

From Partnership to Pressure: U.S.–Pakistan Relations under George W. Bush & Donald Trump

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Abstract

This research examines the evolution of U.S. foreign policy toward Pakistan during the Bush (2001–2009) and Trump (2017–2021) administrations, highlighting the strategic, operational, and political dynamics that shaped bilateral relations. Under the Bush administration, Pakistan was positioned as a frontline ally in the Global War on Terror, receiving substantial military and economic assistance, intelligence cooperation, and diplomatic support. While this partnership facilitated tactical counterterrorism successes, it reinforced Pakistan's dependence on U.S. aid, strengthened military authority at the expense of civilian institutions, and allowed selective tolerance of militant sanctuaries. In contrast, the Trump administration adopted a transactional, accountability-driven approach characterized by aid suspension, public pressure, and a strategic tilt toward India, prompting Pakistan to diversify its partnerships toward China, Russia, and other regional actors. This comparative analysis highlights how U.S. policy shifted from partnership-based incentives to coercive measures, affecting Pakistan's strategic autonomy, regional positioning, and domestic governance. Using a qualitative research design, the study draws on semi-structured interviews with academics, policymakers, diplomats, security analysts, and research scholars, complemented by official reports and archival data. The research employs Realism (Power and Security) as its theoretical framework, explaining both administrations' focus on national interest, security imperatives, and regional power balancing. Findings indicate that sustainable U.S.–Pakistan relations require nuanced engagement combining strategic incentives, accountability, democratic support, and diversified partnerships. The study contributes to the understanding of bilateral dynamics, highlighting lessons for future U.S. foreign policy and Pakistan's strategic planning in a complex, multipolar regional environment.

Keywords: U.S.–Pakistan Relations, Bush Administration, Trump Administration, Realism, Strategic Autonomy, Counterterrorism, Foreign Policy Analysis

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Introduction

U.S.–Pakistan relations prior to the September 11, 2001 attacks were characterized by a complex mix of strategic cooperation, intermittent distrust, and transactional engagement shaped largely by the Cold War legacy and South Asian regional dynamics. Abbas, S., Hasan, M. N. U., & Yousaf, D. B. (2024). During the Cold War era, from the 1950s to the late 1980s, Pakistan aligned with the United States as part of its policy of containing the Soviet Union, receiving military and economic aid, and participating in alliances such as SEATO and CENTO. Key leaders in this period included U.S. Presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Richard Nixon, alongside Pakistani leaders like President Ayub Khan and Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Ahmad, A., Ur Rehman, M. M., & Umer, M. A. (2024). The U.S. maintained bases, training programs, and diplomatic presence in Islamabad, Rawalpindi, and Karachi, while Pakistan leveraged its location bordering Afghanistan, Iran, and India for strategic advantage. Relations experienced tension after the 1971 Indo-Pakistani war, nuclear proliferation concerns under Zia-ul-Haq in the 1980s, and Pakistan's intermittent engagement with Islamist groups.

The attacks of 9/11 transformed Pakistan's role from a peripheral partner to a central actor in U.S. strategy, particularly in the War on Terror. Ali, M. (2025). Under President George W. Bush (2001–2009) and Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, Islamabad became critical for logistics, intelligence coordination, and counterterrorism operations targeting Taliban and al-Qaeda elements in Afghanistan, with key operations conducted from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Bush's strategy emphasized incentives, aid, and designation of Pakistan as a Major Non-NATO Ally, whereas the Trump administration (2017–2021) under President Donald J. Trump and Prime Minister Imran Khan shifted toward transactional pressure, aid suspension, and public accountability. The contrasting approaches of these two administrations highlight shifts in U.S. geopolitical priorities, including a growing tilt toward India, regional power recalibration, and evolving counterterrorism objectives. Bilal, H. M., Anwar, T., & Ali, A. (2025).

