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Asia in 2025: Great power rivalry, contested polities, and global disorder

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Pakistan 2025: Internal governance challenges, security perils and foreign policy crosswinds

Marco Corsi

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In 2025, Pakistan faced significant political turmoil alongside enduring security and economic concerns, with foreign relations emerging as a pivotal factor. The 2024 general elections, which brought the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) to power under the leadership of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, had been marred by the exclusion of Pakistan TehreekeInsaf (PTI) and the imprisonment of its leader, former Prime Minister Imran Khan. This gave way to a legitimacy crisis, deepening polarisation and fuelling the rise of Tehreek-e-Tahaffuz-e-Ayeen Pakistan (TTAP), an opposition alliance demanding constitutional supremacy. Economically, amid persistent structural weaknesses, high debt repayments, sluggish exports, and limited fiscal space, short-term stabilisation and modest growth projections were achieved in 2025 with support from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Still, government investment plans struggled to inspire confidence, with the fiscal year 2025-26 budget reflecting the dual challenge of reducing development spending while expanding defence outlays amid rising tensions with India. Militancy also escalated, with the Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA) and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), among other groups, increasingly targeting China-funded projects. The April 2025 terrorist attack in Kashmir sparked a serious confrontation with India, marked by reciprocal missile and drone strikes, before the United States brokered a ceasefire. Relatedly, foreign policy was Pakistan's standout focus in 2025. Its relations with the United States steadied, shifting toward a transactional partnership centred on security and targeted investment. Regionally, Pakistan kept channels open across both South and Central Asia while managing ongoing tensions with India and Afghanistan, and it continued to deepen its long-standing ties with Saudi Arabia.

Keywords – Economy; India; foreign affairs; militancy; United States.

1. *Introduction*

In 2025, Pakistan faced a convergence of internal political unrest, economic fragility, and escalating regional tensions, all while the United States was reasserting itself as a decisive player in its security and diplomatic calculus.

Still, the stage was set by the February 2024 general elections, which returned Shehbaz Sharif and the PML-N to power. That party's accession was, however, overshadowed by the exclusion of the PTI and the imprisonment of former Prime Minister Imran Khan. These developments deep-

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ened polarisation, eroded public confidence in the democratic process, and sparked a wave of protests. Pakistan's internal strife intensified with the formation of the TTAP, a multi-party opposition alliance advocating for constitutional supremacy and civilian oversight.

Civil liberties came under further strain with the passage of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes (Amendment) Act 2025, which expanded government control over digital content and introduced new means of mass surveillance. Further concerns about freedom of expression and judicial independence were raised following the approval of the 27th Constitutional Amendment, which restructured Pakistan's judicial and military architecture, effectively sidelining the Supreme Court and consolidating military authority.

These political challenges unfolded amid a relatively stable macroeconomic environment: inflation had fallen to a nine-year low, though growth forecasts were revised downward to 3%, indicating fiscal pressure, structural inefficiencies, and significant external debt repayments amounting to more than US$ 22 billion [*Reuters* 2025, 7 February]. The government's pursuit of an export-led recovery was met with scepticism, given the impact of recent US tariffs and aid suspensions under Executive Order 14169, issued by President Trump [GovInfo 2025, 20 January].

The year 2025 was marked by Pakistan's particular focus on nurturing its international ties. Islamabad's renewed engagement in global affairs was reflected in its recalibrated relations with Washington. With the new Trump administration, Washington was shifting its bilateral relationship with Islamabad to a commercial, interest-driven and narrowly defined strategic engagement, giving way to a transactional dynamic geared toward alignment with the «America First» doctrine. Pakistan-US relations appeared to be thawing despite years of mistrust, evidenced by high-level visits from both sides [*Dawn* 2025, 26 June]. Pakistan supported US counterterrorism operations, while Washington reached investment deals with Islamabad in trade, energy and minerals [Mustafa 2025, 5 August; United States Department of State 2025, 11 August]. Islamabad also consolidated its relations with partners across South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East despite persistent tensions with India and Afghanistan [Manning 2025, 23 October]. Both the April 2025 crisis with India (sparked by a terrorist attack in Kashmir) and the conflict with Afghanistan escalated into serious confrontations. US engagement proved crucial in brokering a ceasefire with New Delhi, underscoring Washington's enduring leverage.

2. *Confrontation in Pakistani politics and mounting concerns over the diminishing space for civilian liberties and institutions*

The PTI first emerged as a significant political force with the 2013 general elections, which laid the groundwork for Imran Khan's victory in the 2018

elections. His tenure was marked by alignment – and later tension – with the military, ultimately leading to his ouster in 2022. Since then, and despite disqualification, imprisonment, and allegations of military interference, Khan and the PTI have remained central to Pakistan's polarised politics. Despite repression, the PTI continues to mobilise significant public support, positioning itself as the primary challenge to Pakistan's political order [Corsi 2025, pp. 360-362].

