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From Ideological State to Pragmatic Player: Pakistan's Identity Crisis in a Multipolar World

Order

Dr. Kehkashan Naz

Assistant Professor/Incharge, Department of Pakistan Studies, Federal Urdu University of Arts, Sciences and Technology, Abdul Haq Campus Karachi

kehkashan.naz@fuuast.edu.pk

Ms. Zainab Sharif

Lecturer, Department of Pakistan Studies, Federal Urdu University of Arts, Sciences and Technology, Abdul Haq Campus Karachi

zainab.sharif@fuuast.edu.pk

Muhammed Adeel

Lecturer in Pakistan Studies at National University of Computer and Emerging Science, Karachi

adeel@nu.edu.pk

Abstract

This article examines the evolving foreign policy of Pakistan against the backdrop of a multipolar world order characterized by the rise of China, the recalibration of the United States, and intensifying regional power dynamics. Tracing Pakistan's trajectory from its ideological foundations rooted in the Two-Nation Theory and Islamic solidarity during the Cold War to its contemporary pragmatic engagements, the study identifies a persistent identity crisis stemming from the tension between ideological commitments and pragmatic necessities. Employing a qualitative methodology grounded in secondary data and framed through the theoretical lenses of realism and constructivism, the analysis reveals that Pakistan's foreign policy has gradually shifted toward economic diplomacy and strategic diversification, exemplified by the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). However, this transition has produced policy inconsistencies and domestic contestations, manifesting as an unresolved identity crisis. The article argues that this crisis, while constraining policy coherence, also serves as an adaptive strategy enabling Pakistan to navigate competing pressures from major powers and regional actors. The findings highlight the broader relevance for developing countries grappling with similar ideological-pragmatic dilemmas in a multipolar era. Recommendations include institutionalizing economic diplomacy, depoliticizing strategic choices, and fostering regional connectivity. Ultimately, Pakistan's capacity to reconcile its ideological heritage with pragmatic adaptation will determine its future role as a stable, coherent, and effective actor in the emerging global order.

Keywords: Pakistan Foreign Policy, Identity Crisis, Multipolar World Order, Ideological Pragmatism, Strategic Reorientation, Constructivism.

Introduction

Pakistan's emergence as a sovereign state in 1947 was deeply embedded in an ideological narrative anchored in the Two-Nation Theory, which posited that Muslims of the Indian subcontinent constituted a distinct nation requiring a separate homeland. This foundational vision, articulated by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, fused religion with political identity and provided the normative basis for state formation. The ideological underpinnings of Pakistan were not limited to territorial separation but extended to the aspiration of constructing a polity guided

by Islamic principles, thereby shaping both domestic governance and foreign policy outlook (Jalal, 1995). Early policymakers viewed ideology as a source of cohesion and legitimacy, particularly in the face of internal diversity and external threats, especially from India, which was framed as both a geopolitical and civilizational rival (Cohen, 2004). This perception reinforced a security-centric worldview in which ideological identity and national survival became intertwined. Simultaneously, Pakistan sought to position itself within the broader Muslim world, actively participating in platforms such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to cultivate transnational Islamic solidarity (Shaikh, 2009). However, the ideological project was neither static nor uncontested; it evolved through political contestation, institutional weaknesses, and shifting elite priorities. As Haqqani (2013) argues, ideological narratives often served instrumental purposes, enabling the state to mobilize domestic support and navigate external alliances despite material constraints. Thus, from its inception, Pakistan's foreign policy identity reflected a complex interplay between ideological commitments and pragmatic considerations, laying the groundwork for future tensions in its external engagements.

During the Cold War, Pakistan's foreign policy trajectory revealed a gradual but significant shift from ideological orientation to strategic alignment, driven largely by security imperatives and systemic pressures. Faced with an asymmetrical power balance vis-à-vis India and limited economic resources, Pakistan aligned itself with the United States through alliances such as SEATO and CENTO, embedding itself within the Western bloc (Rizvi, 2000). This alignment was not purely pragmatic; it was discursively framed in ideological terms, portraying Pakistan as part of the "free world" resisting communist expansion, thereby reconciling strategic necessity with normative identity (Jalal, 1995). The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 marked a critical juncture, transforming Pakistan into a frontline state and deepening its engagement with the United States, while simultaneously reinforcing its Islamic credentials through support for Afghan resistance movements (Yousaf, 2022). However, the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a unipolar international system exposed the limitations of Pakistan's dependency on a single great power. The imposition of sanctions following Pakistan's nuclear tests in 1998 and the fluctuating nature of U.S.-Pakistan relations in the post-9/11 era underscored the volatility of such alliances (Tellis, 2015). In response, Pakistan began to diversify its foreign policy engagements, increasingly prioritizing economic and strategic partnerships over ideological alignment. This shift was most evident in the deepening of relations with China, which evolved into a comprehensive partnership encompassing economic, military, and diplomatic dimensions (Wolf, 2020). Consequently, Pakistan's foreign policy entered a phase characterized by greater pragmatism, where national interest, economic development, and strategic autonomy began to take precedence over rigid ideological commitments.

