

Recalibrating Pakistan's Role In The Muslim World: Implications For Foreign Policy, Strategic Governance And Regional Cooperation

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Pakistan's changing engagement with Muslim-majority states through the interrelated lenses of foreign policy, strategic governance and regional cooperation. Recalibrating Pakistan's Role in the Muslim World: Strategic Interests and Geopolitical Balancing, it uses qualitative documentary interpretation rather than new interviews or original survey data. The analysis distinguishes symbolic claims of Muslim solidarity from substantive policy outcomes in diplomacy, trade, migration, security collaboration and multilateral institutions. It identifies geopolitical rivalries, dependence on external finance, inconsistencies in policy coordination and limited civilian diplomatic capacity as constraints on sustained engagement. Drawing upon institutional analysis, neoclassical realism and Anna Leander's account of the power to define security agendas, the article argues that strategic governance concerns not only which alliances Pakistan prefers but also who frames priorities, which institutions implement commitments and how results are evaluated. The study proposes a coordinated, economically informed and publicly accountable policy framework emphasizing selective security engagement, Gulf labour and investment governance, balanced relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia, and practical cooperation through the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. These are analytical recommendations derived from documentary evidence, not findings of causal impact measurement.

Keywords: Pakistan Foreign Policy; Muslim World; Public Policy; Strategic Governance; Regional Cooperation; Security Governance; OIC

Introduction

Pakistan's association with the wider Muslim world has occupied an important place in its state identity and diplomacy since independence in 1947. Political leaders have repeatedly invoked Muslim solidarity while seeking diplomatic support, economic opportunities and strategic partnerships with countries whose interests are far from uniform. The central question is not simply whether Pakistan belongs to a community

of Muslim-majority states; it is how identity-based expectations translate into workable policies, sustainable institutional relationships and measurable public outcomes (Cohen, 2004; Sattar, 2017).

Statements of solidarity, summit attendance and resolutions can influence recognition and diplomatic agendas, yet they do not automatically create investment, resolve conflicts or strengthen public institutions. Substantive engagement requires continuity, administrative capacity, negotiated commitments and the ability to follow through after high-level meetings. This article carries that argument into the field of public policy and governance: foreign relations are treated as a process of agenda setting, policy choice, implementation and assessment rather than as the product of geopolitical positioning alone (Wendt, n.d.; Howlett et al., 2009).

The category “Muslim world” covers states with different political systems, historical experiences, levels of development and security preferences. Saudi Arabia and Iran have pursued competing regional interests; Türkiye and Gulf states have their own priorities; Malaysia and Indonesia offer different economic and educational partnerships; and Afghanistan creates immediate humanitarian and border-security concerns for Pakistan. A single language of unity cannot eliminate these differences. In practice, Pakistan must manage multiple relationships simultaneously, protect domestic economic interests and avoid assuming that religious affinity guarantees policy agreement (Nasr, 2006; Small, 2015).

Pakistan’s external commitments are also constrained by domestic institutions. Foreign policy in consequential areas involves elected governments, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, economic ministries, parliament, security organisations and provincial authorities. Coordination among these actors matters because a diplomatic memorandum may require customs reforms, investment approvals, labour protections or ongoing security oversight before any promised benefit can reach citizens. Civilian administrative capacity and a stable process for evaluating agreements are therefore not secondary considerations; they are necessary conditions for translating foreign-policy ambition into delivery (Hussain, 2018; Peters, 2015).

Geographical location adds both opportunities and constraints. Pakistan lies close to the Gulf and Central Asia, borders Iran and Afghanistan and has transport connections relevant to regional markets. Such proximity can support commerce and energy cooperation but also exposes the state to external rivalries, sanctions compliance issues, refugee movements and regional conflict. Relations with Gulf states are closely tied to migration, remittances and investment, while relations with Iran raise distinct challenges involving border management and energy trade. This combination makes strategic balancing a practical problem in policy design rather than merely a declaration of neutrality (Lieven, 2011; Sattar, 2017).

A governance-oriented perspective also asks whose conception of security receives priority. Leander (2005) demonstrates that authority in security politics includes the capacity to shape which problems count as security concerns and whose expertise becomes influential. Her article focuses on private military companies, not Pakistan or the OIC. Here its conceptual lesson is applied cautiously: security discourse, institutional expertise and participation in decision-making can shape whether Pakistani diplomacy privileges military partnerships, migration and employment security, regional economic integration or humanitarian risks. The extension is this

article's analytical interpretation, not a finding directly advanced by Leander about Pakistan.