In December 2024, Pakistan's political scene shifted when the government and the PTI began discussions to ease tensions. These talks focused on key issues, most notably including the release of Imran Khan and other party members. The PTI also called for a judicial inquiry into the events of 9 May 2023, when violent protests targeted military facilities following Khan's arrest, leading to large-scale arrests and military trials of PTI activists [Corsi 2024, pp. 358-362]. Despite initial hope, the PTI withdrew from these negotiations in January 2025, citing the government's unwillingness to meet its demands, particularly the formation of judicial commissions to investigate the events of May 2023. The conflict escalated when, on 17 January 2025, an anti-corruption court convicted Imran Khan to 14 years of imprisonment, and his wife, Bushra Bibi, to seven years, on charges of obtaining real estate through an illegal transaction [Corsi 2025, pp. 340-342; Ellis-Petersen 2025, 17 January; Ewe 2025, 17 January; Sullivan 2025, 17 January]. These verdicts were serious setbacks in the reconciliation efforts between the PTI and the government, exacerbating political instability in the country. A third round of talks between Pakistani officials and the PTI was held in February 2025, but it faced a protracted impasse with uncertain prospects for resolution [Shehzad 2025, 15 January; Shehzad 2025, 1 February; Junaidi 2025, 6 February; *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* 2025, 8 February].

In early 2025, tensions between the government and opposition escalated following the formation of a unified multi-party opposition bloc – the TTAP («Movement for the Protection of Pakistan's Constitution») – led by seasoned Pashtun nationalist Mahmood Khan Achakzai. This bloc brought together several major parties, including the PTI, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, Jamaat-i-Islami, and Awaam Pakistan. Achakzai, who chairs the Pashtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (a Pashtun nationalist party founded in 1989), has served multiple terms in the National Assembly and has long been recognised for his commitment to federalism and constitutionalism [*Dawn* 2025, 12 February; *Aaj News* 2025, 22 February]. The increasing involvement of military institutions in areas of civilian governance is a key point of concern for the TTAP, which asserts that they have overstepped their constitutional role by expanding their influence over policymaking processes [Corsi 2025, p. 361]. The TTAP alliance has also been critical of the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC), a public entity established in 2023 to attract investment in several key sectors, including defence. The prime minister

chairs the SIFC, but military representatives work alongside civilian authorities on its various committees. Critics have argued that the SIFC has granted excessive powers to the military in civilian economic matters, enabling military interests – particularly those of a financial nature – to prevail. More specifically, concerns have been raised over the SIFC's focus on attracting investment without fully addressing the underlying structural problems facing the Pakistani economy [Anwar 2023, 30 August; Ahmed 2024, 18 February; Haider 2024, 10 May]. The TTAP alliance has heightened public awareness of the importance of the rule of law, judicial independence, and constitutional supremacy while coordinating opposition efforts and putting pressure on the government through nationwide demonstrations calling for early elections and the release of imprisoned opposition leaders [Imran 2025, 26 February].

In January 2025, the upper house of the Parliament of Pakistan enacted a bill amending the nation's cybercrime legislation, allowing the government to impose stricter penalties for the dissemination of disinformation. The Prevention of Electronic Crimes (Amendment) Act 2025 enhanced the government's oversight powers over the content appearing on various digital platforms [Digital Rights Foundation 2025]. The act led to the establishment of the Social Media Protection and Regulatory Authority, which oversees social media platforms, addresses misinformation, and ensures regulatory compliance, including by removing or censoring unlawful content [Government of Pakistan, National Assembly 2025]. The act also made it a criminal offence to deliberately spread false information that could incite fear or public disorder – an offence punishable by up to three years' imprisonment and monetary penalties. In addition, it compels social media platforms to register with the government and adhere to content-removal directives [Butt 2025, 24 January]. Critics have argued that the expanded governmental powers could undermine freedom of expression in the country. Moreover, the swift passage of the bill, which entailed limited public consultation, further intensified debates about its implications for civil liberties [Munir 2025, 23 January; Amnesty International 2025, 24 January; *Reuters* 2025, 28 January; *AP News* 2025, 29 January]. Amnesty International reported in 2025 that the Lawful Intercept Management System and the national internet firewall, collectively, enable authorities to monitor citizens' phones and censor online content [Amnesty International 2025, 9 September].