The transition toward a multipolar world order in the 21st century has further reshaped Pakistan's foreign policy environment, intensifying the need to balance competing interests while managing its ideological legacy. Multipolarity, defined by the diffusion of power among multiple global and regional actors, has been marked by the rise of China, the resurgence of Russia, and the relative recalibration of U.S. global engagement (Zakaria, 2008). Within this evolving system, Pakistan occupies a strategically significant yet precarious position, necessitating a nuanced approach to external relations. Its deepening partnership with China, particularly through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), reflects a shift toward geo-economic priorities and long-term development goals (Wolf, 2020). At the same time, Pakistan continues to engage with the United States, albeit in a more cautious and transactional manner, reflecting the changing dynamics of global power politics (Yousaf, 2022). Regional

complexities, including relations with India, Afghanistan, Iran, and Gulf states, further complicate Pakistan's strategic calculus, requiring a delicate balancing act between ideological affinities and pragmatic necessities (Fair, 2014). Importantly, domestic political discourse continues to invoke Islamic identity and anti-Western sentiments, even as policymakers pursue economic integration and global engagement. This coexistence of competing narratives underscores what scholars describe as an identity crisis in Pakistan's foreign policy, where ideological legacies and pragmatic imperatives remain in constant tension (Shaikh, 2009). As Acharya (2018) notes, navigating multipolarity demands flexibility and strategic foresight, qualities that require reconciling historical identity with contemporary realities. In this context, Pakistan's evolving foreign policy reflects not merely a reactive adjustment to systemic changes but an ongoing struggle to redefine its role in an increasingly complex and multipolar international order.

Literature Review

The scholarly literature on Pakistan's foreign policy has long emphasized the centrality of ideology in shaping its external orientation, particularly in the formative decades following independence. Foundational works argue that Pakistan's identity was constructed through a fusion of religion and nationalism, which subsequently informed its diplomatic behavior and threat perceptions. For instance, Jalal (2000) underscores how the ideological premise of Muslim nationhood translated into a security-driven worldview, particularly in relation to India, while also embedding a persistent search for legitimacy within the international system. Complementing this perspective, Cohen (2011) situates Pakistan's ideological trajectory within a broader institutional context, arguing that the state's civil-military imbalance reinforced a securitized identity, thereby privileging ideological narratives over pragmatic considerations. Further, Shaikh (2009) critically interrogates the internal contradictions of Pakistan's ideological project, demonstrating how competing interpretations of Islam have generated ambiguity in both domestic governance and foreign policy. This body of literature collectively suggests that ideology has not functioned merely as a symbolic framework but as a substantive driver of policy choices, shaping alliances, threat perceptions, and diplomatic priorities. However, scholars increasingly note that this ideological orientation has been neither static nor monolithic; rather, it has evolved in response to changing geopolitical realities, creating a dynamic interplay between normative commitments and strategic imperatives.

A parallel strand of literature examines Pakistan's Cold War alignments through the lens of realism, highlighting the primacy of security and survival in an anarchic international system. McMahon (2013) argues that Pakistan's decision to align with the United States was less an ideological choice than a strategic necessity, driven by its asymmetric rivalry with India and limited material capabilities. Similarly, Rizvi (2000) provides a detailed account of Pakistan's integration into Western security alliances, emphasizing how military and economic assistance from the United States reinforced a dependency that shaped its foreign policy behavior for decades. In contrast, Siddiq (2007) introduces a critical dimension by analyzing the role of the military establishment in consolidating this alignment, arguing that institutional interests often intersected with, and at times superseded, national ideology. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan further deepened this alignment, as highlighted by Coll (2004), who illustrates how Pakistan's role as a frontline state not only enhanced its strategic significance but also reinforced its ideological positioning within the Muslim world. Yet, the end of the Cold War disrupted this equilibrium, exposing the vulnerabilities of reliance on a single great power and prompting a gradual shift toward diversification. This transition, as Kugelman (2018) notes, marked the beginning of a more pragmatic phase in Pakistan's foreign policy, characterized by

an increasing emphasis on economic and regional considerations alongside traditional security concerns.

