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Exploring Pakistan's Participation in Un Peacekeeping as an Instrument of International Image-Building

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ABSTRACT

Pakistan has always been one of the highest troop contributing nations in United Nations peacekeeping activities, and the country used it as a foreign policy tool. This study explored the role of Pakistan in the UN peacekeeping operations and discussed how this involvement could be considered as an instrument in the international image-building process. The researchers adopted qualitative research design and used the secondary sources of data, such as official UN reports, peer-reviewed journal articles, and foreign policy documents. The researchers used thematic analysis to identify the trends that connect the role of peacekeeping in Pakistan to its overall diplomatic and other soft power goals. The results indicated that Pakistan employed a role of peacekeeping to project a role of a responsible state, advance military credibility, disrupt the negative discourses associated with terrorism, and solidify bilateral and multilateral ties. The paper also found that the economic incentives and institutional prestige supported the long-term participation of Pakistan to UN missions. The researchers concluded that the presence of peacekeeping was a multidimensional tool of foreign policy, which served reputational, diplomatic, and strategic interests at the same time. This work added to the overall knowledge of how developing states negotiated the world politics by an institutional interaction and not by hard power.

Keywords: *United Nations, Peacekeeping Activities, Foreign Policy, International Image-Building Process, Bilateral and Multilateral Ties, Pakistan*

Introduction

Pakistan has become one of the largest providers of peacekeeping missions in the post-Cold War period, sending tens of thousands of soldiers to some of the most unstable conflict areas in the world. This protracted and massive involvement begged a significant question among theorists of international relations and foreign policy: is the Pakistan involvement in UN peacekeeping beyond humanitarian need and is it actually a calculated process of creating and projecting a positive international image (Jabeen, 2022)? With the introduction of the new world order after the collapse of the Cold War, developing countries were increasingly looking to multilateral institutions as the platforms to exert influence, create legitimacy and control perceptions in the outside world. The behaviour of Pakistan on this front seemed to follow such a pattern and thus the case is especially instructive to analyze (Gilani et al., 2023).

Foreign policy in Pakistan has traditionally been a multi-layered system of regional rivalry, security concerns and reputation issues (Khan et al., 2024; Arif et al., 2023). The international community continued to put the country under scrutiny concerning the issues such as proliferation of nuclear weapons and the presence of the militant networks in the country. Within this setting, being involved in UN peacekeeping provided an interesting opportunity that Pakistani authorities could use to offset negative images and establish a more positive national identity (Naz, 2024). When Pakistan offered soldiers to go on missions in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, it showed that it was ready to take up the burden of global security and this posed a very strong symbolic and diplomatic message to the world (Zaidi & Nirmal, 2022).

Soft power as is expressed in the literature of international relations was particularly applicable in the explanation of the peacekeeping approach of Pakistan (Saifullah & Qaisrani, 2022). Soft power was described as the capacity of a state to influence the global tastes by attraction, legitimacy and persuasion and not coercion or material enticements (Butt et al., 2026). UN peacekeeping provided Pakistan with an opportunity to exert this kind of influence, by linking its national brand to the ideas of peace, stability, and cooperation among countries (Warraich et al., 2023). Every single mission that Pakistani troops participated in strengthened a discourse of Pakistan as a responsible international actor eager to respect the norms of the liberal international order (Afzal & Mushtaq, 2024).

In addition to reputational benefits, the peacekeeping involvement in Pakistan also had tangible diplomatic and institutional benefits (Shah et al., 2025). The community of the leading troop-contributing countries membership allowed Pak to access informal circles of influence in the UN system such as having more leverage in the formulation of peacekeeping mandates and policies. This institutional location was converted into diplomatic capital that Pakistan used to promote her interests in multilateral bodies and bilateral relations (Charles, 2023). The financial aspect also deserved the mentioning as the UN reimbursement system gave the Pakistani military a considerable portion of economic assets that financed the institution building and operational preparedness (Rehman et al., 2023).