On 13 November 2025, Pakistan's 27th Constitutional Amendment was approved, introducing extensive changes to the country's judicial and military architecture [*Al Jazeera* 2025, 11 November]. It established a Federal Constitutional Court (FCC) with exclusive jurisdiction over constitutional interpretation, federal-provincial disputes, and fundamental rights, taking over the Supreme Court's prior constitutional role. The amendment also revised judicial transfers: High Court judges could now be reassigned be-

tween provinces at the recommendation of the Judicial Commission, with refusal to do so potentially triggering disciplinary action. In the military domain, the amendment abolished the post of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, effective 27 November 2025. The Chief of Army Staff was redesignated as Chief of Defence Forces (CDF), gaining constitutional authority over all three military services. Five-star officers were granted lifetime rank retention and immunity from criminal prosecution. The amendment also extended this lifetime criminal immunity to the president and expanded the protections for Governors. Additional provisions modified provincial cabinet requirements and federal-provincial fiscal arrangements [Chaudhry & Usama 2025, 8 November]. Scholars have argued that the amendment fundamentally restructured Pakistan's constitutional balance. The FCC was widely considered to have weakened judicial independence by depriving the Supreme Court of its central constitutional role and introducing an appointment mechanism susceptible to executive influence. The revised transfer rules were criticised for undermining the judicial security of tenure. However, analysts have broadly contended that military provisions were the most consequential change. Elevating the Chief of Army Staff to CDF and granting lifelong immunity formally entrenched military exceptionalism and reduced civilian oversight, creating constitutional insulation for military leadership. Overall, scholarly analysis asserted that the amendment centralised power, weakened judicial autonomy, bolstered executive/military dominance, and challenged the democratic separation of powers [Shahid 2025, 15 November; Khan 2025, 19 November].

3. *The militancy*

Since 2024, Pakistan has seen a marked increase in terrorist attacks, particularly in Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This trend is primarily driven by the intensification of the insurgency by the BLA, a secular ethno-nationalist separatist group motivated by economic grievances, and the TTP, a coalition of Islamist militant groups primarily operating along the Afghan border and benefiting from safe havens in Afghanistan [Sabharwal 2025, 2 April].

Militant factions in Baluchistan allege that the federal government exploits the province's natural resources while denying its people fair political and economic representation [Baluch 2025, July]. Tensions are further aggravated by Baluchistan's geostrategic importance (see Section 5.1) and by China's growing influence in the province. Accordingly, the BLA focuses its attacks on Pakistani security personnel and Chinese workers involved in initiatives funded by China and implemented under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the major development initiative launched in 2015 as part of the Belt and Road Initiative.

These tensions culminated on 11 March 2025 in the BLA's seizure of the Jaffar Express passenger train in Baluchistan and its 450 passengers as hostages, including about 100 members of Pakistan's security forces [Rehman 2025, 12 March]. The incident began when militants detonated explosives on the tracks, forcing the train to halt inside a tunnel during its journey from Quetta to Peshawar. The BLA then demanded that Pakistan release Baluch political prisoners, threatening to harm the hostages if Pakistan failed to comply. Pakistani security forces mounted a rescue operation, ultimately freeing the hostages after a 30-hour standoff, though not before the militants had killed 21 passengers and four paramilitary personnel. All 33 insurgents involved in the hijacking were killed over the course of the rescue operation [Shah 2025, 12 March].

Pakistan has focused much of its recent counterterrorism activities on confronting the TTP. In recent months, security forces have conducted operations in Northwest Pakistan, particularly the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa tribal areas, which have been increasingly targeted by TTP militants, especially since the Taliban regained power in Afghanistan in August 2021. Among the most violent attacks in 2025 was a suicide vehicle bombing on 28 June in Mir Ali, North Waziristan, near the border with Afghanistan, which killed 16 Pakistani soldiers and injured nearly 30 others. The attack was later claimed by a faction linked to the TTP [Khan 2025, 28 June]. On 2 July 2025, a bombing killed five officers and wounded 11 in Bajaur district; responsibility was later claimed by the Islamic State-Khorasan Province [Khan, 2025, 2 July]. Just days earlier, Pakistani troops had killed 30 TTP militants attempting to cross the border from Afghanistan near North Waziristan [Khan 2025, 4 July]. According to the Pakistani military, the TTP and allied factions have taken advantage of cross-border sanctuaries. Islamabad's subsequent crackdown on TTP bases has further strained relations with the Taliban (see Section 5.3) [Jadoon 2025, 7 March]. In fact, contrary to Pakistan's expectations, Kabul has seemingly not undertaken meaningful action against the group [Stacey 2025, 30 June].

