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Pakistan-USA Relations in the Post-9/11 Era: A Strategic Recalibration

By

Ms. Sania Khan,

Lecturer, Department of International Relations, National University of Modern Languages, Multan Campus, Islamabad, Pakistan



Abstract

The events of 9/11 marked a transformative period in Pakistan-USA relations, thrusting Pakistan into the forefront of the United States-led War on Terror. This article critically examines the evolution of bilateral ties in the post-9/11 era, highlighting key phases of cooperation, mutual mistrust, and divergence. Pakistan's decision to align with the U.S. during this period is analyzed through the lens of strategic bandwagoning, a framework that underscores the trade-offs between short-term benefits and long-term vulnerabilities.

The article delves into the multifaceted impacts of this partnership, including economic aid, counter-terrorism cooperation, and domestic repercussions for Pakistan in terms of security and political stability. It also explores the strained geopolitical relationships arising from Pakistan's alignment with the U.S., particularly with neighboring countries.

Recognizing the limitations of a singularly focused foreign policy, the article advocates for a balanced approach to international relations. Drawing on the principles of strategic autonomy, it emphasizes the need for Pakistan to diversify its global partnerships, strengthen regional cooperation, and enhance domestic resilience. By recalibrating its foreign policy to align with contemporary global realities, Pakistan can secure its long-term national interests and maintain its relevance in an increasingly multipolar world.

This article concludes by asserting that a proactive, multi-vector foreign policy is not only desirable but essential for ensuring Pakistan's stability, security, and prosperity in the 21st century.

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Corresponding author
Ms. Sania Khan

Introduction

The tragic events of September 11, 2001, reshaped global geopolitics, placing Pakistan at the center of the United States-led War on Terror. This alliance fundamentally altered Pakistan-USA relations, characterized by cooperation in counter-terrorism, economic aid, and strategic alignment. However, the partnership has also been fraught with challenges, including mistrust, diverging priorities, and significant domestic repercussions for Pakistan. Over the decades, these dynamics have underscored the need for Pakistan to adopt a more balanced foreign policy that aligns with its long-term strategic interests.

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of Pakistan-USA relations post-9/11, examining key phases, strategic underpinnings, and policy outcomes. It further advocates for a balanced foreign

policy approach, grounded in the concept of strategic band wagoning, to navigate the evolving global order and secure Pakistan's national interests.

The Immediate Aftermath of 9/11: Pakistan's Strategic Choice

In the wake of 9/11, the United States launched Operation Enduring Freedom, aimed at dismantling al-Qaeda and removing the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Pakistan, under the leadership of President Pervez Musharraf, faced a critical decision: align with the U.S.-led coalition or risk international isolation and potential retaliation. Musharraf chose to support the U.S., a decision driven by pragmatic considerations, including economic sanctions, geopolitical isolation, and threats to national security.



Key Aspects of Pakistan's Role

- Military and Logistical Support:** Pakistan provided essential military bases, air corridors, and intelligence-sharing capabilities to the U.S., making it a pivotal partner in the war effort.
- Counter-Terrorism Operations:** Pakistan's military launched significant operations in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) to combat terrorist networks, resulting in substantial human and material costs.
- Economic Aid:** The U.S. provided Pakistan with substantial economic and military assistance, amounting to over \$33 billion from 2002 to 2018, as compensation for its role in the War on Terror.

While this strategic alignment brought immediate benefits, it also exposed Pakistan to significant risks, including domestic backlash, increased terrorism, and strained relations with neighboring countries.

The Complexities of the Pakistan-USA Alliance

Mutual Mistrust

The Pakistan-USA relationship in the post-9/11 era has been marked by mutual suspicion. From Washington's perspective, Pakistan's alleged double game—supporting U.S. counter-terrorism efforts while harboring Taliban factions—raised questions about its reliability as an ally. Notable incidents, such as the discovery of Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, exacerbated this mistrust.

Conversely, Pakistan has often viewed U.S. policies as transactional and inconsistent. The abrupt reduction of military aid, imposition of economic sanctions, and perceived disregard for Pakistan's sovereignty have fueled anti-American sentiment within the country.

Domestic Repercussions

Pakistan's involvement in the War on Terror had profound domestic consequences:

- Economic Costs:** The war disrupted trade, deterred foreign investment, and led to losses exceeding \$150 billion.
- Security Challenges:** Terrorist attacks surged across Pakistan, claiming over 70,000 lives and destabilizing the nation.
- Political Instability:** The alliance with the U.S. polarized domestic politics, with segments of the population and political parties opposing Pakistan's role in the war.

Geopolitical Implications

The partnership also strained Pakistan's relations with neighboring countries. India capitalized on U.S. concerns about terrorism to strengthen its strategic ties with Washington, while Afghanistan accused Pakistan of supporting the Taliban insurgency.

Additionally, Pakistan's alignment with the U.S. created tensions with Iran and Russia, further complicating its regional diplomacy.

