

# Pakistan at 75: Security at the Center Stage- Sitara Noor



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Since its inception, Pakistan has been facing a plethora of internal and external challenges that are undermining its security. Even after 75 years of independence, the unsettling global and regional environment marked by great power rivalry, economic competition and a hostile neighbourhood are directly affecting Pakistan's security. In addition, numerous domestic challenges such as deteriorating internal security, depleting economy, and political instability affect the country's ability to effectively deal with these challenges. Despite being located at the confluence of three important regions of the world i.e., South, East and West Asia, Pakistan could not utilize its full geographical potential as it remained busy confronting immediate and long-term security

challenges. While the list is long, the following challenges namely the great power rivalry, unsettled neighbourhood, and resurging terrorism are of immediate concern with greater bearing on Pakistan's future in near and long term.

## **Caught in the Crossfire of Great Power Rivalry**

On the global front, one of the biggest concerns for Pakistan is to balance its relations with both the United States and China. After an on-again, off-again relationship with the US under President Trump, the Pak-US relations plummeted to their lowest after the latter's chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan. The schisms widened over the US's [alleged involvement](#) in the toppling of the *Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf* (PTI, Pakistan Movement for Justice) government as claimed by the outgoing Prime Minister Imran Khan. Although the new *Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz* (PMLN) government under Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif has vowed to improve Pakistan's relationship with the US and expand cooperation with China, any move in that direction is invariably affected by the growing US-China rivalry in the region at large.

While Pakistan needs US support to keep its economy afloat through the International Monetary Fund (IMF) loans, it cannot afford to do so at the cost of its strategic military, economic and technical relationship with China. After having completed the harvest phase of the much-celebrated \$62 billion worth China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) - the flagship project of the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative, Islamabad is required to prioritise and gear toward the crucial second phase of the project that will determine its success through rapid industrialization and

regional connectivity. To date, Pakistan has managed to insulate its strategic and economic cooperation with China from US interference, however, with growing US-China rivalry, that space is fast reducing, forcing Islamabad to make some stark and difficult choices. The [perceived](#) slowdown of CPEC projects has raised concerns not only about Pakistan's capacity to manage the program but also about its ability to sustain growing external pressure. With War in Ukraine, Pakistan is facing additional [pressure](#) to abandon its neutral position. Walking on that tight rope and not falling victim to the great power rivalry is going to be the biggest concern for Islamabad in the near and long-term future.

## **The Eastern Question: Crises with India under Nuclear Overhang**

The US-China rivalry is negatively affecting the already volatile neighbourhood as well. India's projection by the US as the net security provider in the Indo-Pacific region against China has further strained the relationship between Pakistan and India. The ongoing contestation over the disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir has led to many serious crises under the nuclear overhang. Under the Indo-US strategic partnership, India has acquired military equipment of around USD 20 billion from Washington in the past 15 years. Additionally, India has signed several defence cooperation agreements including the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) for geospatial cooperation (2020), the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (2018) and the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (2016). These agreements will provide India with a significant edge over Pakistan in its geospatial navigation and intelligence capabilities.

India is pursuing a comprehensive military modernisation

programme including air, ground, naval and strategic nuclear forces e.g. India has acquired multi-role Rafale fighter jets from France and also managed to acquire the S-400 air defence system from Russia, successfully bypassing the US sanctions. While India justifies its massive arms build-up against the Chinese threat, most of these technologies are going to be used against Pakistan in any future conflict. To offset India's arms buildup, Pakistan is enhancing some existing options such as up gradation of JF-17 Thunder, Block-III and further development of multiple independently targetable reentry vehicle (MIRV) capability. Pakistan air force has also inducted J-10C fighter jets that will enhance Pakistan's conventional combat capability against India, thereby strengthening mutual vulnerability.

Apart from these defence procurements, India is ostensibly [changing](#) its nuclear posture by steadily doing away with the "No First Use" (NFU) pledge and flirting with the idea of pre-emptive counterforce strikes. These developments are undermining fragile strategic stability in South Asia and require serious attention. While a backdoor channel with India purportedly remains active, any major breakthrough is seemingly impossible at the moment, given the obstinate nature of the current BJP leadership in India.

## **Afghan Crisis and Resurging Terrorism**

The aggravating security situation in Afghanistan under the Taliban is directly affecting Pakistan's stability. Pakistan has been seeking greater international engagement with Afghanistan even at the risk of being labelled a Taliban sympathiser, mainly because any spill over is likely to adversely affect Pakistan's security. According to the UNHCR estimates, there are around [1.44 million](#) registered Afghan refugees already residing in Pakistan

and Islamabad has expressed its inability to host more. However, as a result of the worsening humanitarian crisis, there is a perennial risk of more Afghan refugees coming to Pakistan in future in search of food and safety, despite a relative calm at the moment.

Taliban's control over Afghanistan has also aggravated Pakistan's terrorism problem. It has revitalised domestic terror organisations such as the Tehreek Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other transnational terror outfits such as the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). According to Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) [report](#), there is up to 42 per cent increase in terrorist attacks in 2021 from the previous year with an almost 40 % increase in fatalities of security personnel.

The Taliban's inability or complacency to control the Tehreek-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) operations from Afghan soil has already become a sore point in the bilateral relationship. Despite the Taliban's repeated assurance to not allow Afghan soil to be used against Pakistan, TTP has continued its attack on Pakistani citizens and security forces with impunity, leading to a major escalation as Pakistan resorted to cross-border aerial strikes in the Khost and Kunar provinces of Afghanistan. The Taliban's ongoing assistance in brokering a ceasefire between Pakistan and TTP is unlikely to resolve the problem. The Taliban are not going to [give up](#) on the TTP completely because of their cultural affinity, their common take on the Durand line issue and most importantly to continue to use them as leverage against Pakistan.

## **Conclusion**

In order

to deal with these enduring challenges, Pakistan must make independent and smart decisions through astute diplomacy. As a sovereign country, Pakistan must hold its ground and should not succumb to the pressure of taking sides in regional competitions. At the same time, while strengthening its defence posture, Pakistan must continue to work for peaceful resolution of all issues with its neighbours.

Notwithstanding the challenges, Pakistan's geographical location offers great opportunities as well. The same geography can be used for regional connectivity. However, any potential economic activity is dependent on realising Pakistan's much-touted shift to geo-economics as outlined in the latest National Security Policy. That shift will require political acumen, a sustained diplomatic effort for regional peace.

Furthermore, in order to deal with any external challenge, Pakistan must strengthen itself from within. The government must prioritise economic revival through overcoming energy shortfall, curbing corruption, improving governance through broad-based and inclusive policies and working on non-traditional security aspects such as human security, climate change and food security etc. This will not only add strength to the external outlook but will also deny space to an insider-outsider collusion to undermine Pakistan's security.



## **Sitara Noor, Centre for Aerospace & Security Studies (CASS)**

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