In the post-Cold War and post-9/11 context, the literature increasingly highlights the emergence of pragmatism as a defining feature of Pakistan's foreign policy, particularly in response to shifting global power structures. Tellis (2015) contends that the fluctuating nature of U.S.-Pakistan relations, marked by periods of cooperation and mistrust, compelled Islamabad to reassess its strategic priorities and seek greater autonomy. This recalibration is most evident in Pakistan's deepening relationship with China, which has been extensively analyzed within the framework of geo-economics and strategic partnership. Small (2015) characterizes the China-Pakistan relationship as a "strategic entente," rooted in converging interests rather than shared ideology, while Wolf (2020) highlights the transformative potential of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in redefining Pakistan's economic and geopolitical landscape. At the same time, scholars such as Pant (2016) argue that Pakistan's foreign policy remains constrained by its historical security paradigm, limiting the extent to which it can fully transition to a purely economic or pragmatic approach. The persistence of ideological narratives in domestic discourse further complicates this transition, creating tensions between policy rhetoric and practice. Consequently, the literature points to a hybrid foreign policy model in which pragmatism coexists with, rather than replaces, ideological considerations, reflecting the complex realities of a state navigating both internal and external pressures.

More recent scholarship situates Pakistan's foreign policy within the broader context of an emerging multipolar world order, emphasizing the challenges and opportunities associated with shifting global dynamics. Acharya (2018) conceptualizes multipolarity as a diffusion of power that necessitates greater flexibility and adaptability from middle powers, a framework that is particularly relevant to Pakistan's strategic positioning. Similarly, Zakaria (2008) highlights the rise of non-Western powers, particularly China, as a defining feature of the contemporary international system, creating new avenues for states like Pakistan to diversify their partnerships. Within this context, scholars such as Haqqani (2013) argue that Pakistan's foreign policy is increasingly characterized by a balancing act between major powers, requiring a careful negotiation of competing interests. Fair (2014), however, offers a more critical perspective, suggesting that internal ideological and institutional constraints continue to hinder Pakistan's ability to fully capitalize on the opportunities presented by multipolarity. Meanwhile, Yousaf (2022) emphasizes the role of regional dynamics, including Afghanistan and the broader South Asian security environment, in shaping Pakistan's strategic choices. Collectively, this body of literature underscores the central argument that Pakistan's foreign policy is undergoing a complex transformation, driven by the interplay between ideological legacies and pragmatic imperatives in an increasingly multipolar world. Rather than viewing this as a linear shift, scholars increasingly interpret it as an ongoing process of negotiation and adaptation, reflecting the broader challenges faced by states seeking to reconcile historical identities with evolving geopolitical realities.

Problem Statement

Pakistan's foreign policy has long been shaped by a complex interplay between ideological commitments and pragmatic necessities, creating persistent tensions in its external behavior. While the country was founded on a strong ideological basis rooted in religious identity and political differentiation, changing global dynamics have increasingly compelled policymakers to adopt interest-based and economically driven strategies. This shift has not been seamless, as ideological narratives continue to influence domestic discourse and foreign policy rhetoric,

often leading to inconsistencies and ambiguity in strategic direction. The emergence of a multipolar world order, characterized by competing power centers and evolving alliances, has further complicated Pakistan's position, requiring it to balance relationships with major powers while safeguarding its national interests. Consequently, Pakistan faces an ongoing identity crisis in its foreign policy, where reconciling ideological legacies with pragmatic imperatives remains a critical challenge for achieving coherence, stability, and effectiveness in an increasingly complex international environment.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the ideological foundations of Pakistan's foreign policy and their influence on its external behavior since independence.
2. To analyze the transition from ideology-driven to pragmatism-oriented foreign policy in response to changing global dynamics.
3. To evaluate how the emerging multipolar world order shapes Pakistan's strategic choices and contributes to its foreign policy identity crisis.

Research Questions

1. How have ideological foundations influenced Pakistan's foreign policy orientation since its creation?
2. What factors have driven Pakistan's shift from ideological alignment to pragmatic engagement in international relations?
3. How does the evolving multipolar world order impact Pakistan's foreign policy identity and strategic decision-making?

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to analyze the evolution of Pakistan's foreign policy from an ideological framework to a more pragmatic orientation within a changing global order. The research is primarily based on secondary data, including academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, and official government statements, enabling a comprehensive and interpretive understanding of the subject. A thematic analysis approach is employed to identify recurring patterns related to ideology, pragmatism, and strategic behavior in Pakistan's foreign policy. The study is guided by a theoretical framework that integrates elements of realism and constructivism, allowing for an examination of both material interests and identity-driven factors in shaping state behavior. Historical analysis is also utilized to trace the continuity and transformation of foreign policy across different periods, including the Cold War, post-Cold War, and the contemporary multipolar era. By synthesizing these analytical tools, the research aims to critically evaluate the tensions and adaptations within Pakistan's foreign policy, providing a nuanced understanding of how internal and external dynamics interact to influence its strategic direction.