This study is guided by three primary objectives: first, to examine U.S. policy strategies toward Pakistan under Bush and Trump; second, to identify strategic, domestic, and regional factors shaping bilateral relations; and third, to analyze implications for Pakistan's strategic autonomy and regional security. Dominic, S., Liaqat, B. B., & Tanveer, M. U. (2025). The research addresses critical questions: How did U.S. policy toward Pakistan evolve across these two administrations? What were the motivations and tangible outcomes of Bush's and Trump's approaches? How did Pakistan respond strategically to changing U.S. policies while balancing domestic pressures, military considerations, and regional dynamics in South Asia? By situating Pakistan within broader U.S. strategic calculations, this study provides insights into the enduring patterns, opportunities, and challenges of bilateral engagement in a highly complex geopolitical environment.

Literature Review

Post-9/11 Reconfiguration of U.S.–Pakistan Relations

The September 11, 2001 attacks fundamentally transformed U.S.–Pakistan relations, converting a distant and sanctions-constrained relationship into an urgent security partnership. Pakistan's geographic proximity to Afghanistan, intelligence capabilities, and historical links with militant actors made it indispensable for U.S. counterterrorism operations. Malik, Y., & Aquil, S. (2025). Scholarly literature emphasizes that this re-engagement was driven primarily by immediate security imperatives rather than shared political or normative values. As a result, bilateral relations became heavily securitized and operationally focused. Shah, M., Arshad, J.,

& Khan, S. (2025). Counterterrorism cooperation replaced long-term institutional development as the central pillar of engagement. This shift laid the foundation for a transactional and interest-based alliance. The post-9/11 phase thus redefined the strategic logic of U.S.-Pakistan relations. Shamil, T. (2024).

Pakistan's Strategic Leverage in the War on Terror

Pakistan's geostrategic position provided it with significant leverage in its dealings with the United States during the War on Terror. Zakariya, M. F. B., Rana, F. A., Abbas, S., & Ikram, M. (2024). Control over supply routes, airspace, and intelligence networks enabled Pakistan to negotiate cooperation while maintaining selective autonomy. The Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) became a crucial partner for U.S. forces targeting al-Qaeda and Taliban elements. Zafar, M. B. (2024). Scholars argue that U.S. operational urgency led Washington to prioritize access and short-term effectiveness over accountability and reform. This imbalance created an asymmetrical yet mutually dependent relationship. Pakistan's bargaining power was reinforced by U.S. reliance on its cooperation. Consequently, strategic mistrust coexisted with operational collaboration. Ali, I., & Anwar, M. F. (2025).

Bush Administration: Incentive-Based Security Cooperation

Under the Bush administration, U.S. policy toward Pakistan was overwhelmingly shaped by counterterrorism and security priorities. Sanctions were lifted, Pakistan was designated a major non-NATO ally, and large-scale military and economic assistance was extended. Khan, S. R. (2023). Coalition Support Funds became a key instrument for incentivizing Pakistani cooperation in Afghanistan. Scholars note that this engagement was instrumental and tactical rather than transformative or institutional. Ahmed, Z., & Farooq, K. (2024). Democratic governance, human rights, and civilian oversight were subordinated to security efficiency. While cooperation yielded short-term counterterrorism gains, it entrenched military dominance within Pakistan. This approach reflected a realist emphasis on threat neutralization over normative considerations. Hussain, R. (2025).

Strategic Trade-Offs, Aid Dependency, and Selective Compliance

Although the Bush era produced notable counterterrorism successes, including the capture of senior al-Qaeda figures, it also involved significant strategic trade-offs. Pakistan's selective action against militant groups allowed some networks to persist, particularly those linked to Afghan dynamics. Latif, M. (2025). The United States largely tolerated these ambiguities due to operational dependence. Extensive military aid fostered aid dependency and reinforced civil-military imbalances within Pakistan. Mustafa, A. (2024). Scholars argue that this security-centric model weakened democratic consolidation and institutional development. These structural vulnerabilities undermined the sustainability of counterterrorism outcomes. Over time, they contributed to growing mistrust and policy fatigue. Patel, N. (2022).