4. *The economy*

In 2025, Pakistan's economy sparked cautious optimism following a period of severe crisis in the preceding years. Although significant challenges persisted, indicators such as disinflation, bolstered foreign currency reserves, and higher export volumes reflected early signs of macroeconomic recovery and stabilisation [Corsi 2025, p. 363; Aurangzeb 2025, 12 January; Khan 2025, 4 March; State Bank of Pakistan 2025, 2 July]. Despite adjusting its forecast for Pakistan's gross domestic product growth from 3.2% to 3% for 2025, the IMF anticipated that the country would reach 4% by 2026 [*Express Tribune* 2025, 18 January].

Pakistan has embarked on efforts to stabilise and revitalise its economy. Recent measures include large-scale support from the World Bank, the IMF, and the International Finance Corporation, as well as the launch of a plan to promote reforms, attract investment, and achieve sustainable, export-oriented growth. The World Bank approved a US$ 20 billion, 10-year lending package to support the country's economic reforms and stabilise its economy by addressing various development challenges, including malnutrition, inadequate education quality, and insufficient climate change resilience [White 2025, January 15]. This initiative complements the US$ 7 billion IMF bailout that had commenced in July 2024 with a focus on economic reforms, including broadening the tax base and eliminating preferential investment incentives [Corsi 2025, pp. 334-344]. The International Finance Corporation also increased its investments, namely in large-scale infrastructure projects, up to US$ 2 billion annually in value over the next decade [Shahid 2025, 14 February; Shahid 2025, 17 February].

In December 2024, Pakistan introduced the «Uraan Pakistan» Five-Year Transformation Plan, a locally developed economic revival programme aimed at revitalising the economy.[1] The plan seeks to position Pakistan as a US$ 1 trillion economy by 2035, reducing its reliance on external support and promoting sustainable economic growth. It centres on key reforms, including improved tax collection, export-driven expansion, the use of technology and renewable energy for diversification, and greater investment in human capital [Khan 2025, 17 March].

Despite concerted efforts to revitalise the Pakistani economy, achieving sustainable growth remains a complex task. Recent IMF infusions primarily drove stabilisation; thus, they did not indicate reduced economic vulnerability, as evidenced by Pakistan's external debt repayments exceeding US$ 22 billion in fiscal year 2025 [*Reuters* 2025, 7 February].

In June 2025, Pakistan unveiled a US$ 62 billion federal budget for fiscal year 2025-26, which cut overall spending by about 7% from the previous year [*AP News* 2025, 11 June; Shah & Shahzad 2025, 10 June]. Still, the defence allocation increased by roughly 20% to about US$ 9 billion amid mounting tensions with India, bolstering Pakistan's conventional deterrence and rapidresponse capacity. In comparison, the federal public-sector development budget retained only approximately US$ 3.5 billion to fund infrastructure, education, and health projects. This gap underscored the need to maintain critical investment while managing ongoing economic priorities amid geopolitical uncertainty, all while reassuring multilateral lenders of the country's commitment to fiscal discipline [Khan 2025, 2 June; Dilawar 2025, 10 June].

1. https://uraanpakistan.pk/

5. *Foreign affairs: momentum amid tensions in South Asia*

5.1. *US cooperation with Pakistan in the era of the «America First» doctrine*

Under the administration of former US President Joe Biden, relations with Pakistan were primarily centred on Afghanistan and broader regional stability in the aftermath of the 2021 troop withdrawal. Counterterrorism cooperation was initiated and involved intelligence-sharing activities [Government of the United States, U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Pakistan 2023, 7 March; Corsi 2024, pp. 347-348 & 365].

In January 2025, newly elected US President Trump issued Executive Order 14169, titled «Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid», which mandated an initial 90-day suspension of all US foreign development assistance programmes to conduct a comprehensive review in pursuit of reduced global aid spending [White House 2025, 20 January]. The formal cancellation of aid packages that followed – part of President Trump's broader «America First» doctrine, purportedly aimed at prioritising US interests over long-standing international commitments – affected US$ 845 million in key projects of the United States Agency for International Development in Pakistan [Riaz 2025, 23 January; Syed 2025a, 4 February; Seddon 2025, 5 February]. All US-funded development initiatives in Pakistan came to a halt, impacting the health, education, energy, agriculture, governance, and humanitarian sectors [Syed 2025b, 4 February].

