail.com

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**Abstract**

*The current study explores the attempts of Pakistan to develop an independent foreign policy against 2018 to 2022 and will analyze the factors that have contributed to its quest and evaluate its achievements and failures. The research aims to know why and why not to get autonomy in the international relations through a methodology that entails a thorough examination of secondary literature in the form of publications and reports. Some of the factors considered include global power balance, regional impacts, and domestic political concerns. The study offers valuable information about the consequences of policy making, diplomacy, and the negotiation process, thereby making an input to an informed policy making, and shaping the future of the foreign policy in Pakistan. The results of the study contribute to understanding the specifics related to the course of autonomous foreign policy and give clues about the outcomes of the Pakistani efforts concerning its role in the world arena. The current study may be valuable to add to the policy-making discussions and contribute to the formation of the more knowledge-based strategy to build the future foreign policy orientation of Pakistan.*

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**Introduction**

Pakistan's foreign policy is a nuanced undertaking influenced by an intricate interaction of domestic and international forces. Foreign policy is essentially the outward expression of a society's combined actions in the context of international relations, motivated by the desire to protect and advance its own interests. The goals that guide the development and execution of Pakistan's foreign policy include protection against external threats, financial assistance, power dynamics, and moral influence. The policy is shaped by several internal variables, such as the institutional framework, ingrained views and values, responses to psychological pressure, national unity, the mobilization of ideas, and the demographic composition of the population (May, n.d.).

An examination of Pakistan's foreign policy since gaining independence in 1947 through a historical perspective highlight key developments in 1952, 1953, 1961, and 1962. The country's geopolitical orientation has oscillated between pro-American and pro-Soviet positions, mirroring the prevailing geopolitical necessities of each age. The historical context serves as a basis for

comprehending Pakistan's diplomatic dexterity in maneuvering through global power dynamics (Zaidi, 2019).

The foreign policy of Pakistan has many hindrances in the current era, in the period of 2018-2022 under the leadership of Imran Khan. The complexities of the conflict in Afghanistan, the complex diplomatic relationships with US and Afghanistan, the repeal of the Article 370 by the Indian government, and the pact with China require a responsible and smart action. The viability of foreign policy is based on the delicate balance to safeguard the national interests and the ability to adapt artfully to the ever-changing world. This study aims at giving a thorough discussion of both internal and external influences on the foreign policy of Pakistan. It will focus on the effectiveness and flexibility of the foreign policy of Pakistan to safeguard its national interests in the international sphere (Zubair, 2017).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The research article is an investigative work on the multi-layered causes of the Pakistani foreign policy and gives an in-depth analysis of the foreign policy as formed through the historical course of development, the internal forces that contribute to shaping its foreign policy, and its reaction to the contemporary problems. The paper examines the foreign policy as a collective behavior of the society affected through some internal factors including institutional structure, ideology, and population dynamics. In addition, it addresses the complex issues faced by Pakistan over the recent times, including the Afghan war, bilateral relations and regional developments. Through a critical examination of the past trends and present challenges, the research aims at offering useful information on the flexibility and efficiency of the foreign policy of Pakistan in safeguarding national interests with the new global environment.

### **Pro-Regional Policies of Pakistan: An Independent foreign policy approach in the Era of 2018-22**

The focus on foreign policy by nations has become a critical issue in modern politics whereby national interest is given priority over general ideological beliefs. The creation of Pakistan was based on the partition of British India to satisfy the need of the Islamic nationalists. It is benefiting it greatly since it is strategically and geographically located. The strategic location of Pakistan has been a crucial factor in influencing its foreign policy since its establishment. The various regions of the country, delineated by unique features in terms of geography, history, socioeconomics, and physical traits, constitute an essential component of the nation's structure (The Diplomat, 2016). The linkage between local communities and the state is fostered through regional associations, where both local and federal tiers of administration converge on a regional scale. The shapes and structures of these regions are inextricably interconnected with their distinct historical, geographical, political, and cultural characteristics. Regionalization promotes the preservation of unique cultural characteristics and encourages a variety of social, economic, and political interests within certain regions. However, achieving a harmonious combination of equitable regional growth and a functional state-local government connection is rarely observed in reality. Comprehending Pakistan's foreign policy requires adeptly navigating intricate factors such as internal regional dynamics and exterior geopolitical issues (Malik, 2018).