Theoretical Framework

A robust theoretical framework for analyzing Pakistan's foreign policy transformation can be constructed through the combined lens of constructivism and realism, as both offer complementary insights into the interaction between identity and material interests. Constructivism emphasizes that state behavior is not determined solely by material capabilities but is also shaped by ideational factors such as identity, norms, and historical narratives (Wendt, 1999). In the case of Pakistan, its ideological foundations rooted in Islamic identity and the Two-Nation Theory have played a significant role in defining its foreign policy preferences and threat perceptions. As Katzenstein (1996) argues, national security policies are deeply embedded in cultural and normative frameworks, which influence how states interpret external threats and opportunities. This perspective helps explain Pakistan's enduring emphasis

on its ideological distinctiveness and its alignment with the Muslim world, as well as its persistent rivalry with India. However, constructivist scholars such as Hopf (2002) also highlight that identities are not static; they evolve through interaction with the international system. This is particularly relevant in understanding Pakistan's gradual shift toward pragmatism, as changing global dynamics and domestic pressures reshape its foreign policy identity. Thus, constructivism provides a critical foundation for examining the internal contradictions and evolving nature of Pakistan's ideological orientation.

At the same time, realism offers a necessary counterbalance by emphasizing the role of power, security, and strategic interests in shaping state behavior. Classical and neorealist theorists argue that in an anarchic international system, states prioritize survival and pursue policies that maximize their relative power (Waltz, 1979). Pakistan's alignment with the United States during the Cold War, its nuclear deterrence strategy, and its deepening partnership with China can all be interpreted through this realist lens, as responses to external threats and shifting power configurations. Mearsheimer (2001) further contends that states are compelled to act aggressively to ensure their security, a notion that resonates with Pakistan's security-centric foreign policy, particularly in relation to India. However, the limitations of a purely realist approach become evident when considering the persistence of ideological narratives in Pakistan's policy discourse, even when they appear to contradict material interests. Scholars such as Ruggie (1998) suggest that integrating ideational and material factors provides a more comprehensive understanding of state behavior. Therefore, a hybrid theoretical framework that combines constructivism and realism allows for a more nuanced analysis of Pakistan's foreign policy, capturing both the enduring influence of identity and the pragmatic adjustments necessitated by an evolving multipolar world order.

Ideological Foundations

The ideological foundations of Pakistan's foreign policy are deeply rooted in the historical experience of partition and the intellectual articulation of Muslim nationhood in South Asia. The Two-Nation Theory, advanced during the late colonial period, provided the central ideological justification for the creation of Pakistan by asserting that Muslims constituted a distinct political community requiring sovereign expression. This foundational idea was not merely a mobilizing slogan but evolved into a durable framework shaping state identity and external orientation. As Jalal (1985) demonstrates, the early leadership envisioned Pakistan as both a homeland for Muslims and a state that would safeguard Islamic political identity within a hostile regional environment. This duality embedded a persistent linkage between ideology and security, particularly in relation to India, which came to be viewed not only as a territorial rival but as a civilizational counterpart. Further elaborating this point, Qureshi (1996) argues that Islamic solidarity became a central pillar of Pakistan's diplomatic outreach, positioning the country within a broader transnational Muslim community. This aspiration was reflected in its early efforts to cultivate ties with Middle Eastern states and promote pan-Islamic cooperation. However, the ideological narrative was neither uniform nor uncontested; it evolved through political debates and institutional constraints, shaping a foreign policy identity that was both normative and strategic in character.

In the early decades following independence, Pakistan's foreign policy alignments reflected a complex interplay between ideological aspirations and geopolitical realities. Despite its emphasis on Islamic identity, Pakistan chose to align with the Western bloc during the Cold War, joining U.S.-led alliances such as SEATO and CENTO. This decision has been widely interpreted as a pragmatic response to security vulnerabilities rather than a departure from ideological commitments. McMahon (1994) contends that Pakistan's leadership perceived

alignment with the United States as essential for counterbalancing India and securing military and economic assistance. At the same time, this alignment was framed within an ideological discourse that portrayed Pakistan as part of the global struggle against communism, thereby reconciling strategic necessity with normative identity. Hussain (2005) further notes that Pakistan's participation in Western alliances did not diminish its engagement with the Muslim world; rather, it pursued a dual-track policy that sought to maximize both security and ideological legitimacy. This duality underscores the adaptability of Pakistan's foreign policy, which has historically balanced competing imperatives without fully abandoning its ideological foundations. Nevertheless, reliance on external powers also introduced vulnerabilities, as shifting geopolitical dynamics often exposed the limitations of such alignments, prompting periodic reassessments of foreign policy priorities.