Trump Administration: Transnationalism and Coercive Pressure

The Trump administration marked a sharp rhetorical and strategic shift in U.S.-Pakistan relations under the "America First" doctrine. Qureshi, F., & Sami, A. (2024). U.S. policy emphasized conditionality, burden-sharing, and public accountability, portraying Pakistan increasingly as a security liability. The suspension of military aid was intended to coerce behavioral change rather than deepen partnership. Scholars contend that coercive rhetoric and public criticism eroded trust and reduced diplomatic flexibility. Rahman, T. (2023). At the same time, the U.S. strategic tilt toward India intensified Pakistan's regional security concerns. Rather than increasing U.S. leverage, this approach encouraged Pakistan to diversify its strategic options. The relationship became more openly transactional and strained. Saeed, H. (2025).

Realism and Comparative Implications for Regional Stability

Realism (Power and Security) provides a coherent framework for comparing U.S.-Pakistan relations under the Bush and Trump administrations. Sheikh, J. (2024). Both periods reflect continuity in strategic objectives despite differences in tactics, rhetoric, and instruments. U.S. policy was consistently driven by national interest, cost-benefit calculations, and regional power considerations. Tariq, R., & Zaman, Q. (2025). Pakistan's responses similarly reflected survival, autonomy, and balancing behavior, particularly through closer alignment with China and cautious engagement with Russia. Usman, A. (2023). The comparative gap in existing scholarship is addressed by this unified theoretical lens. Realism explains both cooperation and conflict as rational responses to shifting incentives. The evolving relationship has profound implications for South Asian stability and regional power balances.

Analysis & Findings

George W. Bush Administration (2001–2009)

During the George W. Bush administration, U.S. foreign policy toward Pakistan was characterized by incentive-based and discreet diplomacy. Pakistan, under President Pervez Musharraf, emerged as a frontline ally in the Global War on Terror, a role that elevated its strategic importance in U.S. calculations. Following the September 11, 2001 attacks, the United States quickly recognized Pakistan's geostrategic value due to its proximity to Afghanistan, influence over Taliban networks, and control of critical supply routes, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Baluchistan, and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Yousaf, M. (2024). Islamabad received extensive military and economic support, including designation as a Major Non-NATO Ally, Coalition Support Funds totaling over \$9 billion, and direct military equipment and logistical assistance. These incentives were intended to ensure operational cooperation, secure supply chains for U.S.-led forces in Afghanistan, and foster Pakistan's active participation in counterterrorism missions. Hussain, Z., & Farooq, K. (2024). During this period, intelligence sharing between U.S. agencies and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) facilitated the capture of high-value targets, disrupted al-Qaeda networks, and enhanced tactical counterterrorism successes in South Asia. Khan, S. R. (2023).

Despite these operational gains, structural vulnerabilities emerged. Pakistan's reliance on U.S. aid deepened its economic and strategic dependency, limiting its autonomous decision-making. Military influence over domestic politics strengthened, often at the expense of civilian governance and democratic institutions, creating a governance imbalance that persisted throughout Musharraf's tenure. U.S. tolerance of selective militant sanctuaries, particularly in regions bordering Afghanistan, highlighted a strategic compromise: operational necessity was prioritized over enforcing domestic or regional reforms. Ahmed, I., & Anwar, M. F. (2025). Furthermore, the U.S.-India Civil Nuclear Agreement in 2008 signaled a long-term shift in Washington's regional strategy, creating tension in Pakistan and undermining the perception of a fully equal partnership. While Pakistan remained operationally indispensable for U.S. counterterrorism and logistical needs, strategically it was constrained, revealing the transactional nature of the alliance and the limits of partnership-centered diplomacy.