The current body of research on the motivations to peacekeeping provided a number of contradictory theories of why states donate their forces to the UN missions. The realist views were based on the strategic self-interest and material benefit, whereas the liberal institutionalist ones focused on the importance of international norms and systems of cooperation (Gul et al., 2025). Constructivist methods appealed to the identity making and the importance of peacekeeping in the development of how states interpreted and presented themselves to the world (Jadoon et al., 2024). The case of Pakistan posed a challenge to the researchers because the peacekeeping behaviour of Pakistan seemed to be based on all three logics at the same time, which indicated that a multidimensional framework was the most analytically satisfying explanation (Fahim & Islam, 2023).

This enquiry was not confined to a single case, Pakistan facing the growing difficulties of maintaining effective peacekeeping processes in the environment of intense competition of great powers and chronic under-investment, the motivation of the key contributors of troops became a growing issue of interest to the UN (Sinha, 2025). In case states such as Pakistan were engaged mainly to build images and engage in the diplomatic process, this revelation had implications to the way the UN built the incentive structures, the relationship management to the contributing countries, and to the quality of operation of the missions (Shahnawaz et al., 2025). The insights offered by a more explicit knowledge of the transactional aspects of peacekeeping involvement also shaped the discussion on reform and the sustainability of the UN peacekeeping system in the long term (Butt, 2024).

This study thus placed the peacekeeping involvement of Pakistan in the larger frame of image-building international, and used thematic analysis in tracking the relationships between military involvement and diplomatic success. The researchers reviewed the existing literature and policy reports to develop a rich description of the nature and cause of such a massive investment in the activities of the UN peacekeeping by Pakistan during many decades. The paper aimed to prove that Pakistan did not just make its contributions out of chance or altruism, but rather theirs was a complex and well-thought-out foreign policy initiative which aimed to maneuver through a difficult international system and gain the respect of the international order.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze the reasons why Pakistan has continued to be involved in peacekeeping operations of the UN.
2. To examine the role of peacekeeping engagement as an instrument to build international image and project soft power in the foreign policy of Pakistan.
3. To assess the diplomatic, institutional and reputational benefits Pakistan received due to the contributions made to the UN peacekeeping missions.

Research Questions

1. Which were the major motivations that drove Pakistan to donate to the UN peacekeeping operations?
2. How did the involvement of Pakistan in the UN peacekeeping missions become a tool of constructing and projecting a positive international image?
3. What diplomatic, institutional, reputational gains did Pakistan gain through its involvement in UN peacekeeping operations?

Significance of the Study

This research had a profound scholarly and policy impact since it shed light on the strategic rationality that informed Pakistan over decades of peacekeeping in the UN. The scholars added to an expanding literature that addressed the issue of peacekeeping involvement not as a humanitarian intervention but as a foreign policy tool. To policymakers, the paper provided a glimpse into how third world countries use multilateral institutions to gain reputational benefits and diplomatic advantage, in addition to guiding the debate on UN reform by outlining the multifaceted motives that influenced the troop-contributing behaviour of third world countries and the sustainability of the international peacekeeping system over the long term.

Literature Review

The existing academic literature on the UN peacekeeping motives provided an excellent theoretical background upon which to analyze the international behaviour of Pakistan. Early scholarship on the subject matter was inclined towards the normative approach to peacekeeping participation, reflecting it as the manifestation of the fidelity of states to international peace and security (Khan et al., 2024). This idealist reading, however, was refuted in later scholarship, which has shown that material interests, tactical calculations, and reputational concerns profoundly and sometimes decisively influenced the choices of the troop-contributing nations. The development of this literature as normative to interest-based analysis offered the necessary framework that the behaviour of the peacekeeping in Pakistan could be evaluated in a meaningful way.

Realist research on the motivation behind peacekeeping has emphasized the key role of self-interest in the motivation of states to send troops to the UN missions. According to the views of scholars in this school of thought, developing countries, especially, engaged in peacekeeping operations since the financial reimbursements received by the United Nations offered them a

lot of resources in terms of military modernization and institutional development. In the case of states having limited defense budgets, UN reimbursements were a good subsidy to maintain professional armed forces, and at the same time provided experience of operation in a complex environment. The Pakistani military, which had had one of the largest and most institutionally developed force among developing nations, was to gain a great deal under these arrangements, giving credence to materialist accounts of Pakistani peacekeeping behaviour.