The paper consequently investigates how Pakistan can retain diplomatic solidarity while improving the governance of its relationships with Muslim-majority states. It traces historical shifts, reviews academic debates, examines the thesis's main themes and develops a realistic policy framework. Its contribution is to link foreign-policy objectives with institutional responsibilities and practical indicators such as completed agreements, protection of overseas workers, continuity of diplomatic initiatives, economic diversification and transparent review.

Literature Review

Identity, historical development and foreign policy

Cohen (2004) explains how Pakistan's political identity, strategic location and domestic institutions interact in the making of foreign policy. Ziring (1997) and Sattar (2017) present historical accounts of the country's evolving external relations, demonstrating the influence of partition, regional wars, the Cold War and shifting alliances. Such approaches show why Islamic solidarity has long been important but cannot fully explain why Pakistan has adopted different policies toward different Muslim-majority states. Historical commitment establishes political language; bilateral bargaining determines which commitments survive competing demands.

Symbolic actions can signal concern about Palestine, Kashmir or humanitarian emergencies and may contribute to agenda building. Nevertheless, effectiveness must be assessed through sustained negotiation, project completion, institutional relationships and consequences for affected populations. This is a useful corrective to equating visibility at international meetings with influence over outcomes (Remsha, n.d.).

Geopolitics, domestic institutions and state capacity

Neoclassical realism argues that international power pressures affect policy through domestic political and institutional filters. Rose (1998) identifies the analytical importance of perceptions, state structures and extraction of national resources; Ripsman et al. (2016) develop this approach for foreign-policy analysis. Pakistan's relations with Muslim-majority countries cannot be understood without considering economic constraints, security calculations, competing institutions and leadership expectations. At the same time, such theory is insufficient if implementation is taken for granted.

Public-policy scholarship helps fill that gap. Howlett et al. (2009) distinguish agenda formation, formulation, decision, implementation and evaluation; Peters (2015) analyses coordination problems within government. Applied to Pakistan, their insights suggest that a regional initiative requires more than a foreign ministry announcement. A labour mobility agreement, for instance, may depend on skills certification, migrant grievance channels, coordination with employers and consular support; an investment arrangement may depend on taxes, reliable power and contract enforcement. Weak implementation can explain the difference between diplomatic ambition and citizen benefit.

Security governance and the politics of expertise

Security governance research directs attention to how multiple authorities make, justify and implement security decisions. Leander (2005) argues that security actors can exercise power by defining threats and establishing particular forms of expertise as authoritative. While her empirical case concerns private military companies, this article uses the narrower transferable insight that the power to frame problems matters alongside material capability. Pakistan's security partnerships with Gulf states, maritime cooperation and regional counterterrorism arrangements should accordingly be analysed for their mandate, institutional supervision, public justifications and effects on diplomatic flexibility.

Buzan and Wæver (2003) similarly illuminate how geographically connected security problems are framed through regional relationships. In Pakistan's case, Afghanistan, Iran and Gulf security concerns intersect but cannot be treated as identical. Governance analysis should distinguish specific security risks from broad generalisations about whole countries or populations. It should also examine legal authority, parliamentary scrutiny and the relationship between civilian and military expertise.

Multilateralism, economic diplomacy and research gap

The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation offers a longstanding platform for Pakistan's diplomatic engagement. Its charter identifies cooperation among member states across political, economic, social and cultural fields (Organisation of Islamic Cooperation [OIC], 2008). Yet the significance of multilateral declarations depends on member-state interests and the resources committed to implementation. Keohane (1984) provides a broader institutional rationale for cooperation even when interests differ: rules and repeated interaction can reduce uncertainty without removing conflict.

Economic and societal ties deserve equal analytical weight. Workers in the Gulf, family remittances, business connections, educational exchanges, humanitarian assistance and investment projects make Muslim-world diplomacy consequential for everyday governance. The literature on Pakistan often privileges grand strategy or ideological debates. Building on governance aspects, the present paper addresses a narrower gap: how to evaluate strategic recalibration by considering institutions, policy instruments and delivery mechanisms instead of interpreting every foreign-policy shift as either leadership success or geopolitical retreat.