In his speech to a joint session of Congress on 4 March 2025, President Trump addressed US-Pakistan relations [White House 2025, 4 March; Khan 2025, 19 March]. His remarks on global security stood out, particularly his acknowledgement of Pakistan's role in counterterrorism efforts. He credited Pakistan for assisting in the arrest of Islamic State-Khorasan Province commander Mohammad Sharifullah, accused of involvement in the August 2021 attack near the Kabul airport that killed approximately 170 Afghan civilians and 13 US soldiers [United States Department of Defense 2024, 15 April]. That arrest operation underscored ongoing counterterrorism cooperation between Washington and Islamabad, including Washington's agreement to a US$ 397 million payment to Pakistan for F-16 aircraft maintenance, signalling the possibility of renewed military collaboration [Yousaf 2025, 1 March; Siddique 2025, 5 March; *Express Tribune* 2025, 9 March].

In their first official discussion in April, Pakistani Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar and US Secretary of State Marco Rubio addressed the need to strengthen counterterrorism collaboration. Secretary Rubio also expressed interest in expanding bilateral cooperation to include trade, investment, and access to critical minerals. In response, Minister Dar highlighted the need to address Pakistan's concerns about US tariffs on Pakistani exports [*News* 2025, 7 April]. This issue stemmed from the US's announcement of new reciprocal tariffs and the significant financial pressure that Pakistan faced after the initial steep 29% levy imposed by

President Trump on 2 April 2025 [White House 2025, 2 April]. Recognising the potential damage to its key export sectors, especially textiles and garments, and the exacerbation of its economic struggles, Pakistan swiftly adopted a diplomatic approach. The government of Pakistan reached out to US officials, emphasising the need for equitable treatment, and dispatched a high-level delegation to Washington to identify a resolution. The 90-day pause in tariff enforcement granted by the Trump administration in April 2025 provided Pakistan with the opportunity to engage in dialogue and mitigate the economic fallout [Rana 2025, 6 April; *Express Tribune* 2025, 9 April]. The government's outreach centred on a pledge to increase imports from the US and signalled an intention to explore potential adjustments [*ProPakistani* 2025, 8 April; *News* 2025, 10 April]. On 13 April 2025, Pakistan and the US reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening strategic relations during a visit by a US congressional delegation to Islamabad. In a meeting with Pakistan's Minister for Planning, Development, and Special Initiatives, Ahsan Iqbal, discussions focused on fostering cooperation across technology, climate resilience, and education [*Express Tribune* 2025, 13 April].

In July 2025, the US and Pakistan finalised a trade and energy agreement that reshaped bilateral relations. This deal reduced US tariffs on Pakistani exports to 19%, in return for which Islamabad offered zero-tariff concessions for American imports, including the rollback of a 5% digital services tax and eased access for US firms. The «historic» agreement, as described by President Donald Trump, established new frameworks for cooperation in mining, information technology, and the exploration of Pakistan's newly confirmed oil reserves in Baluchistan [Shahid *et al.* 2025, 31 July]. Critical minerals, which are essential to the development of various technologies (e.g., batteries, semiconductors), were included as a crucial element of the bilateral framework. Pakistan has untapped deposits of antimony, cobalt, nickel, and copper (also in Baluchistan), resources that Islamabad has utilised to attract foreign investment. In September 2025, US Strategic Metals (USSM), an American firm that specialises in producing and recycling critical minerals, signed a memorandum of understanding on a US$ 500 million investment with Pakistan's Frontier Works Organization, a science and technology branch of the Pakistani military [Hussain & Dar 2025, 5 September; U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Pakistan 2025, 8 September].

The accord positions Pakistan as a prospective partner for Washington in mitigating China's growing influence, while offering Islamabad options beyond the China-centric CPEC development framework [Urva 2025, 10 August]. However, experts have questioned the feasibility of this plan due to the speculative nature of Pakistan's oil reserves, which have little evidence of commercially viable quantities, the security concerns in Baluchistan, and the region's persistent infrastructural and institutional weaknesses [Ellis-Petersen & Baloch 2025, 27 September]. Beyond economic uncertainty, the

deal carries certain political risks. Washington engaged directly with Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Army Chief Field Marshal Asim Munir while avoiding public criticism of Pakistan's increasingly authoritarian tendencies or the potentially destabilising long-term effects of the erosion of its civil institutions [Peltier 2025, 13 August; Andreopoulos 2025, 3 September].