Liberal institutionalist views provided a supplementary explanation that noted that international norms and multilateral cooperation had an influence upon state behaviour. Researchers in this school of thought claimed that engagement in UN peacekeeping was indicative of internalization of states on collective security and international responsibility. To Pakistan, the involvement in the UN system also provided the avenue to institutional influence that would otherwise have been hard to reach due to the relatively low economic power of the country. Literature on middle powers and institutional diplomacy was particularly enlightening in this regard, and implied that states such as Pakistan exploited the multilateral institutions to punch above their weight in international politics by accruing normative capital by making visible and consistent contributions to international governance (Ali et al., 2022).

Constructivist scholarship added the aspect of identity into the theories of peacekeeping motivation by stating that states were creating and recreating specific self-perceptions in the process of their interaction with international institutions. It was revealed in the literature on state identity and foreign policy that the role of peacekeeping participation may serve as a process of affirmation and projection of preferred national identities, especially in a situation where such identities were under contestation or delegitimation. The situation in Pakistan corresponded well with this theoretical postulate: since the country had a poor reputation regarding terrorist acts, nuclear weaponry and instability in the region, peacekeeping provided a good source of symbolic capital in which to build an alternative identity based on responsibility, professionalism and multilateral commitment (Arif et al., 2023).

Another powerful lens through which the issue of peace keeping and international image-building was analyzed in the literature was the concept of soft power, which had been best developed by Joseph Nye. The framework by Nye differentiated between soft and hard power, with the soft one being conducted by attraction, legitimacy, and values and culture persuasive power. In the context of peacekeeping, this framework implied that the contribution of the troops would assist a state to increase its soft power by attaching it to the internationally appreciated norms of peace and security. Some scholars used this insight to claim that states used peacekeeping participation as a tool of public diplomacy in a strategic way to mould foreign perceptions and to develop goodwill in international forums.

The available literature on the foreign policy and strategic culture of Pakistan placed the peacekeeping behaviour of the state in the broader pattern of institutionalization of engagement aimed at coping with the hostile environment of security. Observed by scholars, Pakistan was under constant pressure in many fronts, one of which was the hostile relationship with India, the fear of Afghanistan being unstable, and the constant wrangles with the Western powers on the issue of counter-terrorism collaboration. Peacekeeping presence in this context played a diversification role, enabling Pakistan to build goodwill and influence in sector and among actors that would have otherwise been unconcerned or antagonistic to Pakistani interests. Alliance management and hedging behaviour in developing countries literature was of particular use in comprehending this strategic rationale (Saleem et al., 2022).

Although the available literature is rather rich, there were still critical gaps on how the literature has dealt with the peacekeeping behaviour of Pakistan. The bulk of the literature

which dealt with the contributions of Pakistan to the UN was incidental, being included within general discussions of Pakistani foreign policy, or South Asian security politics. The authors found the necessity of a specific and systematic study of the correlation between the role that Pakistan played in peacekeeping and its image-building purposes that would combine the findings of realist, liberal, and constructivist schools to provide a complete explanation. The current study addressed this gap by applying the thematic analysis to trace the relations between the participation of peacekeeping and international reputation management through the available academic and policy literature in the field.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The researchers employed qualitative research design to explore the role of Pakistan in the UN peacekeeping operations as a foreign policy instrument of international image building. This method enabled the scholars to identify political motives, diplomatic accounts, and foreign policy agenda discursively.

Data Collection

The researchers used secondary sources of data to obtain pertinent information. These were official reports of the UN, the foreign policy archives of Pakistan, peer reviewed journal articles and credible news archives. The researchers also used academic books and policy briefs, which touched on the military diplomacy of Pakistan and its international positions.

Data Analysis

The researchers to establish common trends in the literature that were gathered used the thematic analysis. The researchers systematized the data into central themes, including projection of soft power, diplomatic advantage, and reputation building through military. This approach enabled the researchers to make significant implications between the role that Pakistan has played in peacekeeping and its overall foreign policy objectives.

