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## Pakistan-US Relations During the Imran Khan Era (2018-2022): An Analysis of Strategic Shifts

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### **Abstract**

*This research article examines the evolution of Pakistan's foreign policy towards the United States during the tenure of Prime Minister Imran Khan (2018-2022). The period witnessed significant strategic shifts in Pakistan-US relations, marked by both cooperation and tensions. This study explores key factors influencing these shifts, including geopolitical interests, regional security concerns, economic dependencies, and the changing dynamics of global politics. By analyzing the major events, diplomatic interactions, and policy statements, this article aims to understand the complexities of Pakistan-US relations during this era.*

### **Keywords**

Diplomatic relations, Policy Statement, Regional Peace, Global Strategy

### **Introduction**

Imran Khan's foreign policy approach during his tenure as Pakistan's Prime Minister (2018-2022) was characterized by a blend of pragmatism, idealism, and an emphasis on sovereignty. His government aimed to reposition Pakistan's role in the global arena, moving away from a purely security-centric outlook towards one focused on economic diplomacy and regional peace. The shift was driven by his vision of an independent foreign policy that sought to reduce Pakistan's reliance on traditional Western allies, particularly the United States, and instead, cultivate diverse and balanced relations with global and regional powers such as China, Russia, and the Middle Eastern countries (Jaffar, 2022).

One of the central tenets of Khan's foreign policy was the pursuit of economic partnerships over aid dependency. This marked a significant departure from previous administrations, which often relied heavily on foreign aid, especially from the United States. Khan advocated for a relationship based on mutual respect and economic cooperation, emphasizing trade and investment as key drivers of international engagement. This was reflected in his focus on strengthening ties with China, particularly through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a cornerstone of Pakistan's economic strategy. Khan's government sought to expand CPEC projects, viewing China as a critical ally in its pursuit of economic stability and development (Ahmed, 2022).

Khan's foreign policy also emphasized Pakistan's role as a facilitator of regional peace, especially in Afghanistan. His government played a pivotal role in the Afghan peace process, facilitating talks between the United States and the Taliban. Pakistan's involvement was recognized globally, and it temporarily improved relations with Washington. Khan consistently advocated for a political solution in Afghanistan, opposing military interventions and urging the international community to support peace-building efforts. However, the chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 tested this diplomatic success, as Pakistan faced criticism for its alleged ties with the Taliban and the perceived instability that followed (Muzzaffar, 2021).

Another key aspect of Khan's foreign policy was his focus on redefining Pakistan's international identity by projecting it as a responsible and peace-seeking nation. He raised global issues like

Islamophobia and the plight of Kashmiris in India at prominent international forums, including the United Nations General Assembly. Khan's outspoken stance on Islamophobia resonated with many Muslim-majority countries, enhancing Pakistan's image within the Muslim world. Simultaneously, his strong criticism of India's policies in Kashmir reinforced Pakistan's traditional stance on the dispute, although it did little to change the status quo (Khan, 2022).

Khan's tenure also saw a shift towards diversifying Pakistan's strategic alliances, notably through stronger ties with Russia and a deepening of the country's defense and economic cooperation with Turkey. His visit to Moscow on the eve of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was emblematic of Pakistan's efforts to balance its relationships beyond the Western bloc. This move, however, attracted criticism from Western capitals, particularly the United States, highlighting the complexities of maintaining a non-aligned stance in a polarized global environment (Syed, 2022). Pakistan's foreign policy towards the United States has historically been characterized by a mixture of cooperation and distrust, shaped by security concerns, economic aid, and regional geopolitics. The tenure of Prime Minister Imran Khan (2018-2022) marked a distinct phase in these relations. Khan, who came to power advocating for a more independent foreign policy, faced the challenge of navigating Pakistan's strategic interests in an increasingly complex global environment while managing relations with a long-time ally, the US.

### **Objective of Study**

The objective of this study is to analyze the shifts in Pakistan's foreign policy towards the United States during the Imran Khan regime (2018-2022), focusing on the factors that influenced these changes and the impact they had on bilateral relations. By examining key events, diplomatic engagements, and strategic decisions, this study aims to understand how Khan's vision of an independent foreign policy affected Pakistan's approach to the US, the challenges encountered in balancing traditional alliances with emerging global dynamics, and the broader implications for regional and international geopolitics.

### **Literature Review**

The relationship between Pakistan and the United States has been a subject of extensive academic and policy research, often characterized by cycles of alliance and estrangement. Scholars like Dennis Kux in *The United States and Pakistan, 1947-2000: Disenchanted Allies* have outlined the historical trajectory of this relationship, highlighting how it has primarily been shaped by security concerns and geopolitical interests. However, the period under Imran Khan (2018-2022) introduced new dynamics, making it crucial to examine this phase separately.

Several studies have focused on Pakistan's foreign policy shifts, particularly after the post-9/11 period, where the War on Terror defined Pakistan-US relations. Scholars like C. Christine Fair and Hassan Abbas have explored the security-driven nature of the alliance, where military aid and counterterrorism cooperation formed the backbone of bilateral relations. However, Imran Khan's tenure marked a pivot away from this security-centric approach towards one centered on economic partnerships, regional peace, and strategic diversification.