Ideology has also played a critical role in shaping Pakistan's security perceptions, particularly its enduring focus on India as the primary threat. This India-centric policy orientation is deeply intertwined with the ideological narrative of partition, which framed the relationship between the two states in existential terms. As Ganguly (2001) argues, the persistence of conflict between India and Pakistan cannot be understood solely through material factors; it is also rooted in competing national identities and historical grievances. This ideological framing has influenced not only military strategy but also diplomatic engagement, reinforcing a securitized worldview that prioritizes defense and deterrence. At the same time, Pakistan has sought to complement its security strategy with active engagement in the Muslim world, leveraging its Islamic identity to build alliances and enhance its international standing. Its participation in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation exemplifies this approach, providing a platform for promoting collective interests and fostering solidarity among Muslim-majority states. According to Hurd (2008), such engagement reflects the broader role of religion in international relations, where identity-based affiliations can shape diplomatic behavior and institutional participation. However, the effectiveness of this strategy has been uneven, as geopolitical rivalries and divergent interests within the Muslim world have often limited the scope of collective action, highlighting the constraints of ideology in a complex international system.

Domestic narratives and political discourse have further reinforced the ideological orientation of Pakistan's foreign policy, shaping how external relations are conceptualized and communicated. The role of political elites, media, and educational institutions in constructing and disseminating national identity has been particularly significant in this regard. As Ahmed (2013) observes, state narratives have consistently emphasized Islamic identity and external threats, creating a public discourse that legitimizes security-centric policies and ideological alignments. This discursive framework not only influences policy formulation but also constrains the range of acceptable strategic choices, as deviations from ideological norms may be perceived as compromising national identity. At the same time, internal contestations over the meaning and role of Islam have introduced additional complexity, leading to divergent interpretations of foreign policy priorities. Weiss (2014) highlights how competing ideological currents within Pakistan have shaped its engagement with both Western and Muslim-majority states, reflecting broader debates over the country's identity and direction. These dynamics underscore the importance of domestic factors in understanding foreign policy behavior, as internal narratives often mediate the impact of external pressures. Ultimately, the ideological foundations of Pakistan's foreign policy cannot be understood in isolation from the domestic context in which they are embedded, as political discourse, institutional structures, and societal perceptions collectively shape the country's external orientation in profound and enduring ways.

Transition toward Pragmatism in Foreign Policy

The end of the Cold War marked a decisive inflection point in Pakistan's foreign policy, compelling a gradual transition from ideologically driven alignments toward a more pragmatic and interest-based orientation. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a U.S.-led unipolar order fundamentally altered the strategic environment in which Pakistan had previously operated as a frontline ally. As Hussain (2005) observes, the disappearance of bipolar rivalry reduced Pakistan's geopolitical utility to the United States, thereby exposing the fragility of its alliance-dependent foreign policy. This shift coincided with growing international scrutiny following Pakistan's nuclear tests in 1998, which triggered sanctions and underscored the costs of strategic isolation (Tellis, 2001). Consequently, policymakers began to reassess the viability of rigid ideological positioning, recognizing the need for greater flexibility in navigating an evolving global order. The post-9/11 period further complicated this transition, as Pakistan re-engaged with the United States in the war on terror while simultaneously facing domestic instability and international criticism (Riedel, 2011). These developments highlighted the limitations of a purely ideological framework and accelerated the shift toward pragmatism, where foreign policy decisions increasingly reflected calculations of national interest, economic necessity, and strategic autonomy rather than normative commitments alone.

A central driver of this pragmatic turn has been Pakistan's persistent economic challenges, which have necessitated a reorientation of foreign policy toward development and economic integration. Chronic fiscal deficits, energy shortages, and reliance on external financial assistance have underscored the urgency of prioritizing economic growth as a core component of national security (Zaidi, 2015). In this context, economic diplomacy has emerged as a key instrument of foreign policy, with initiatives such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) symbolizing a strategic pivot toward geo-economics. As part of China's broader Belt and Road Initiative, CPEC represents a transformative effort to enhance infrastructure, connectivity, and industrial capacity within Pakistan, while also strengthening its strategic partnership with China (Wolf, 2020). Beyond China, Pakistan has actively sought to diversify its economic partnerships, deepening ties with Gulf States through investment and labor migration, and exploring opportunities in Central Asia for regional connectivity and energy cooperation (Kugelman, 2018). This diversification reflects a conscious effort to reduce dependency on any single partner and to leverage multiple avenues for economic growth. At the same time, it underscores the increasing convergence between economic and strategic objectives, as foreign policy becomes a tool for addressing domestic development challenges in an interconnected global economy.