Research Questions

How has Pakistan's role among Muslim-majority states changed from symbolic solidarity toward pragmatic foreign-policy engagement?

How do domestic policy institutions, security framings and economic constraints shape strategic governance and geopolitical balancing?

Which governance reforms and cooperative policy instruments could convert regional relationships into sustainable, accountable outcomes?

Aims and Objectives

To examine the historical and contemporary foundations of Pakistan's diplomacy toward Muslim-majority states.

To analyse the interaction of security priorities, economic interests and domestic institutions in foreign-policy formulation and implementation

To identify practical mechanisms for policy coordination, institutional accountability and inclusive regional cooperation

Methodology

The study uses qualitative documentary analysis. It reviews the thesis's historical narrative, bilateral cases, account of symbolic versus substantive leadership, and its concluding findings and recommendations. Scholarly books and articles provide an additional conceptual basis; OIC documentation supplies the formal institutional context. This is a secondary analysis and conceptual reframing in Public Policy and Governance, not a new field study. No interview sample, questionnaire, quantitative dataset or statistical estimates are claimed.

Material was organised into six interpretive categories: identity and symbolic leadership; strategic balancing; economic governance; security governance; domestic institutional capacity; and multilateral coordination. The categories were compared against the thesis's findings and the analytical questions above. The method supports identification of coherent themes and possible policy mechanisms, but cannot establish causal effects or verify whether a specific policy produced a measured increase in trade or diplomatic influence. Examples are used illustratively, not as a representative sample of all Muslim-majority states.

Findings and Discussion

From symbolism to substantive policy outcomes

A central theme of the source thesis is that solidarity retains political importance while economic and security interests increasingly guide actual choices. This need not be interpreted as the disappearance of identity. Diplomatic advocacy may help build coalitions and public legitimacy, but its substantive value depends on follow-up action. For policy evaluation, the useful question is not how frequently a government invokes unity; it is whether such advocacy produces sustained coordination, assistance, negotiations or negotiated commitments. The thesis's description of a gap between aspiration and capability provides the foundation for this interpretation (Wendt, n.d.).

A practical governance distinction is between output and outcome. A summit communiqué is an output; an implemented customs arrangement or functioning humanitarian coordination system is a more concrete result. Outcomes such as lower transaction costs or safer labour migration require further evidence. Pakistan could therefore report agreement implementation, designated responsible agencies and review dates alongside diplomatic announcements. This would make foreign-policy performance easier to scrutinise without turning diplomacy into a simplistic numerical ranking.

Gulf engagement, labour mobility and economic governance

Pakistan's relationship with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and other Gulf countries is central to the thesis because of economic ties, defence contacts and labour migration. These relationships are mediated by government-to-government

negotiation and by everyday administrative systems: recruitment oversight, skills recognition, consular assistance, banking channels and investor regulation. The governance issue is whether these instruments protect workers and investors and translate engagement into predictable economic opportunities, rather than whether Pakistan can claim a broad leadership role.

Dependence on external inflows can complicate bargaining. When finance, energy supply, investment and remittances are concentrated among a limited number of partners, policymakers may be cautious in regional crises. Diversifying economic relationships and improving contract implementation could strengthen discretion over time. The argument is an institutional inference from economic vulnerability, not proof that any one Gulf state dictates Pakistan's decisions.

Balancing Saudi Arabia, Iran and competing regional priorities

The thesis identifies balancing relations with rival regional powers as an enduring difficulty. Pakistan shares cultural and economic ties with Saudi Arabia and border, energy and neighbourhood interests with Iran. These different relationships make uniform alignment impractical. The relevant governance challenge is to maintain issue-specific cooperation, clear decision procedures and diplomatic channels during periods of regional tension. Careful distinctions among political disputes, commercial opportunities and border security can reduce the risk that one issue overwhelms the entire bilateral relationship.

Neutrality should therefore be analysed as an active policy practice, not an empty slogan. It may include regular dialogue, transparent limits on security commitments, procedures for considering spillover risks and mechanisms for conflict-sensitive communication. Whether neutrality succeeds requires examination of actual decisions and their consequences; the thesis offers a reasoned qualitative case for diplomatic flexibility rather than an independently measured effectiveness estimate.