One stream of literature examines Khan's emphasis on "Naya Pakistan" (New Pakistan), which sought a redefinition of Pakistan's global posture. Authors like Moeed Yusuf have argued that Khan's government pursued a more balanced foreign policy that aimed to reduce dependency on the West, particularly the United States. This shift is evident in Pakistan's growing closeness with China, as articulated in studies by Andrew Small, who explores the China-Pakistan nexus through the lens of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Under Khan, CPEC was not only an

economic initiative but also a strategic maneuver, as Pakistan sought to counterbalance its relationship with the US by leaning on China.

Imran Khan's approach to regional peace, particularly in Afghanistan, is another area that has garnered significant scholarly attention. Publications by Barnett Rubin and Shuja Nawaz have highlighted Pakistan's role in the Afghan peace process, noting that the country's involvement was crucial in bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table. During Khan's tenure, Pakistan's foreign policy centered on promoting a political solution in Afghanistan, a stance that temporarily aligned with US objectives. However, literature also indicates that this cooperation was limited by mutual distrust, with reports like the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) discussing the perennial "do more" demands from Washington and Islamabad's resistance to these pressures.

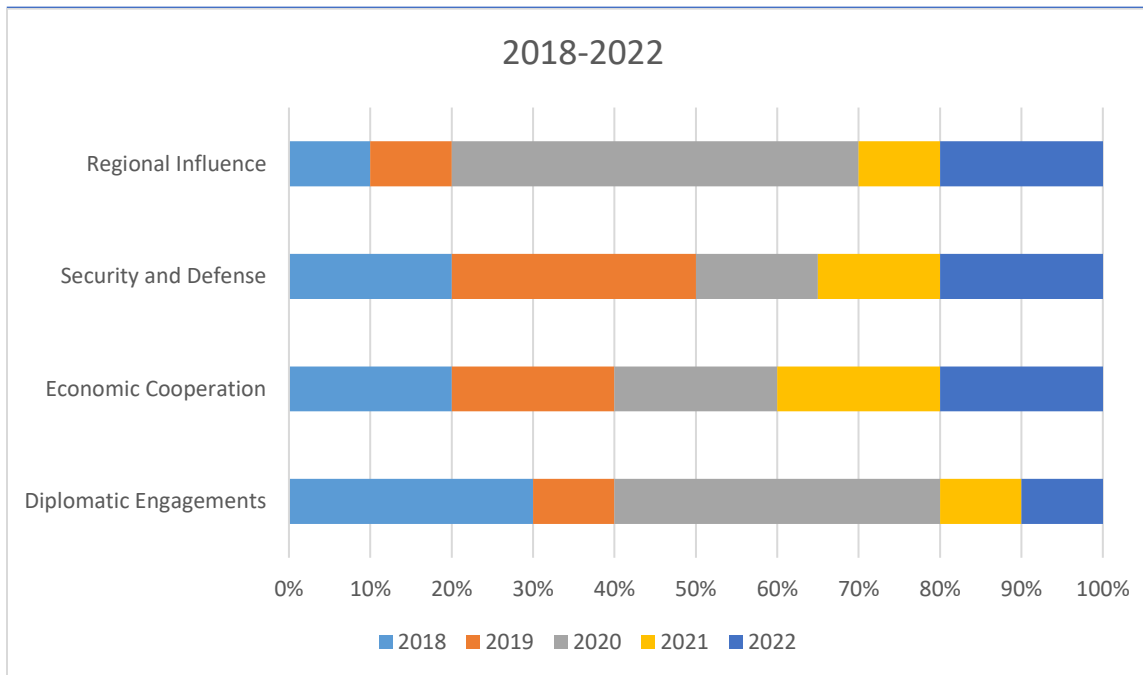
The period of 2021-2022 marked a significant downturn in relations, driven by the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and Khan's increasingly vocal critique of Western policies. Studies such as those by Michael Kugelman and Ayesha Jalal suggest that the chaotic withdrawal exacerbated existing tensions, leading to a re-evaluation of bilateral ties. The literature indicates that Imran Khan's rhetoric of "absolutely not" in response to US requests for bases highlighted his desire for a more independent foreign policy, a stance that resonated domestically but strained diplomatic ties with the US.

Another key theme in the literature is the diversification of Pakistan's alliances during Khan's regime. Authors like Anatol Lieven and Talat Masood note that Khan's foreign policy focused on deepening ties with non-Western powers, particularly China, Russia, and Turkey. This shift is analyzed as part of a broader global trend where middle powers like Pakistan seek multipolarity in a world increasingly defined by US-China competition. Despite these shifts, the literature suggests that Pakistan remains tethered to its historical relationship with the US, primarily due to economic dependencies and international financial obligations. Analysts like Daniel Markey and Zahid Hussain argue that while Khan's government attempted to pivot towards a more independent foreign policy, structural constraints, such as Pakistan's need for IMF bailouts and trade with Western markets, limited the extent of this reorientation.