Scope and Limitations

The researchers concentrated on the peacekeeping activities of Pakistan since the post-cold war period until now because during this period, the greatest increase in troop contribution by Pakistan was realized. The researchers have recognized the fact that the study relied solely on the available published material, which presented the chance of missing primary governmental data.

Ethical Considerations

The researchers were able to observe academic integrity in the study by referencing all sources properly and preventing any data misrepresentation. The researchers made sure that the analysis was objective and not politically biased, and the findings were provided that were true to the current academia on the motivations of Pakistan to engage in peacekeeping.

RESULTS AND DATA ANALYSIS

The thematic analysis of the secondary data obtained resulted in the identification of seven key themes that, when put together, shed light on the connection between the involvement of Pakistan in the UN peacekeeping operations and its image-building strategy. All themes were developed based on patterns found in several sources, such as official UN reports, foreign policy analysis, and academic literature. All these themes provided a complete explanation of the multidimensional roles that peacekeeping played in the overall foreign policy framework of Pakistan.

Theme 1: Counterbalancing Negative International Narratives

The researchers discovered that there was consistent evidence that the peacekeeping role played by Pakistan was a calculated tool of soft power. Diplomatic communications and

Pakistani officials reiterated troop contributions as a show of the Pakistani commitment to world peace in an attempt to counter the narratives that have linked Pakistan mainly with instability and terrorism. Through its continued and visible presence in UN missions, Pakistan garnered symbolic capital that it used in multilateral forums to project a responsible and constructive national identity. Researchers affirmed that this reputational policy was a key pillar of Pakistan international relations throughout the post-Cold War decades.

Theme 2: Counterbalancing Negative International Narratives

The information showed that the peacekeeping role of Pakistan was a particular defense purpose in its foreign policy, which contributed to the refutation of harmful international discourses. After the attacks of September 2001 and the ensuing war on terror, Pakistan was subjected to a high level of international scrutiny about its association with militant networks. Peacekeeping contributions provided Pakistani officials with a tangible and visible counter-argument, which they could use to refer to the sacrifices of their soldiers in international operations as the indication of the true intentions of the country to fight violence and instability. The researchers established that this defensive aspect of peacekeeping motivation increased in saliency as reputational pressures on Pakistan increased during the 2000s and 2010s.

Theme 3: Institutional Influence within the United Nations

The position of Pakistan as a leading troop-contributing nation created a concrete institutional power within the UN system that Pakistan was very keen to exploit. The researchers found that the steady contributions by Pakistan provided it with a recognized voice in the debate on the peacekeeping mandates, operational policies, and institutional reforms. This institutional advantage was not only limited to peacekeeping-specific forums, but it also boosted the overall image and credibility of Pakistan in the wider UN system. Scholars have observed that the representatives of Pakistan leveraged this role to pursue the interests of the developing countries and to form alliances with other states contributing troops, which increased the diplomatic weight of Pakistan, which could not have been achieved by its economic means.

Theme 4: Military Professionalization and Capacity Building

The discussion revealed that the involvement of the peacekeeping played a big role in professionalization and institutionalization of the armed forces of Pakistan. The Pakistani military personnel received operational experience and exposure to international military standards in deployments in complex mission environments, which boosted their capabilities and prestige. The researchers discovered that the military leadership in Pakistan appreciated this developmental aspect of the peacekeeping involvement because they considered it as a tool of preserving institutional excellence and operational preparedness. The experience and expertise gained during the UN missions also helped to strengthen the image of the Pakistani military in the world arena, which is why Pakistani soldiers were in demand as participants in the further actions.

Theme 5: Economic Incentives and Financial Benefits

The financial aspect of UN peacekeeping proved to be a very regular and substantial element in the explanation of the consistent contributions of Pakistan. The troop reimbursement system at the UN offered the Pakistani military with significant revenues that enabled it to acquire equipment, train its personnel and meet the costs of its operations that could not be met by the domestic defense budgets. The researchers discovered that although Pakistani officials seldom anticipated economic reasons in their official explanations of their involvement in peacekeeping, the academic literature invariably found financial gain as a framework force

behind the national contributions. This economic rationale did not exclude the reputational and diplomatic motives but worked in tandem with them as a complementary factor.