### **Foreign Policy in the era 2018-2022**

In the era 2018 to 2022, Pakistan's foreign policy underwent a significant transformation under the leadership of Prime Minister Imran Khan, diverging from the strategies employed by prior governments. The Imran Khan government placed great importance on regional connectivity and economic cooperation, giving priority to programs such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and facilitating regional commerce to promote economic integration with neighboring countries. This approach deviated from the previous emphasis on developing partnerships with global powers, indicating a unique concentration on utilizing Pakistan's strategic geographical position (DAWN, 2016).

The Imran Khan government has maintained a diplomatic relationship with various countries and international organizations, with the Prime Minister himself attending international conferences to improve the Pakistani image on the international scale and address such significant issues as the Kashmir problem and anti-terrorist campaigns. On the other hand, the past regimes have often shown a more passive approach to diplomacy, relying on some backdoor channels of communication or even a reactive approach (Fani, 2005).

The Imran Khan administration actively participated in the activities of regional security and cooperation, especially anti-terrorism cooperation, and formed alliances with nearly all neighbouring countries, such as Afghanistan and China. They tried to facilitate peace talks in Afghanistan and strengthen intelligence gathering and military cooperation. This strategy built upon the counterterrorism strategies deployed by the previous administrations, which included the military campaigns against the terrorist groups (Iqbal, 2016).

A strategic tie was strived to develop relations in the diplomatic relations with the main world powers like the United States, China, and Saudi Arabia. It was aimed at maintaining cordial relations with all stakeholders, safeguarding the national interests of Pakistan, without the tendency of making and breaking alliances that were prevalent in the interactions between the past administrations and the powerful countries (Zaidi, 2017).

The Imran Khan administration utilised humanitarian diplomacy and soft power projection to enhance Pakistan's international standing. The implementation of projects such as the Kartarpur Corridor, which allows Sikh pilgrims to visit religious sites, and the hosting of international cricket matches, were strategically planned to strengthen interpersonal connections and promote cultural interchange. These endeavours have elevated cultural diplomacy to a prominent position within Pakistan's foreign policy. The foreign policy strategy during Imran Khan's tenure is characterised by a unique combination of economic collaboration, assertive diplomacy, regional security measures, and cultural diplomacy (Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, 2020).

### **An Analysis of Imran Khan regime and Foreign Policy**

Pakistan's national election, which resulted in Imran Khan's glory, has generated curiosity regarding his foreign policy agenda, precisely his position on inter-regional connections. Imran Khan highlights the imperative for Pakistan to establish peaceful relations with all its neighboring countries, citing the nation's economic predicament as a critical motivating element. Prime Minister Imran Khan of Pakistan's foreign policy has prioritized improving relations with neighboring countries, mainly focusing on India. Acknowledging the significance of regional stability and collaboration, Khan has proactively endeavored to initiate a re-establishment of relations with India. The individual in question has participated in numerous high-level meetings with the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, to exhibit his dedication to identifying areas of mutual agreement and resolving protracted conflicts (Sustainable Development Policy Institute, 2019).

The protracted Kashmir conflict, a longstanding bone of contention between Pakistan and India, continues to pose a formidable obstacle. Imran Khan has consistently espoused advocating a peaceful resolution of the Kashmir dispute, underscoring the imperative of an UN-mediated dialogue. Notwithstanding these endeavors, advancements have been sluggish, and the matter persists as an obstacle to the potential enhancement of bilateral relations between the two nations. Khan's unwavering dedication to nonviolent methods of conflict resolution and his consistent efforts to engage with Indian counterparts demonstrate his resolute stance towards resolving this enduring matter (Bengali, 2018).

Concurrently, Imran Khan has endeavored to enhance relations with China, Pakistan's most intimate ally. Acknowledging the strategic significance of the China-Pakistan nexus, Khan has prioritized improving cooperation and collaboration between the two nations. The bilateral relationship between the two nations has been strengthened by his visits to China and the

sustained economic and military assistance provided by China. The partnership mentioned above has not only augmented Pakistan's economic advancement but also furnished a perception of assurance and constancy within the vicinity (Ahmad, 2022).

Furthermore, Imran Khan has been proactively engaged in efforts to mitigate tensions with Afghanistan, which is situated west of Pakistan. Acknowledging the intricate nature of the bilateral ties between the two nations, Khan has advocated for a decrease in antagonism and has participated in several consultations with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani. Notwithstanding the progress, there are still obstacles to overcome, notably transnational terrorism, which has placed significant pressure on the diplomatic ties between the two countries. Khan's endeavors to promote discourse and collaboration are geared towards enhancing regional stability and security. However, resolving these matters necessitates persistent diplomatic endeavors and cooperation (Ali, 2022).