Security concerns and regional instability have also played a critical role in shaping Pakistan's pragmatic foreign policy orientation, reinforcing the relevance of realist approaches to international relations. The persistence of tensions with India, instability in Afghanistan, and the broader volatility of the South Asian region have necessitated a careful balancing of security priorities and diplomatic engagement. As Fair (2014) argues, Pakistan's strategic behavior continues to be heavily influenced by its perception of existential threats, particularly in relation to India, which sustains a strong security-centric outlook. However, this has been increasingly complemented by pragmatic efforts to stabilize the regional environment, including participation in peace processes in Afghanistan and engagement with regional organizations. Simultaneously, Pakistan's foreign policy has demonstrated a growing emphasis on strategic balancing, particularly in managing its relationships with major powers. While its partnership with China has deepened significantly, Pakistan has also sought to maintain functional ties with the United States, reflecting a nuanced approach to great power

competition (Yousaf, 2022). This balancing act illustrates the increasing reliance on realist calculations of power and interest, even as ideological narratives continue to resonate domestically. Ultimately, Pakistan's transition toward pragmatism is not indicative of a complete abandonment of ideology but rather reflects an adaptive response to structural changes in the system, where economic imperatives, security challenges, and shifting power dynamics collectively shape a more flexible and interest-driven foreign policy.

Multipolarity and Strategic Reorientation

The transition toward an emerging multipolar world order has fundamentally altered the structural context within which states formulate foreign policy, with significant implications for Pakistan's strategic reorientation. Multipolarity is characterized by the diffusion of power across multiple centers, most notably the rise of China, the resurgence of Russia, and the relative recalibration of the United States' global role. Scholars such as Acharya (2018) argue that this shift reflects the erosion of Western dominance and the increasing agency of non-Western powers in shaping global governance. Similarly, Zakaria (2008) conceptualizes the contemporary order as a "post-American world," where power is no longer monopolized but distributed among several influential actors. Within this evolving system, China's rapid economic growth and expanding geopolitical influence have positioned it as a central pillar of multipolarity, while Russia's assertive foreign policy underscores its continued relevance in global politics (Lo, 2015). At the same time, the United States remains a dominant but relatively constrained actor, recalibrating its strategic priorities in response to domestic and international pressures (Ikenberry, 2018). These dynamics create a complex and fluid international environment in which middle powers like Pakistan must navigate competing interests and shifting alliances. Consequently, multipolarity not only expands strategic options but also intensifies the challenges associated with balancing relationships among major powers.

Within this context, Pakistan's strategic positioning reflects a nuanced balancing act aimed at maximizing opportunities while minimizing risks in an increasingly competitive geopolitical landscape. Its longstanding partnership with China has deepened significantly, particularly through economic and strategic cooperation, positioning Beijing as a cornerstone of Pakistan's foreign policy. At the same time, Pakistan has sought to maintain functional, albeit cautious, relations with the United States, recognizing the continued importance of Washington in global financial systems and security arrangements (Yousaf, 2022). This dual engagement illustrates Pakistan's attempt to avoid overdependence on any single power while leveraging its geostrategic location. Beyond major powers, Pakistan's foreign policy is also shaped by its engagement with regional actors, including India, Afghanistan, Iran, and Gulf countries, each presenting distinct opportunities and constraints. As Ganguly and Kapur (2010) note, the enduring rivalry with India remains a central determinant of Pakistan's security calculus, influencing its defense posture and diplomatic priorities. Meanwhile, instability in Afghanistan necessitates continuous engagement to manage cross-border security challenges and facilitate regional stability (Riedel, 2011). Relations with Iran and Gulf states further reflect a delicate balancing act, as Pakistan navigates sectarian, economic, and strategic considerations within a volatile regional environment. Collectively, these interactions underscore the complexity of Pakistan's strategic positioning in a multipolar order, where competing interests require constant recalibration of foreign policy.