Donald Trump Administration (2017–2021)

The Trump administration introduced a starkly different approach, marked by transactional and coercive diplomacy, under the framework of the "America First" doctrine. President Donald J. Trump emphasized accountability, conditionality, and public pressure, signaling a departure from the discreet and incentive-driven approach of the Bush era. Military aid was suspended, and the strategic tilt toward India was reinforced, reflecting broader shifts in U.S. priorities in South Asia. Public criticism of Pakistan's policies, coupled with formal demands

for dismantling militant networks, challenged Pakistan's traditional autonomy in regional strategy. Despite these pressures, operational cooperation continued in counterterrorism, particularly in intelligence coordination and Afghanistan-related negotiations, indicating Pakistan's enduring strategic value to U.S. interests. Hussain, R. (2025).

Pakistan responded with a dual strategy that combined pragmatic cooperation with public defiance. The country diversified its international partnerships, strengthening ties with China through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, expanding engagement with Russia, and cultivating relationships with Middle Eastern states. Latif, M. (2025). This strategic pivot allowed Islamabad to reduce reliance on the United States, assert sovereignty, and maintain influence in regional security affairs. The Trump era accelerated structural shifts in U.S.-Pakistan relations: reduced U.S. leverage, heightened mutual skepticism, and growing strategic autonomy for Pakistan. While tactical counterterrorism objectives were met, long-term trust and alignment were weakened, demonstrating the limits of coercive diplomacy and the complex interplay of domestic, regional, and international factors. Sheikh, J. (2024).

Comparative Analysis

Comparing the Bush and Trump administrations reveals significant and instructive contrasts in the conduct of U.S. policy toward Pakistan, demonstrating how differing strategic priorities, leadership styles, and global contexts shape bilateral relations in profound ways. Tariq, R., & Zaman, Q. (2025) During the George W. Bush era, from 2001 to 2009, U.S. policy toward Pakistan was defined by a combination of partnership, discretion, and operational alignment, reflecting the immediate imperatives of the Global War on Terror following the September 11 attacks. President Bush, working closely with Secretary of State Colin Powell, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, and the U.S. military establishment, leveraged Pakistan's strategic location, intelligence networks, and influence over Taliban and al-Qaeda operatives to secure operational objectives in Afghanistan. Pakistan, under President Pervez Musharraf, responded by accepting a frontline role, providing logistical access through air, land, and rail routes into Afghanistan, sharing intelligence, and facilitating counterterrorism operations that led to high-value target captures. Rahim, A., Ambreen, S., & Khan, A. (2025). To sustain this partnership, the U.S. offered extensive incentives, including the designation of Pakistan as a Major Non-NATO Ally, \$9 billion in Coalition Support Funds, and significant military and economic assistance. The approach emphasized discretion, with aid and incentives delivered to secure compliance and operational cooperation while tolerating selective non-compliance in areas such as militant sanctuaries along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. This framework achieved considerable tactical gains, disrupted key terrorist networks, and demonstrated Pakistan's indispensability to U.S. operational goals. Yet, despite these achievements, the Bush-era strategy reinforced structural vulnerabilities in Pakistan, including heightened aid dependency, the entrenchment of military authority over civilian institutions, and limited democratic development, which created long-term challenges for sustainable bilateral relations. Strategic ambiguities also emerged, as the U.S.-India Civil Nuclear Agreement in 2008 signaled a long-term tilt toward New Delhi, generating mistrust in Islamabad and highlighting the inherent tension between operational necessity and strategic equity in regional policy. Rahim, A., Ambreen, S., & Khan, A. (2025).

In contrast, the Trump administration, spanning 2017 to 2021, adopted a transactional, coercive, and highly public approach to Pakistan, guided by the "America First" doctrine. President Donald J. Trump, in coordination with Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, and other officials, emphasized accountability, conditionality, and overt pressure as the primary mechanisms for securing U.S. objectives. Military aid was

suspended, public criticism of Pakistan's policy on counterterrorism and regional security was frequent, and the administration reinforced strategic engagement with India, altering the regional balance in South Asia. While operational cooperation continued, particularly in intelligence sharing and in facilitating Afghan peace negotiations, strategic trust diminished significantly. Islamabad responded with a dual strategy, combining pragmatic cooperation to maintain operational relevance with public defiance to assert sovereignty, highlighting the limits of coercive diplomacy. The administration's approach catalyzed Pakistan's strategic recalibration toward China and Russia, with deepened engagement through initiatives such as the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor and expanded defense and economic partnerships with other regional powers. This strategic pivot enhanced Pakistan's autonomy and mitigated vulnerability to unilateral U.S. pressure while demonstrating that transactional tactics, even when combined with operational collaboration, can strain long-term trust and complicate bilateral alignment.