The regional policies advocated by Imran Khan have generated various responses from analysts, which are not entirely uniform. The endeavor to enhance ties with Pakistan's neighboring countries has been received positively by some, who perceive it as imperative for promoting regional stability and progress. The analysts favor his inclination to participate in discussions and seek nonviolent solutions to protracted conflicts. <sup>1</sup>Nonetheless, some individuals have raised apprehensions regarding Khan's tendency to excessively appease India and China, which could potentially undermine Pakistan's interests. Achieving a successful diplomatic outcome necessitates carefully calibrating collaborative efforts to protect a nation's interests (Ali, 2020).

The efficacy of Imran Khan's foreign policy agenda is contingent upon several factors, encompassing the receptiveness of adjacent nations to reciprocate endeavors, the intricacies of regional dynamics, and his adeptness in navigating intricate issues such as the Kashmir conflict and transnational terrorism. Achieving peace and enhancing regional relations necessitates a multifaceted approach that demands unwavering dedication, constructive communication, and a willingness to make concessions from all the concerned parties. The efficacy of Imran Khan's efforts to foster harmonious and collaborative ties with Pakistan's neighboring countries can only be determined with time (Anwar, 2020).

### **Imran Khan prioritises China in foreign policy due to its involvement in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and poverty reduction.**

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) plays a crucial role in promoting closer ties between Pakistan and China. Central to the Belt and Road Initiative, this all-encompassing growth strategy includes enormous infrastructure projects that cover highways, railways, and energy programmes. Prime Minister Imran Khan perceives CPEC as a catalyst for Pakistan's economic progress, acknowledging its potential to bring about significant transformation. The project, intended to connect China's northwestern area with Pakistan's southwestern port of Gwadar, is expected to enhance trade, create jobs, attract foreign investment, and coincide with Khan's objective of improving the country's economy and alleviating poverty (Ali, 2020).

Imran Khan not only appreciates China's economic partnership, but also has a strong desire to learn from China's effective strategies in reducing poverty. Pakistan regards China's approach to poverty reduction, industrialization, and infrastructural development as a good template for its own socio-economic advancement. In addition to economic relations, China has become a crucial military partner for Pakistan, offering substantial defense support and helping to the improvement of Pakistan's defense capabilities. This has led to a mutual dependence and coordination between the two countries in security affairs (Best & Christiansen, 2021).

Nevertheless, the growing relationship with China has sparked apprehensions, such as the risk of becoming overly reliant, the potential for debt accumulation due to development initiatives,

and the need to protect Pakistan's national interests in bilateral accords. The Imran Khan administration must delicately navigate the task of maintaining a balance between the benefits of the Pakistan-China relationship and safeguarding sovereignty and long-term national interests.

### **Textual Evidence**

Prime Minister Imran Khan of Pakistan has emphasized the significance of keeping "mutually advantageous" and "equitable" relations with the United States. Khan's plea for a mutually beneficial partnership highlights his desire to reconfigure the complexities of the Pakistan-U.S. alliance. The individual plans to withdraw from a cooperation that is seen as unfairly favoring the United States, a situation that has often caused concern for Pakistan (Bhaumik, 2022). Khan seeks to rectify the unequal conditions, dependency, and negative consequences on Pakistan's independence and well-being by pursuing a fairer alliance. The Prime Minister's assessment of the current status of relations with the United States suggests his intention to evaluate the nature of Pakistan's engagement with its long-standing ally. This involves a reassessment of aspects such as defence cooperation, economic assistance, and political engagements. Khan strives to prioritise the safeguarding of Pakistan's national interests and establish a bilateral partnership based on values of mutual respect and understanding (Bastos, 2021).

In addition, Imran Khan's focus on the negative consequences for Pakistan highlights the harmful repercussions of previous policy frameworks that have hindered the country's social and economic development and regional stability. The individual strives to address these concerns and foster a mutually beneficial connection with the United States that fosters progress and prosperity for both nations (Ali, 2020).

It is crucial to recognize that the process of readjusting the Pakistan-U.S. relationship and achieving a fairer cooperation is a complex endeavor. The previous history of the partnership has been marked by oscillations and moments of tension, stemming from differing priorities and geopolitical forces. Establishing a more equal and mutually advantageous partnership needs constant communication, smart negotiation, and a concentrate on shared priorities, including counterterrorism, regional stability, and economic engagement (Montgomery, 2018).