5.2. *The armed conflict between Pakistan and India*

A terrorist attack took place in Pahalgam – in Indian-administered Kashmir – on 22 April 2025, killing 26 tourists and kickstarting a crisis with India [Sharp 2025, 22 April]. New Delhi attributed the attack to Pakistan-based militants, namely Lashkar-e-Taiba, through an affiliate group; in response to the attack, India expelled Pakistani diplomats, withdrew its diplomatic representatives from Islamabad, and shut the Attari-Wagah border crossing. Pakistani nationals were prompted to leave India by 27 April 2025, and all visa services for Pakistani citizens were halted. New Delhi also suspended the 1960 Indus Waters Treaty, a water-sharing agreement with Pakistan that governs the allocation of water from the Indus River between the two countries. Citing national security concerns, India initiated the construction of diversion canals and hydropower projects on the Chenab, Jhelum, and Indus rivers to maximise its upstream water-use rights. The suspension, which harmed Pakistan's economy and posed a risk to its national food security, heightened the risk of an escalation [Kugelman 2015, 29 June].

Pakistan rejected any notion that it played any role in the attack and condemned the suspension of the Indus Water Treaty, arguing that the suspension constituted a breach of international law aimed at weaponising water against a downstream country heavily reliant on these water resources. Islamabad sought to internationalise the issue, pursue arbitration under the World Bank's oversight mechanisms and, simultaneously, fast-track dam construction in Gilgit-Baltistan. In retaliation for India's measures, Pakistan suspended the 1972 Shimla Agreement signed after the 1971 war with New Delhi, which established the Line of Control (LoC) as both the military boundary between Indian- and Pakistani-administered Jammu and Kashmir and the *de facto* frontier in the disputed region. Pakistan also closed its airspace and trade routes to India, expelled Indian diplomats, and halted visa services for Indian citizens [Dhillon & Janjua 2025, 24 April; *Economic Times* 2025, 24 April; *Samaa TV* 2025, 24 April; Shahzad *et al*. 2025, 24 April; Khuldune 2025, 29 April; *Indian Express* 2025, 20 August; *Mint* 2025, 22 August; *Travel and Tour World* 2025, 24 August].

Tensions escalated following clashes along the LoC in Kashmir, and, on 7 May 2025, New Delhi launched Operation Sindoor, a long-range missile, drone, and artillery attack targeting sites of alleged terrorist infrastructure. Pakistan denounced the Indian strikes as an act of war, reporting that civilian facilities had been hit, incurring at least 26 civilian casualties [Iyengar & Haltiwanger 2025, 8 May]. It then staged shelling across the disputed

border in Kashmir and claimed that it had downed five Indian jets and drones [Singh 2025, 27 April; Hussain *et al.* 2025, 7 May].

Global discourse rapidly centred on the need for international mediation [*News* 2025, 30 April]. The US urged restraint and sought de-escalation but seemed ambivalent about offering direct mediation [Roy 2025, 24 April; *NDTV* 2025, 26 April; Singh & Ismail 2025, 30 April; *News* 2025, 1 May; Shalvey *et al*. 2025, 7 May]. However, on 10 May 2025, the fourth day of the conflict – marked by missile strikes, drone incursions, and aerial combat – India and Pakistan agreed to a ceasefire [Vats 2025, 30 May]. Unexpectedly, President Trump announced a truce, with US Secretary of State Marco Rubio stating that he and Vice President JD Vance had contacted high-level officials from both countries, including their prime ministers, over the preceding two days [Rehman *et al.* 2025, 10 May].

Following the cessation of hostilities, New Delhi and Islamabad accused each other of violating the agreement and announced that they had prevailed in the conflict. While India validated the neutralisation of military targets across the LoC, Pakistan celebrated their military defence system, which protected its territorial integrity and deterred escalation while retaining access to international diplomatic support. Pakistan's military, especially Army Chief Asim Munir, received a public relations boost; the episode was widely seen as a demonstration of both national resilience and military capacity. Munir's image as a leader was then bolstered by his promotion to field marshal on 20 May 2025. Pakistan undoubtedly benefited geo-strategically from US involvement. The Trump administration called for a resolution to the Kashmir dispute and resolved to internationalise an issue that the Pakistani military establishment had long championed. This marked a rare diplomatic victory for Islamabad, most notably a shift in focus from accusations of Pakistan-backed terrorism to concerns about nuclear escalation [Kugelman 2025, 21 May].

Pakistan dispatched two high-level delegations – one led by Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, member of the National Assembly and son of late former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto and President Asif Ali Zardari, and another by high-level diplomat Syed Tariq Fatemi – to Washington, New York, London, and Brussels in an effort to counter India's narrative and accusations of Pakistan sponsoring terrorism [Klein 2025, 10 June; *Economic Times* 2025, 11 June]. The delegations engaged with lawmakers, institutions, think tanks, media outlets, diaspora groups, and UN officials to garner support for neutral mediation and an international investigation, showcasing Pakistan's commitment to ceasefire and dialogue, particularly on Jammu and Kashmir and the suspended Indus Waters Treaty [Reed 2025, 11 June]. The visits reflected Islamabad's pursuit of a high-level public diplomacy strategy aimed at shaping international perceptions by presenting itself as an actor committed to de-escalation and dialogue. This approach succeeded in securing public calls for peace from the European Union and the US.