The contrast between the two administrations underscores critical lessons for managing U.S.–Pakistan relations. The Bush approach illustrates that incentive-driven partnership can facilitate immediate tactical gains but may reinforce dependency, entrench structural vulnerabilities, and allow strategic ambiguity to persist. In contrast, the Trump era demonstrates that transactional diplomacy and conditionality, while promoting accountability, can undermine trust, accelerate realignment with alternative partners, and challenge assumptions of predictability in bilateral cooperation. Both periods highlight that reliance solely on tactical cooperation—whether incentivized or conditional—is insufficient to sustain a stable and credible partnership. Long-term strategic trust, robust domestic governance, and careful regional balancing are essential for maintaining influence, credibility, and operational effectiveness. Rahim, A., Ambreen, S., & Khan, A. (2025). *The Sustainable engagement* requires nuanced policies that integrate domestic political realities, regional dynamics, and international objectives, ensuring that operational collaboration does not come at the expense of strategic autonomy or regional stability. This includes managing the complex interplay of India–Pakistan tensions, Afghanistan's security situation, and Pakistan's evolving relationships with China and other global actors. By applying a realist lens, the divergent U.S. strategies under Bush and Trump can be interpreted as manifestations of power projection, national interest calculations, and the prioritization of security imperatives over normative or ideological commitments. Bush's discretion and partnership-oriented strategy exemplify realist calculations aimed at maximizing operational utility while managing regional constraints, whereas Trump's transactional approach reflects realist principles of leverage, conditional compliance, and coercive engagement to achieve short-term strategic objectives. From Pakistan's perspective, strategic adaptations—including diversifying partnerships, strengthening civil-military coordination, and asserting sovereignty in regional and multilateral arenas—align with realist imperatives of preserving autonomy, maintaining operational relevance, and balancing power asymmetries. The comparative analysis of these two periods demonstrates that U.S.–Pakistan relations are best managed through calibrated engagement combining incentives, accountability, and strategic awareness, balancing immediate operational cooperation with long-term national interests. It further illustrates that shifts in U.S. policy frameworks, whether discretionary partnership or coercive transaction, have profound implications for Pakistan's strategic autonomy, regional security architecture, and its role in global counterterrorism initiatives. Ultimately, the lessons drawn from the Bush and Trump eras highlight the enduring complexity of bilateral relations in a dynamic geopolitical environment and underscore the need for Pakistan to pursue policy planning,

diversified partnerships, and institutional resilience as the foundation for sustainable and balanced engagement with the United States and other global actors. Strategic foresight, integration of domestic and regional considerations, and a realist understanding of power dynamics are critical to navigating future challenges, ensuring that Pakistan can maintain sovereignty, operational effectiveness, and credibility in an increasingly multipolar world while safeguarding its national interests and regional stability.