Strategic Bandwagoning: A Theoretical Lens

The concept of **strategic bandwagoning** offers a useful framework to understand Pakistan's post-9/11 foreign policy. Bandwagoning involves aligning with a stronger power to maximize security and economic benefits. In this context, Pakistan's decision to ally with the U.S. can be seen as a pragmatic move to:

- Secure Economic Assistance:** The U.S. aid package bolstered Pakistan's economy, providing much-needed financial relief.
- Enhance Security Capabilities:** Cooperation with the U.S. improved Pakistan's military infrastructure and counter-terrorism capabilities.
- Avoid Isolation:** Aligning with the U.S. ensured Pakistan's relevance in global politics and shielded it from potential sanctions.

However, the limitations of this approach became evident over time. While bandwagoning offered short-term gains, it constrained Pakistan's foreign policy autonomy and exposed it to long-term vulnerabilities.

Key Phases in Pakistan-USA Relations Post-9/11

2001-2008: Strategic Alignment

During this period, Pakistan-USA relations were at their peak, driven by shared counter-terrorism objectives. However, the alliance began to unravel towards the end of this phase, as the U.S. questioned Pakistan's commitment to combating terrorism.

The Lal Masjid operation (2007) and the assassination of Benazir Bhutto (2007) further highlighted Pakistan's internal challenges.

2009-2016: Diverging Interests

The Obama administration's Af-Pak strategy emphasized drone strikes and counter-insurgency operations, often straining Pakistan's sovereignty. High-profile incidents, such as the Salala checkpoint attack (2011) and the bin Laden raid (2011), deepened mistrust. Despite these tensions, economic assistance under the Kerry-Lugar-Berman Act highlighted attempts to sustain the partnership.

2017-Present: Reassessment and Realignment

The Trump administration's decision to cut military aid and accuse Pakistan of "lies and deceit" marked a low point in bilateral relations. However, Pakistan's role in facilitating the U.S.-Taliban peace process (2020) and the subsequent withdrawal from Afghanistan underscored its continued relevance. The Biden administration's focus on great-power competition has further shifted U.S. priorities, necessitating a recalibration of Pakistan-USA relations.

Towards a Balanced Foreign Policy

In light of these dynamics, Pakistan must adopt a balanced foreign policy that minimizes reliance on any single power and maximizes its strategic autonomy. This approach should focus on:

1. Diversifying Strategic Partnerships

Pakistan should strengthen ties with other global powers, including China, Russia, and the European Union, to reduce dependence on the U.S. Initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) offer opportunities for economic growth and regional connectivity.

2. Strengthening Regional Cooperation

Building constructive relationships with neighboring countries is essential for regional stability. For instance:

- **Afghanistan:** Supporting a stable and inclusive Afghan government can prevent the resurgence of terrorism.
- **India:** While challenging, improving trade and diplomatic ties with India can enhance regional integration.
- **Iran:** Expanding economic and energy cooperation with Iran aligns with Pakistan's developmental needs.

3. Enhancing Domestic Resilience

A balanced foreign policy must be underpinned by robust domestic institutions and economic stability. Investing in education, infrastructure, and technology can reduce Pakistan's vulnerability to external pressures and enhance its global standing.

4. Maintaining Pragmatic Relations with the U.S.

Despite challenges, Pakistan must continue to engage with the U.S. on areas of mutual interest, such as counter-terrorism, climate change, and trade. A cooperative yet independent approach can ensure that the relationship remains productive.

Strategic Bandwagoning Revisited

Strategic bandwagoning remains relevant in Pakistan's foreign policy discourse, but it must be adapted to contemporary realities. Rather than exclusively aligning with the U.S., Pakistan should adopt a multi-vector approach, leveraging its strategic location and geoeconomic potential to engage with diverse partners.

This recalibrated strategy aligns with the principles of strategic autonomy, enabling Pakistan to:

1. **Balance Competing Interests:** By diversifying its partnerships, Pakistan can avoid becoming overly dependent on any single power.
2. **Enhance Strategic Leverage:** A balanced approach enhances Pakistan's bargaining power in global and regional diplomacy.
3. **Secure Long-Term Gains:** A multi-faceted foreign policy ensures sustainable development and security.

Conclusion

The post-9/11 era has profoundly shaped Pakistan-USA relations, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges of strategic bandwagoning. While the alliance with the U.S. provided significant benefits, it also underscored the limitations of a narrowly focused foreign policy.

In an increasingly multipolar world, Pakistan must adopt a balanced foreign policy that aligns with its long-term national interests. This entails diversifying its partnerships, fostering regional cooperation, and maintaining a pragmatic relationship with the U.S. Such an approach is not merely desirable but essential for ensuring Pakistan's security, stability, and global relevance. By embracing strategic autonomy and pursuing a proactive, multi-vector foreign policy, Pakistan can navigate the complexities of the 21st-century global order and secure a prosperous future.