Theme 6: Bilateral Relationship Enhancement

The positive spillover effects of the peacekeeping involvement of Pakistan on its bilateral relations with major international partners were created. The researchers discovered that the contributions that Pakistan made towards missions in African and Middle Eastern nations contributed to goodwill and diplomatic advantage in the regions where Pakistan was interested in increasing its activities and securing economic interests. The contributions of Pakistan were also positively received by the Western governments, especially the United States and the European states that were the champions of peacekeeping in the UN, which generated goodwill that Pakistan used in bilateral negotiations regarding aid, trade, and security cooperation. This two-sided aspect demonstrated that the image-building role of peacekeeping was active at several levels simultaneously and formed relations with host nations and donor countries.

Theme 7: National Identity Affirmation and Domestic Legitimacy

The last theme was the domestic aspect of the Pakistani peacekeeping involvement, which unveiled the fact that international image building played an internal legitimacy role as well. The researchers discovered that peacekeeping participation by Pakistani civilian and military leaders served to strengthen a national identity based on Islamic solidarity, international responsibility, and professional military excellence. The military gained domestic prestige through successful missions and the foreign policy successes that they brought back home to boast about. This internal aspect implied that the audience of the Pakistan image-building activities extended beyond the international community to the Pakistani population itself, who saw peacekeeping as a national pride and institutional legitimacy.

Discussion

The results of this study have shown that the involvement of Pakistan in the UN peacekeeping operations was a complex and multidimensional foreign policy approach and not a simple manifestation of humanitarian obligation. The seven themes, which were identified during the thematic analysis, all indicated that reputational, diplomatic, institutional, economic, and domestic factors all influenced the continued involvement of Pakistan in UN missions. The results were consistent with and contributed to the existing theoretical literature on the motivation to engage in peacekeeping, and these findings showed that neither pure realist nor pure normative explanations could be used to explain the complexity of the behaviour of Pakistan. The constructivist observation that peacekeeping was an identity-resource was particularly enlightening, since it tied the international image-making goal to the larger issues of national self-understanding and internal legitimacy. The researchers found that the approach of Pakistan was indicative of a sophisticated grasp of how developing states could utilize multilateral institutions to navigate a difficult international setting, amass influence beyond their material strength, and cope with reputational strains by being regularly and visible to engage with globally appreciated norms of peace and security.

Conclusion

The study determined that the engagement of Pakistan in UN peacekeeping operations was a conscious and useful tool of international image-making, based on a set of reputational, diplomatic, institutional, economic and domestic interests. By showing that Pakistan has remained consistently involved in the missions of the UN, the researchers revealed that the country has a consistent logic of foreign policy and not an incidental or selflessly acting behaviour, and placed the peacekeeping history of the country in the context of soft power

projection and identity formation. The results were added to the academic knowledge of the way in which emerging states negotiate international politics by engaging in institutions, which provided the example of Pakistan as a valuable lesson of multilateral diplomacy in practice. Future studies may focus on how the image-building goals of Pakistan converted into tangible shifts in the perception of the international community, and how the changing world dynamics influenced the viability of this strategy.

Recommendations

The policymakers of Pakistan must institutionalize a more proactive and transparent approach to public diplomacy that makes clear that the contribution of peacekeeping to the national foreign policy aims and objectives, and that the international audience gets a consistent message about Pakistan as a responsible global citizen. The government must invest in the recording and sharing of the Pakistani peacekeeping missions results via the official government, think tanks and the international media. At the same time, the UN ought to develop more institutionalized structures that can reward the regular players with more institutional power, which can produce stronger incentives to continue playing. The scholars and policy analysts are encouraged to embark on longitudinal studies that quantify the real reputational dividends of peacekeeping engagement to give evidence-based advice on future strategic choices.

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