Discussion

The implications of Pakistan's reliance on U.S. aid and overdependence on American policy decisions have been profound and multifaceted, affecting its economic stability, political autonomy, and strategic decision-making. During the Bush administration, extensive military and economic assistance provided Pakistan with the resources necessary to play a central role in the War on Terror, yet this aid created structural dependencies that limited Islamabad's independent policy options. The reliance on financial assistance tied Pakistan's strategic choices to U.S. operational and policy objectives, often compelling compliance even when it conflicted with domestic priorities or regional interests. This dependency was further exacerbated by the concentration of decision-making power within the military, which leveraged U.S. support to consolidate authority while civilian institutions remained relatively weak. Overreliance on U.S. policy also influenced Pakistan's approach to militant safe havens, regional disputes, and counterterrorism operations, frequently prioritizing U.S. expectations over sustainable domestic and regional solutions. Strategic misalignment between U.S. and Pakistani objectives, particularly regarding India, Afghanistan, and broader South Asian dynamics, further complicated the bilateral relationship. The Bush administration focused on operational gains and counterterrorism success, sometimes at the expense of long-term regional stability, while the Trump administration's transactional approach, including aid suspension and public pressure, exposed Pakistan's vulnerabilities and accelerated its strategic pivot toward China and Russia. These shifts underscored the fragility of an alliance heavily influenced by power asymmetries and transactional interests, illustrating how aid dependency and misaligned priorities can constrain a state's autonomy and amplify regional uncertainties. Realism provides a useful lens for understanding these dynamics, as it emphasizes the pursuit of national interest, power balance, and security considerations over ideological or normative commitments. Under Bush, U.S. policy leveraged Pakistan's operational indispensability to advance immediate security objectives, reflecting power-driven calculations and strategic expediency. Trump's approach, guided by "America First" principles, used conditionality, coercion, and public pressure to reshape behavior, demonstrating how power projection and strategic priorities influence policy outcomes. From Pakistan's perspective, strategic adaptation became essential to mitigate vulnerability, diversify partnerships, and maintain leverage in regional affairs. Islamabad's response, including deepening ties with China and Russia, expanding regional cooperation, and asserting sovereignty in multilateral forums, reflects a realist calculus designed to preserve autonomy while sustaining operational engagement with the United States.

Policy lessons emerge clearly from this analysis, highlighting the importance of balanced diplomacy, credible incentives, and sustained engagement that integrates domestic governance with regional and international considerations. Tactical cooperation alone cannot ensure durable alliances; trust, accountability, and respect for internal political dynamics are equally critical. For Pakistan, strategic recommendations include the institutionalization of comprehensive policy planning, ensuring alignment between domestic priorities and international obligations to enhance consistency in decision-making. Strengthening civil-

military coordination can reduce policy friction and improve the coherence of foreign engagements. Diversifying partnerships beyond a single major power, expanding multilateral participation, and deepening regional cooperation can provide strategic leverage while reducing vulnerability to coercive diplomacy. Economic planning and aid management should be linked to long-term development goals, reducing dependence on external funding and enhancing financial sovereignty. Furthermore, the cultivation of independent capabilities in intelligence, defense, and counterterrorism will ensure Pakistan can participate in global security initiatives without appearing subordinate. A forward-looking strategy that balances operational cooperation with strategic autonomy is essential for safeguarding national interests, sustaining regional stability, and ensuring that U.S.-Pakistan relations are constructive rather than transactional. By internalizing these lessons, Pakistan can navigate the complexities of South Asian geopolitics, mitigate the consequences of aid dependency, and assert itself as a credible, autonomous actor in a multipolar world.

Conclusion

The comparative examination of U.S.-Pakistan relations under the Bush and Trump administrations provides critical insights into the evolution of bilateral dynamics, highlighting the contrast between incentive-driven partnership and transactional diplomacy. Under the Bush administration, U.S. policy emphasized a discreet, partnership-based approach, combining military and economic aid with strategic incentives to ensure Pakistan's cooperation in the Global War on Terror. Pakistan, led by President Pervez Musharraf, accepted a frontline role, providing crucial logistical support, intelligence sharing, and counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. The United States granted Pakistan Major Non-NATO Ally status, extended over nine billion dollars in Coalition Support Funds, and offered equipment and training to reinforce operational capacity. This partnership yielded short-term tactical gains, including the disruption of al-Qaeda networks, capture of high-value targets, and operational coordination in counterterrorism missions. However, despite these operational successes, structural vulnerabilities emerged. U.S. reliance on Pakistan's operational utility inadvertently reinforced military dominance over civilian institutions, deepened economic and strategic dependency, and tolerated selective militant sanctuaries, creating long-term fragility in domestic governance and regional strategy. Furthermore, the U.S.-India Civil Nuclear Agreement in 2008 introduced regional tension, signaling a strategic tilt toward New Delhi that constrained Pakistan's strategic positioning despite its indispensable operational contributions. The Bush-era approach illustrates a classic partnership model: incentives and cooperation were prioritized over conditional accountability, operational success was valued above long-term strategic alignment, and the relationship remained highly dependent on mutual necessity rather than trust or balanced engagement.