5.3. *Tensions between Islamabad and Kabul*

Since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan have become increasingly strained, with rising cross-border hostilities and military operations conducted by Islamabad on Afghan soil, triggered by the Taliban's reluctance to curb anti-Pakistan militants [Corsi 2025, pp. 346-347]. On 21 February 2025, the Torkham border crossing – a vital conduit for bilateral trade and transit – was closed by Pakistan due to a dispute over Taliban construction activities near the border. On 23 March 2025, tensions escalated when Pakistani and Afghan forces exchanged fire across the border [*Al Jazeera* 2025, 3 March; *Al Jazeera*, 22 January; Bariz 2025, 19 April]. Diplomatic channels remained active despite the ongoing tensions. Pakistani Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar visited Kabul, and both countries pledged to cooperate on security, trade, transportation, and connectivity [Fazlullah 2025, 17 March]. Progress was made in the easing of bilateral tensions through diplomatic outreach and economic cooperation. The reopening of the Torkham border crossing in March 2025 marked a significant turning point, facilitating the resumption of trade and transit flows following a period of disruption [*AP News* 2025, 19 March]. High-level talks followed, centred on reviving the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement and enhancing connectivity by launching a feasibility study for the Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan railway corridor, on which officials signed a tripartite framework agreement in Kabul in July 2025 [Saidov 2025, 17 July]. By mid-2025, bilateral trade had reached nearly US$ 1 billion in value, and Pakistan had established itself as a major supplier of industrial and food products to Afghanistan [Yousafzai 2025, 15 July].

Despite improvements in the trade ties between them, border violence escalated again in mid-October 2025 after Afghan Taliban troops fired on Pakistani posts in retaliation for Pakistani airstrikes launched into Afghan territory in September 2025. In response, Pakistan used artillery to destroy several Afghan border positions and, once again, closed all major crossings. Islamabad acknowledged having suffered 23 losses from the attack and claimed to have killed many militants in response. Both sides blamed each other: Pakistan accused Afghanistan of harbouring anti-state militants, while Afghanistan protested the violations of its airspace and territory [*Arab News PK* 2025, 12 October; Khan 2025, 12 October; Latif 2025, 12 October; Rehman *et al.* 2025, 12 October].

A fragile ceasefire mediated by Qatar and Turkey was brokered in Doha on 19 October 2025, thereby laying the foundation for the internationalisation of bilateral discussions. The agreement included pledges to stop supporting hostile groups, refrain from attacking civilians, and establish monitoring mechanisms [Shahzad *et al.* 2025, 18 October; Jilani 2025, 19 October; Regencia 2025, 19 October]. Peace talks were conducted in Istanbul in October and November 2025 between Pakistan and Afghanistan's Taliban government, but failed to produce a workable solution

[Khan 2025, 30 October]. Pakistani Information Minister Attaullah Tarar accused the Taliban of deflecting responsibility over cross-border terrorism [*News* 2025, 29 October]. These clashes along the border undoubtedly impacted bilateral trade, with the closure of major border crossings disrupting supply chains and halting transit trade. For Pakistan, border instability not only undermined the economy but also complicated Islamabad's aspirations to become a significant transit hub following regional trade integration through initiatives like the CPEC, the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India natural gas pipeline, and the Central Asia-South Asia electricity transmission project (CASA-1000) [Afridi 2025, 19 October; Akhter 2025, 19 October].

Meanwhile, Islamabad was hit by a deadly attack on 11 November 2025 when a suicide bomber detonated himself near a district court complex, killing 12 people and injuring almost 30 others. The Taliban, which had previously threatened to attack Islamabad in retaliation for the airstrikes, was blamed by the Pakistani military as the culprit for the attack despite a TTP-affiliate militant group claiming responsibility [Ahmed & Mahsud 2025, 12 November; Shah & Shahzad 2025, 12 November].