The opportunities and challenges presented by multipolarity are most evident in Pakistan's pursuit of economic integration and regional connectivity, particularly through initiatives such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). As a flagship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative, CPEC represents a transformative effort to enhance infrastructure, energy capacity,

and trade connectivity, thereby positioning Pakistan as a key node in regional and transregional economic networks (Wolf, 2020). This initiative exemplifies the shift toward geo-economic strategy, where economic development and connectivity are prioritized alongside traditional security concerns. However, as Hillman (2018) cautions, such large-scale projects also entail significant risks, including debt sustainability, governance challenges, and geopolitical tensions. Pakistan's role in regional connectivity extends beyond CPEC, encompassing efforts to link South Asia with Central Asia and the Middle East through trade and energy corridors, thereby enhancing its strategic relevance in a multipolar world. Yet, these opportunities are accompanied by geopolitical pressures, as competing interests among major powers and regional actors complicate the implementation of such initiatives. As Pant (2016) argues, Pakistan's ability to fully capitalize on multipolarity depends on its capacity to balance economic ambitions with strategic prudence, avoiding entanglement in great power rivalries. Ultimately, Pakistan's strategic reorientation in a multipolar order reflects both the promise and the peril of a more interconnected yet contested global system, where the pursuit of economic growth must be carefully aligned with the imperatives of security and sovereignty.

Identity Crisis in Foreign Policy

Identity crisis in foreign policy can be rigorously conceptualized through a constructivist lens, which challenges the assumption that state behavior is driven solely by material capabilities and instead emphasizes the constitutive role of ideas, norms, and identities in shaping state interests (Wendt, 1992; Wendt, 1999). From this perspective, state identity is not fixed; it is socially constructed through historical narratives, domestic political discourse, and international interactions. In the case of Pakistan, identity crisis emerges from the persistent tension between two competing self-conceptions: one rooted in ideological foundations particularly Islamic identity and the two-nation theory and another driven by pragmatic imperatives of state survival, economic integration, and global diplomacy (Katzenstein, 1996; Jalal, 2014). This duality creates an unstable identity equilibrium in foreign policy formulation, where the state simultaneously seeks recognition as an ideological Islamic republic and as a modern, development-oriented nation-state embedded in global capitalism. Constructivist theory explains this contradiction as a struggle over "national role conception," where domestic elites and institutions contest what Pakistan "is" and "should be" in the international system (Onuf, 1989; Adler, 1997). The ideological dimension draws heavily from historical memory of partition, perceived existential insecurity vis-à-vis India, and the symbolic centrality of Islam as a unifying national marker. However, pragmatic state behavior such as engagement with the IMF, participation in global counterterrorism frameworks, and strategic partnerships with China and the United States requires flexibility that often dilutes ideological rigidity. This produces a persistent identity dissonance that constructivists interpret as a mismatch between internalized norms and external systemic pressures. The result is not merely theoretical inconsistency but an observable instability in foreign policy articulation, where Pakistan oscillates between normative commitments and instrumental rationality depending on regime type, leadership preferences, and international constraints. As Wendt (1992) argues, "anarchy is what states make of it," and similarly, Pakistan's identity crisis is what domestic and international actors continuously reproduce through competing narratives of legitimacy and interest.

The identity crisis in Pakistan's foreign policy manifests concretely in recurring policy inconsistencies, diplomatic ambiguities, and sustained domestic political contestation over the direction of external relations. Policy inconsistency is evident in shifting alignments between major powers, where Pakistan has historically oscillated between close security cooperation

with the United States and deep strategic partnership with China, while simultaneously maintaining ideologically charged positions on the Muslim world, particularly in relation to the Middle East (Cohen, 2004; Hussain, 2017). These shifts are not purely opportunistic but reflect competing identity narratives within the state apparatus: one framing Pakistan as a frontline state in Western security architectures, and another positioning it as a leader or protector of the global Muslim community (ummah). Diplomatic ambiguity emerges when these identities collide in multilateral forums, resulting in carefully calibrated but often contradictory positions on issues such as counterterrorism, Kashmir, Afghanistan, and Middle Eastern conflicts. For instance, Pakistan's participation in U.S.-led security initiatives has often coexisted uneasily with domestic political rhetoric emphasizing sovereignty, Islamic solidarity, and anti-imperialist sentiment. Constructivist scholars argue that such ambiguity is not irrational but a product of "multiple identities" operating simultaneously within state discourse (Katzenstein, 1996; Wendt, 1999). Domestically, this crisis is further intensified by political and societal debates involving military institutions, civilian governments, religious parties, and media narratives, each promoting divergent visions of Pakistan's global role. The military establishment has often prioritized strategic depth and security-centric realism, while civilian and populist actors oscillate between economic pragmatism and ideological nationalism. These internal fractures produce fragmented foreign policy signals, reducing coherence and weakening diplomatic credibility. Moreover, societal polarization around questions of Islamization versus modernization further complicates consensus-building on foreign policy priorities. As Jalal (2014) notes, Pakistan's postcolonial state has struggled to reconcile its foundational ideology with the exigencies of governance in a globalized world, resulting in a "fractured sovereignty" that is reflected in its external relations. Consequently, identity crisis becomes not merely an abstract theoretical concern but a structural condition shaping diplomatic behavior, institutional coordination, and international perception of Pakistan as an unpredictable actor in global politics.