In contrast, the Trump administration adopted a transactional and coercive approach, reflecting the broader "America First" doctrine, which prioritized accountability, conditional engagement, and public pressure over discreet incentives. President Donald J. Trump, working alongside Prime Minister Imran Khan, suspended military aid, emphasized India's regional role, and publicly criticized Pakistan for perceived failures in counterterrorism and regional cooperation. Operational collaboration continued in intelligence-sharing and Afghan peace negotiations, yet strategic trust diminished, and Pakistan's reliance on the U.S. was strategically questioned. Islamabad responded with a dual strategy combining pragmatic cooperation and public defiance, simultaneously deepening ties with China through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, engaging Russia, and cultivating partnerships in the

Middle East. This diversification enhanced Pakistan's strategic autonomy, reduced reliance on U.S. leverage, and allowed the country to assert sovereignty while remaining operationally relevant in South Asian security dynamics. The transactional nature of Trump-era diplomacy underscores the limitations of coercive engagement: while conditionality and accountability addressed some operational gaps, the lack of mutual trust, combined with overt pressure and asymmetric expectations, exacerbated bilateral tension and encouraged regional recalibration. Comparing the two administrations reveals the significance of strategic framing and the consequences of differing U.S. approaches. Bush's strategy prioritized operational alignment and partnership, emphasizing incentives to secure tactical objectives, whereas Trump's policy prioritized accountability, conditionality, and pressure, reshaping the bilateral dynamic and exposing the fragility of reliance-based alliances. Both administrations relied on Pakistan for strategic objectives, including Afghanistan, counterterrorism, and regional stability, yet employed different tools and expectations to achieve their goals. The comparison illustrates that sustainable U.S.–Pakistan relations cannot rely solely on tactical cooperation or operational indispensability. Strategic autonomy, regional balance, and domestic democratic governance emerge as essential components of a resilient bilateral relationship. Pakistan's experiences demonstrate that long-term stability requires integrating domestic political coherence with foreign policy, diversifying international partnerships beyond a single major power, maintaining credible operational capacity, and asserting strategic independence in the face of shifting geopolitical pressures. These lessons underscore the importance of nuanced engagement: successful U.S.–Pakistan relations require calibrated incentives, credible accountability measures, and an awareness of domestic, regional, and global factors, ensuring that cooperation is mutually beneficial rather than transactional or coercive.

Realism offers a comprehensive lens to interpret these patterns and behaviors. The Bush administration's partnership approach reflects realist principles in its focus on security imperatives, power projection, and strategic operational utility, while Trump's transactional diplomacy illustrates realist calculations of leverage, conditional compliance, and national interest-driven engagement. Pakistan's strategic adaptations, including diversification of partnerships, civil–military coordination, and efforts to enhance regional influence, also align with realist predictions, highlighting the centrality of power balancing, autonomy, and survival in shaping state behavior. By synthesizing these insights, it becomes evident that U.S.–Pakistan relations are best managed through a combination of incentive-based engagement, credible accountability, and strategic awareness of domestic and regional considerations. A realist understanding of these dynamics provides clarity in interpreting policy shifts, evaluating strategic behavior, and offering policy recommendations that emphasize long-term stability, mutual benefit, and sustainable bilateral cooperation.