5.4. *Pakistan's strengthened ties across Asia and the Middle East*

Pakistan's relationship with Bangladesh – historically strained due to the legacy of the 1971 independence war – has improved in recent years. In September 2024, Dhaka and Islamabad resumed high-level diplomacy when Muhammad Yunus, head of Bangladesh's interim government, met with Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif in New York, where they emphasised the importance of strengthening bilateral relations. Soon after the meeting, direct trade resumed, and various restrictions (e.g., stringent cargo inspections, visa requirements) were lifted [Moinuddin 2024, 26 September; *Profit* 2024, 15 November; Hasnain 2025, 12 January]. Pakistan and Bangladesh have also begun coordinating defence and intelligence exchanges, including visits by military delegations [Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2025, 12 January; Hassan 2025, 13 January; *AP News* 2025, 14 January; Malik 2025, 15 January; Hassan 2025, 3 February]. On 24 August 2025, Ishaq Dar's visit to Dhaka pointed to efforts to shift strategic relations toward commercial cooperation and increased exchanges [Kugelman 2025, 27 August].

Pakistan-Sri Lanka relations remained warm and cooperative. At the February 2025 World Governments Summit in Dubai, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake agreed to deepen high-level exchanges in trade, defence, education, tourism, and sports [*Radio Pakistan* 2025, 11 February]. In April 2025, Islamabad hosted the fifth round of the Pakistan-Sri Lanka Armed Forces Defence Dialogue, during which the two sides reaffirmed strong collaboration across security domains, with defence training and military cooperation set to continue

under long-standing partnerships [Government of Pakistan, Press Information Department 2025, 30 April].

Energy-deficient Pakistan has also recently expressed interest in deepening its ties and connectivity links with gas-rich Central Asian states [Corsi 2024, p. 366; Abdullaev 2024, 31 December]. These links include the above-mentioned transnational rail project connecting Pakistan to Uzbekistan via Afghanistan, with construction expected to begin soon [*Afghanistan International* 2025, 5 February]. Geopolitical factors have also underpinned Pakistan's push into Central Asia, which limits India's ability to secure direct land access and transit trade with the region. Accordingly, Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif visited Azerbaijan in February 2025, meeting with President Ilham Aliyev and finalising accords in trade, energy, and connectivity. The subsequent visit of Sharif to Uzbekistan resulted in an additional trade deal [Abdullaev 2024, 31 December; Zaman 2025, 24 February; Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2025, 25 February; *Dawn* 2025, 26 February].

In September 2025, Pakistan signed a Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement with Saudi Arabia, marking a significant moment in its external relations. The pact stated that an attack on one would be considered an attack on both, placing Pakistan at the heart of a security arrangement that extended into the Gulf. While the two countries had been cooperating for several decades, this step formalised the partnership and gave Islamabad a stronger role in regional security affairs [Markey 2025, 23 September]. For Pakistan, the agreement reinforced its position as a partner actively sought out for defence cooperation, not only within South Asia but globally. The arrangement also laid avenues for closer military collaboration and deepened a relationship that had historically combined defence, political, and financial ties [Zeb 2025, 18 September]. References to Pakistan's nuclear capability added dimension to the agreement, with Pakistani officials portraying the deterrent as linked to broader security cooperation [Varvelli 2025, 20 September; White 2025, 24 September; Waseem 2025, 25 September].

6. *Conclusions*

In 2025, Pakistan faced substantial internal political and security challenges while pursuing a policy agenda heavily focused on external relations. Politics were tense, carefully managed by the Sharif administration, leaving limited room for competitive political expression capable of challenging the governing authorities. Attempts at dialogue with the opposition were ongoing throughout the year, but mistrust among key actors meant that hopes for a more inclusive political environment could only advance slowly. The ongoing detention of Imran Khan and the PTI's constrained status only reinforced this atmosphere of political friction. The emergence of the

TTAP alliance further highlighted concerns over constitutional governance and the evolving balance between civilian authority and military influence.

Security developments continued to test the state. Militant violence intensified in Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, showcasing the ability of the BLA and TTP to disrupt internal stability and put sustained pressure on security institutions.

Economically, stabilisation efforts offered some relief by moderating inflation and securing external financial support. Nonetheless, Pakistan's reliance on international partners to steady its economy underscored not only the country's resilience but also its vulnerability. High external debt repayments, restricted fiscal space, and long-standing structural constraints remained central challenges. The fiscal year 2025-26 budget reflected these tensions, reducing development spending while raising defence allocations amid heightened regional tensions.

Foreign policy was the country's most dynamic and outward-facing dimension in 2025. The government prioritised pragmatic diplomacy, seeking to maintain constructive relations with major partners, including the United States and Gulf states. Its confrontation with India illustrated the volatility of the regional environment and reaffirmed the importance of external mediation, particularly from Washington. Relations with Afghanistan deteriorated markedly, with border clashes and airstrikes giving way to an unpredictable security context despite intermittent diplomacy and a brief ceasefire. Meanwhile, new economic and security agreements – particularly those with the United States and Saudi Arabia – reflected Islamabad's efforts to diversify its strategic options and bolster its international position.

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