Pakistan, the United States, and the geopolitical dynamics of the surrounding region all have much to gain from Imran Khan's aspiration for a more equitable and mutually advantageous relationship with the United States. These repercussions can be approached from multiple perspectives. Pakistan and the United States have diplomatic relations. Imran Khan's emphasis on rebalancing the relationship signifies a shift away from an overly dependent stance on the United States and a yearning for increased autonomy in decision-making. This modification has the potential to enhance Pakistan's self-assurance in safeguarding its national interests and pursuing policies that align with its strategic objectives (Hass, 2019).

### **Economic Diplomacy in the Regime of Imran**

The Government of Pakistan, under the leadership of Prime Minister Imran Khan, acknowledges the crucial significance of economic diplomacy in promoting the country's external economic interests. The administration seeks to prioritize economic diplomacy as a crucial component of its foreign policy in order to guarantee sustainable advancement and protect the welfare of the nation. Although recognizing its significance, the execution of economic diplomacy initiatives encounters difficulties in converting national goals into concrete efforts at the community level. Constraints such as scarcity of resources, inefficiency in bureaucratic processes, inadequate infrastructure, and regulatory barriers obstruct the successful execution, impeding the desired influence on external economic issues (Haiqi & Chia, 2021).

A major hindrance exists in the discrepancy between policy goals and the capacity to implement them, leading to occasional individual achievements without a wider improvement of institutional capacities. In order to tackle these difficulties, it is crucial to implement a

comprehensive reform approach. The Imran Khan administration should give priority to important sectors, beginning with enhancing the capacity of institutions and promoting coordination among government departments involved in economic diplomacy. Capacity-building programs targeting diplomats, trade officials, and stakeholders can bolster their skills and expertise, thereby promoting a more unified and standardized approach (Iqbal, 2022).

Collaborations between the public and private sectors are crucial for utilizing the knowledge and resources of the private industry in economic diplomacy. Collaborations with commercial entities, industry groups, and trade promotion organizations can simplify the process of entering new markets, discover economic opportunities, and improve the global competitiveness of Pakistani companies (Siddiqa, 2018). Proactive marketing and branding strategies are crucial for demonstrating Pakistan's economic capabilities, attracting foreign investment, and expanding export markets. An effective communication plan that highlights the good traits, investment opportunities, and comparative advantages of Pakistan has the potential to significantly improve its international image, hence drawing interest from potential collaborators and financiers. Pakistan may enhance the effectiveness of its economic diplomacy endeavors and promote long-lasting economic development by focusing on these crucial areas (Zaidi, 2019).

### **Security and Defense with relation to Foreign Policy in Imran Government**

Prime Minister Imran Khan's leadership emphasizes the Government of Pakistan's foreign policy, which prioritizes security and defense as crucial foundations. This approach acknowledges their utmost significance in safeguarding national interests and promoting stability in the area. The administration has shown a determined dedication to combating terrorism and extremism by utilizing a comprehensive strategy that includes military strategies, intelligence cooperation, and efforts to reduce radicalization. The coordinated endeavor has markedly diminished terrorist activity and strengthened domestic security (Mohan, 2022).

The Imran Khan administration has actively pursued diplomatic engagement with neighboring states to effectively handle common security concerns, with a particular focus on regional stability. Various diplomatic means, including as official communication channels, face-to-face encounters between two countries, and active involvement in regional conferences, have been employed to promote dialogue, reduce tensions, and foster cooperation. Pakistan's significant participation in supporting a peace process headed by Afghanistan highlights its dedication to maintaining stability in the area (Sheikh, 2022).

The administration has actively promoted dialogue between the Afghan government and the Taliban, with the goal of achieving a peaceful end to the war and ensuring stability in Afghanistan. The administration led by Imran Khan supports a peaceful resolution to the long-lasting conflict in Kashmir with India, in accordance with the desires of the Kashmiri people and the resolutions of the United Nations. This dedication is emphasised on international platforms, underscoring the necessity for a fair and long-lasting resolution that respects the fundamental rights of the citizens of Kashmir (Siddiqi, 2020).

The Imran Khan government has made significant investments in improving and modernising both conventional and strategic defence capabilities, acknowledging their crucial significance. This encompasses the acquisition of advanced military hardware and the advancement of indigenous defence technology to provide a dependable deterrence against prospective security threats (Tamer, 2022).