Institutional coordination and foreign-policy implementation

The thesis repeatedly associates constrained regional influence with political discontinuity, inadequate diplomatic resources and uneven coordination between civilian and security institutions. A public-policy approach converts this concern into specific administrative questions. Who owns implementation after the foreign minister signs an agreement? Does the Ministry of Commerce monitor barriers to trade? Are provincial education and industrial authorities included when projects require local delivery? Are commitments tracked across changes of government? Clear answers matter because external partners need predictable counterparts and because citizens bear the costs of agreements that remain unimplemented.

A standing interministerial coordination process could identify priorities by sector, assign responsibility, record agreements and review progress periodically. Parliamentary committees could scrutinise broader policy goals and fiscal commitments while respecting legitimate confidentiality in sensitive negotiations. Policy continuity should depend on institutional memory and formal procedures rather than exclusively on personalities. These are proposed reforms extrapolated from the thesis's findings, not mechanisms documented as currently operating.

Security cooperation and the authority to define threats

Pakistan has engaged with Muslim-majority partners through training, defence cooperation, counterterrorism exchanges and maritime-security activities, as described in the thesis. These initiatives may offer useful expertise and diplomatic links. However, treating cooperation as an end in itself obscures choices about mandates, oversight, potential entanglement and the opportunity cost of other diplomatic priorities. The Leander-inspired question is who defines the security agenda and what kinds of knowledge are included in policy discussions (Leander, 2005).

For example, Gulf maritime cooperation may be framed primarily as military interoperability, commercial shipping resilience, energy security or protection of civilian seafarers. Each framing emphasizes different institutions and success criteria. Consultation with trade, legal and civilian disaster-management specialists can broaden assessment without denying the relevance of defence expertise. The argument is a conceptual application of security-governance theory, not a claim that Leander analysed Pakistan's maritime policy.

OIC diplomacy and institutional follow-through

The OIC is significant because Pakistan can raise common concerns and communicate with diverse Muslim-majority states through an established forum. Yet the thesis also notes limits imposed by different national interests and weak follow-through. A governance-based strategy would favour manageable joint initiatives—technical training, scholarship exchanges, public-health cooperation, disaster preparedness or standards harmonisation—alongside diplomatic statements. This would not remove political disagreements about Kashmir, Palestine or other contentious issues, but it would make certain forms of cooperation less dependent on unanimous geopolitical alignment.

The OIC charter establishes aspirations for political, economic and social cooperation, but the existence of a mandate is not evidence of successful delivery (OIC, 2008). Pakistan's contribution could therefore be assessed by its role in drafting feasible proposals, mobilising partner institutions, identifying funding and reporting implementation. A smaller number of sustained projects may be more instructive than a large number of untracked declarations.

Türkiye, Malaysia and Indonesia as differentiated partnerships

The thesis discusses Türkiye through security and cultural relations and Malaysia and Indonesia through education, technology, trade and Islamic economic sectors. These examples illustrate why a single regional blueprint is inappropriate. Defence-industrial work may require technical procurement safeguards; education partnerships require recognition of degrees, research funding and visa procedures; halal exports require regulatory standards and testing capacity. Each relationship therefore benefits from a customised policy instrument and a responsible domestic agency.

Cooperation should be judged against locally relevant goals, not a generalised competition for symbolic regional leadership. Sector-specific arrangements can also allow Pakistan to cultivate partners without taking positions on every rivalry among Muslim-majority states. This is a more limited and operational conception of

influence: providing dependable contributions in areas where Pakistan and its partners share interests.

Citizens, accountability and the domestic benefits of diplomacy

Foreign-policy debates often focus on prestige and interstate bargaining, but public policy requires attention to citizens affected by these choices. Labour migrants, exporters, students, investors and border communities interact with agreements through rules and public services. Their experiences can reveal implementation failures that high-level reporting misses. Consultation with business associations, universities, migrant-support organisations and relevant provincial agencies can improve evidence available to central decision-makers.

Public accountability does not require disclosure of every security negotiation. It does require clarity about public expenditure, policy objectives, regulatory changes and the distribution of promised benefits where disclosure is appropriate. Over time, strengthening feedback from policy users could help distinguish opportunities that have practical value from initiatives that remain mostly symbolic. This study proposes such feedback arrangements rather than asserting that they have already produced measurable improvements.