### **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research approach to analyze Pakistan's foreign policy towards the United States during the Imran Khan regime (2018-2022). The research is based on a combination of primary and secondary sources, including government statements, official documents, speeches, and interviews with policymakers, as well as reports from international organizations. Secondary data is drawn from academic literature, policy papers, and media analysis to contextualize the strategic shifts during this period. The research adopts a case study method, focusing on key events and diplomatic interactions between Pakistan and the US, such as the Afghan peace process, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, and Khan's engagement with China and Russia. Content analysis is used to examine the language, themes, and narratives in Khan's foreign policy rhetoric, with a particular focus on speeches, interviews, and public statements. The study also incorporates a historical comparative approach, contrasting Khan's foreign policy with previous administrations to identify continuities and departures in Pakistan-US relations. Through this mixed-methods approach, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors driving the strategic shifts during Imran Khan's tenure and their implications for future Pakistan-US relations.

### **Results**



## Discussion

Pakistan-US relations have fluctuated over the decades, ranging from strong military alliances during the Cold War and the War on Terror to periods of strain over issues such as nuclear proliferation and ties with China. Imran Khan’s tenure coincided with major global events, including the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, rising US-China tensions, and shifts in regional power dynamics.

### Key Phases of Pakistan-US Relations (2018-2022)

#### 1. Initial Diplomatic Engagements (2018-2019)

Imran Khan’s early foreign policy approach sought to reset ties with the US, focusing on trade over aid and advocating for dialogue over military solutions in regional conflicts. The initial phase saw cautious optimism, with the Trump administration showing interest in collaborating with Pakistan on resolving the Afghan conflict.

#### 2. Afghan Peace Process and US-Pakistan Cooperation (2019-2020)

One of the defining moments in Pakistan-US relations under Khan was Pakistan’s role in facilitating peace talks between the US and the Taliban. Pakistan’s influence over the Taliban was recognized as crucial for the success of the negotiations, leading to a temporary improvement in relations. However, trust issues remained, especially concerning Pakistan’s alleged support for certain Taliban factions.

#### 3. US Withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Fallout (2021)

The chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 marked a turning point in bilateral relations. While the US praised Pakistan’s assistance in the evacuation efforts, tensions rose over Washington’s perception that Pakistan had not done enough to curb Taliban advances. The aftermath of the withdrawal strained ties, with US officials expressing concerns over Pakistan’s regional ambitions and its closeness with China.

#### 4. Shifting Alliances and Growing Tensions (2021-2022)

As Imran Khan’s government leaned more towards China and Russia, US-Pakistan relations became increasingly strained. Khan’s public criticism of US policies, especially regarding

Afghanistan and broader regional strategies, reflected a growing divergence in interests. His visit to Moscow on the eve of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 further complicated relations, leading to speculation about Pakistan's shifting geopolitical allegiances.

### **Strategic Shifts and Policy Analysis**

#### **1. The Pivot from Security to Economic Diplomacy**

Khan's government emphasized economic diplomacy over security cooperation, seeking investments and trade deals rather than relying on traditional military aid. This shift highlighted Pakistan's desire to reduce dependency on the US and diversify its foreign relations, particularly with China and the Gulf states.

#### **2. The US 'Do More' Narrative and Pakistan's Response**

Despite Imran Khan's rhetoric of independence in foreign policy, Pakistan remained sensitive to US criticism, particularly regarding its role in counterterrorism and regional security. The US continued to push Pakistan to "do more" in combating terrorism, a narrative that Imran Khan often rejected, stressing Pakistan's sacrifices in the War on Terror.

#### **3. Pakistan's Strategic Alignment with China and Russia**

Under Khan, Pakistan deepened its ties with China through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and sought to expand its relations with Russia. This growing alignment with US rivals was a critical factor in the cooling of relations between Islamabad and Washington.

### **Challenges and Limitations in Pakistan-US Relations**

1. **Trust Deficit:** Historical mistrust remained a significant hurdle, with both sides accusing each other of pursuing self-serving policies at the expense of broader regional stability.
2. **Economic Pressures:** Pakistan's economic dependency on international financial institutions, many of which are influenced by the US, limited its ability to fully disengage from Washington's orbit.
3. **Geopolitical Competition:** Pakistan's strategic alignment with China and its balancing act with the US exposed Islamabad to competing pressures, complicating its foreign policy goals.

### **Conclusion**

Pakistan-US relations during Imran Khan's tenure were marked by significant strategic shifts, reflecting the broader global and regional transformations of the time. While Khan's government sought greater autonomy in foreign policy, the enduring complexities of regional security, economic dependencies, and global geopolitical rivalries ensured that relations with the US remained a central, if challenging, aspect of Pakistan's foreign policy. The period from 2018 to 2022 underscores the delicate balance Islamabad must maintain in managing its ties with global powers, a challenge that will likely persist in the coming years.



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