Recommendations

Institutionalizing policy planning and strengthening strategic autonomy are essential for Pakistan to navigate the complexities of regional and global geopolitics, particularly in the context of fluctuating U.S. policies and broader South Asian security dynamics. Effective institutionalization requires the establishment of robust foreign policy frameworks that integrate domestic political considerations with international pressures, ensuring consistent, proactive, and long-term strategic decision-making. By embedding comprehensive planning mechanisms within ministries, strategic think tanks, and interagency coordination platforms, Pakistan can reduce reactive policymaking and enhance policy continuity across successive administrations. Strategic autonomy, in this context, entails the ability to pursue national interests independently while maintaining cooperative engagement with global partners. It

involves balancing operational collaboration with external powers, including the United States, against the imperative to preserve sovereign decision-making, diversify partnerships, and safeguard domestic political and economic priorities. Enhancing transparency in aid utilization complements this goal by building credibility, accountability, and trust both domestically and internationally. Transparent management of military, economic, and development assistance ensures that aid contributes to sustainable outcomes rather than reinforcing dependency or creating distortions in governance. Effective oversight mechanisms, including parliamentary review, independent auditing, and civil society participation, allow Pakistan to align aid with national development objectives while demonstrating responsible stewardship to international partners.

Integrating economic reforms with security cooperation is another critical component of a holistic strategy. Counterterrorism and defense initiatives must be complemented by structural reforms in economic governance, social development, and infrastructure investment. Linking security assistance to sustainable economic progress reduces long-term dependency, strengthens domestic resilience, and ensures that operational successes translate into broader national stability. Economic reforms may include fiscal consolidation, targeted industrial and agricultural development, social safety nets, and regulatory improvements, all of which reinforce the state's capacity to independently finance security and development initiatives. Strengthening civil-military coordination is equally vital, as misalignment between civilian authorities and military institutions has historically constrained policy implementation, undermined coherence, and affected foreign engagement. By fostering regular dialogue, joint planning mechanisms, and institutionalized coordination channels, Pakistan can ensure that national security objectives, foreign policy priorities, and domestic governance strategies are harmonized, reducing friction and enhancing the efficacy of both domestic and international initiatives.

Diversification of partnerships and expansion of multilateral engagement provide additional strategic depth and reduce vulnerability to unilateral pressures. By cultivating relationships with multiple regional and global actors, including China, Russia, Middle Eastern states, and Southeast Asian partners, Pakistan can strengthen its bargaining power, access alternative sources of economic and military cooperation, and maintain balanced foreign relations. Participation in multilateral organizations and regional frameworks enhances legitimacy, promotes collective security, and provides platforms for advancing Pakistan's strategic interests, particularly in Afghanistan, South Asia, and the broader Indo-Pacific region. Strategic autonomy, transparent aid management, economic reform, effective civil-military coordination, and diversified partnerships together form a cohesive framework that ensures sustainable national development, resilient foreign policy, and credible engagement with global powers. Institutionalizing these measures allows Pakistan to respond effectively to shifting geopolitical pressures, balance operational cooperation with long-term strategic goals, and position itself as a stable, independent actor capable of contributing constructively to regional and global security. By adopting such a comprehensive approach, Pakistan can mitigate risks associated with overreliance on single powers, enhance national sovereignty, and maintain flexibility in a dynamic international environment while promoting economic growth, political stability, and durable regional equilibrium. Strategic foresight, integrated planning, and proactive engagement are indispensable for achieving these objectives, ensuring that Pakistan's foreign policy is guided by long-term national interests, coherent domestic governance, and a balanced approach to regional security. Through consistent implementation of these principles, Pakistan can transform operational

cooperation into sustainable strategic advantage, demonstrating that the integration of domestic, regional, and international considerations is critical for enduring national resilience and influence. This comprehensive approach provides a blueprint for aligning foreign policy, security strategy, and economic development, enabling Pakistan to navigate complex challenges, capitalize on emerging opportunities, and assert its role as a credible, autonomous, and strategically agile state in the contemporary global order.

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