### **Multilateralism and Global organizations**

The Pakistani administration, led by Imran Khan, has recognized the importance of international organizations and multilateralism as crucial elements in achieving its foreign policy objectives. The government has acknowledged the necessity for cooperative measures and synchronization in tackling global issues and has consequently assumed an active role in participating with

international organizations. The government has placed a high priority on multilateralism as a guiding principle in its diplomatic endeavors. Pakistan has consistently shown unwavering commitment to the United Nations and actively participates in its various organizations and agencies (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022). The administration has leveraged United Nations venues to tackle major regional and global issues, including the Kashmir dispute, counterterrorism efforts, sustainable development, and climate change. Pakistan has strived to obtain support for its positions, advocate for fairness and neutrality, and make a significant impact in setting global agendas (Silverstone, 2020).

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) is an intergovernmental entity comprised of 57 member states. The objective of the organization is to foster collaboration and unity among member nations in the realms of politics, economics, and social affairs. The administration of Imran Khan appreciates the importance of the Muslim world and shares the main challenges of Muslim states, which is why the involvement of Pakistan into the organization of Islamic Cooperation has become more powerful. Pakistan has been a participant in OIC conferences and has been an advocate of rights and interests of Muslim people and has contributed to discussion on various issues, including Palestine, Islamophobia, and regional security.

Membership of the SCO by Pakistan has resulted in the opportunity to increase the regional cooperation, in particular, with China and the Central Asian countries. The government has engaged actively in various SCO summits, working groups and projects with the intention of enhancing economic connectedness, security participation and people-to-people contacts in the region. The membership of Pakistan in Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) will support its strategic objective to contribute to the regional integration and enhance connectivity (Sheikh, 2023).

As an Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) member, Pakistan has strongly emphasized on the development of economic cooperation, trade and connectivity with the neighboring nations within the region. The government has attended ECO meetings and projects with the objective of strengthening the integration of the region, enhancing transit linkages, and broadening the economic opportunities under the ECO platform (Siddiq, 2018).

South Asian association of regional cooperation (SAARC) is an inter governmental association that enables the South Asian governments to cooperate and integrate regionally. However, despite the challenges that have been experienced by SAARC over the past few years due to poor relations between member countries, it is still a platform of collaboration between the regions. Pakistan has had its firm commitments to this initiative based on its participation in SAARC. Restoration of SAARC has been one of the priorities of the administration to enhance peace, stability, and development in the South Asian region. Moreover, the government has encouraged dialogue and involvement to solve the local issues (Iqbal, 2022).

### **Challenges to Independent Foreign Policy in the Term of Imran Government**

In its quest to have an independent foreign policy that could suit in its national interests, Pakistan was confronted with a number of complex challenges under the leadership of Imran Khan. Geopolitical factors that curtailed the ability of the country to advance foreign policy objectives comprised strained relations with India and Afghanistan. The effects of internal politics on policy implementation was that instability and changes of leadership brought uncertainties (Bengali, 2020).

Also, other hurdles included the struggle to counteract terrorist activities in Pakistan, as well as the difficulty of ensuring a proper management of the nuclear resources as a deterrent. This is pertinent in the best diplomacy in handling the competing interests of the different regions, as well as the international community particularly when it comes to handling influential countries like the United States, China, and Saudi Arabia. The perception of the global fraternity on Pakistan due

to the concern about terrorism and human rights has affected the diplomatic activity adversely, thereby making it difficult to build on a trust and deterring foreign investment. The issues of foreign policy of Pakistan can be defined as the necessity to manage the conflicts of the region, relations with the multilateral organizations, and the necessity to address the economic limitations. All these difficulties are exacerbated by the ever-evolving nature of the international system (Iqbal, 2022).

### Conclusion

Altogether, the paper highlights that the changes in the global politics, domestic challenges, and the necessity to form a diversity of alliances were the factors that influenced the development of the independent foreign policy of Pakistan between 2018 and 2022. In spite of the great success in the area connectedness and diplomatic involvement, the problems like the India-Pakistan war and the Kashmir conflict were still present. Those measures introduced by the government included economic cooperation and proactive diplomacy despite the existence of problems that were still there. This paper explains the importance of unrelenting efforts, agility, and deft navigation of the global landscape. These results can be of great use to policy-makers and researchers, as it can be concluded that a comprehensive strategy focusing on local and regional conditions should be taken to enhance the foreign relations of Pakistan in the evolving geopolitical setting.

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