The identity crisis in Pakistan's foreign policy simultaneously operates as both a constraint and an adaptive strategy within an increasingly multipolar and fluid global order. On one hand, identity fragmentation constrains foreign policy coherence by limiting the state's ability to articulate a stable long-term strategic vision. Competing ideological and pragmatic imperatives often result in reactive rather than proactive diplomacy, where policy shifts are driven by immediate crises rather than consistent strategic doctrine. This reduces Pakistan's bargaining power and contributes to perceptions of unpredictability among external partners, thereby complicating long-term investment, alliance formation, and regional leadership ambitions (Cohen, 2004). From a constructivist standpoint, this constraint arises because identity is not merely descriptive but constitutive of interest formation; when identity is contested, interests themselves become unstable (Wendt, 1999). However, the same identity fluidity can also function as an adaptive strategy in a volatile international environment characterized by shifting alliances, great power competition, and regional instability. Pakistan's ability to navigate relationships with China through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), maintain functional ties with the United States despite periodic tensions, and engage selectively with Gulf states demonstrates a form of "strategic ambiguity" that allows flexibility in an uncertain world order. Adler (1997) conceptualizes such behavior as "cognitive evolution" in foreign policy, where states adjust their identities pragmatically without fully abandoning foundational narratives. In this sense, identity crisis can be reframed not only as dysfunction but also as an adaptive mechanism that enables Pakistan to survive within overlapping and sometimes contradictory international structures. Yet, this adaptive capacity remains uneven

and contingent on domestic political stability and institutional coherence. Without a coherent synthesis of ideological identity and pragmatic necessity, Pakistan risks perpetuating short-term tactical flexibility at the expense of long-term strategic consistency. Ultimately, the constructivist lens reveals that identity crisis is neither purely pathological nor entirely functional rather it is a dynamic condition that continuously shapes and is shaped by Pakistan's engagement with a rapidly transforming multipolar world order.

Conclusion

Pakistan's journey from an ideologically driven state, forged in the crucible of the Two-Nation Theory and Islamic solidarity, to a pragmatic player navigating a multipolar world order reveals a profound and enduring transformation. The article has demonstrated that during the Cold War, Pakistan's foreign policy was largely shaped by its foundational identity, manifested in alignment with Western-led alliances and an India-centric security posture rooted in religious nationalism. However, the post-Cold War period, compounded by persistent economic vulnerabilities and shifting global power dynamics, compelled a gradual departure from ideological rigidity toward strategic pragmatism. The emergence of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) epitomizes this new orientation, prioritizing economic development and regional connectivity over purely ideological commitments. This transition, however, has not been seamless. The persistent tension between ideological narratives anchored in Islamic identity and historical antagonisms and pragmatic necessities such as economic survival, counterterrorism cooperation, and diversification of partnerships has generated a recurring identity crisis. This crisis manifests in policy inconsistencies, diplomatic ambiguities, and heated domestic debates over whether Pakistan should remain a principled ideological state or evolve into a flexible, interest-driven actor. The article has argued that this identity crisis is not merely a liability but also an adaptive mechanism, forcing Pakistani policymakers to continuously recalibrate between deeply embedded social discourses and the harsh realities of a multipolar system.

The implications of this identity crisis for Pakistan's foreign policy coherence are significant. A state caught between ideological legitimacy and pragmatic functionality risks appearing unreliable to allies and unpredictable to adversaries. Yet, the article concludes that the crisis also presents an opportunity for strategic maturation. By consciously reconciling ideological heritage with pragmatic adaptability, Pakistan can carve out a distinctive role in the emerging multipolar order. Policy recommendations include institutionalizing economic diplomacy as a core pillar of foreign policy, depoliticizing strategic decision-making to insulate it from fluctuating domestic narratives, and fostering regional engagement that transcends historical grievances. Moreover, Pakistan must develop a clearer strategic autonomy, balancing its deepening partnership with China against the necessity of constructive, if cautious, engagement with the United States and other powers. Ultimately, Pakistan's future effectiveness in a multipolar world will depend on its ability to embrace a coherent, interest-based foreign policy without entirely abandoning the ideational resources that have sustained its national consciousness. The enduring challenge is not to choose between ideology and pragmatism but to weave them into a resilient strategic framework that recognizes when principled stands serve long-term interests and when flexible accommodation better secures national survival. Only by resolving this identity tension can Pakistan transition from a reactive, crisis-prone state to a proactive, adaptive player on the global stage.

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