Consolidated qualitative assessment

Theme in thesis	Governance implication	Suggested evidence for evaluation
Symbolic versus substantive leadership	Track implementation beyond statements	Completed projects and public follow-up
Economic dependence and Gulf links	Coordinate labour, investment and consular policy	Grievance resolution and agreement delivery
Intra-Muslim rivalry	Protect issue-specific diplomatic flexibility	Continuity of working channels
Limited institutional capacity	Assign responsibility across ministries	Agency mandates and review records
Security partnerships	Clarify oversight and problem framing	Mandates, reviews and risk assessments
OIC and regional cooperation	Prioritise implementable multilateral projects	Funding and project milestones

Theoretical Framework

Neoclassical realism

Neoclassical realism explains how pressures from regional competition and global strategic change are filtered through domestic perceptions and state capacity (Rose, 1998; Ripsman et al., 2016). Pakistan's relationships with Gulf states, Iran, Türkiye and Afghanistan reflect different opportunities and constraints. But political leadership and institutional resources influence how these pressures are translated into actual diplomatic choices. This perspective is useful for explaining why similar external circumstances do not necessarily produce identical responses.

Strategic governance and security framing

Drawing on Leander (2005), the article treats agenda framing and expertise as dimensions of political authority. Military and civilian institutions may foreground different risks and priorities, while economic agencies, humanitarian bodies and civil society hold information important to wider public outcomes. The question is not to exclude security experts but to establish a process in which the framing of regional problems is examined and alternatives can be assessed. This is an analytical extension of Leander's argument beyond her original private-military-company case.

Institutionalism and the policy cycle

Historical and organisational institutions shape what governments are able to deliver. The policy cycle makes visible stages in which strategic declarations can fail: coordination during formulation, financing during implementation and learning during evaluation (Howlett et al., 2009; Peters, 2015). Institutional capacity thus provides a connecting mechanism between foreign-policy intentions and outcomes. Together, the three perspectives explain geopolitical pressures, contested agendas and administrative performance without claiming a single theory can account for all aspects of Pakistan's regional relationships.

Lens	Central question	Application
Neoclassical realism	Which external pressures are filtered domestically?	Balancing rival regional interests
Security-governance perspective	Who defines priorities and legitimate expertise?	Oversight of security cooperation
Policy-process institutionalism	How do commitments move from decision to delivery?	Interministerial coordination and evaluation

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This research portrays Pakistan's role in the Muslim world as a continuing negotiation between Islamic solidarity, strategic interests, geographic constraints and domestic capacity. Recasting those arguments through public policy and governance yields a specific conclusion: credibility depends not only on the selection of partners or the strength of diplomatic rhetoric, but also on institutions able to design, implement and evaluate cooperation. Economic vulnerability, divergent regional priorities and administrative discontinuity restrict policy options, while established relationships and multilateral channels create opportunities for selective, practical engagement.

A useful first reform would be a published, periodically reviewed framework for engagement with Muslim-majority states. It could specify a limited set of economic, humanitarian, diplomatic and security objectives while allowing confidentiality for legitimately sensitive details. Second, the government could create a cross-ministry register of major bilateral and OIC commitments with accountable lead agencies, implementation milestones and scheduled reviews. Third, Gulf cooperation could link investment diplomacy to migrant welfare, vocational recognition and consular services, while cooperation with Türkiye, Malaysia and Indonesia could prioritise realistically deliverable sectoral projects.

Fourth, engagement with Saudi Arabia and Iran could rely on consistent diplomatic channels and clearly defined limits for security cooperation. Fifth, parliamentary and administrative review could assess fiscal obligations, legal authority and public consequences where appropriate. Finally, Pakistan could use OIC participation to initiate achievable technical and development programmes in which responsibility, resources and timelines are explicit. Such actions would not eliminate geopolitical tensions, nor guarantee leadership over other states. They could, however, improve transparency, policy continuity and the practical value of regional cooperation.

The research is limited by its documentary design and reliance on the original thesis's qualitative interpretation. It does not independently verify every claim in the thesis, calculate causal economic effects or evaluate agreements using implementation datasets. Future research could compare selected bilateral agreements, interview officials and affected stakeholders, and track outcomes over time. These steps would test whether the proposed governance mechanisms actually improve performance.

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