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Impact of Trump Administration Policies on Pakistan-United States Bilateral Relations: A Comprehensive Appraisal

Muhammad Ali

MPhil Scholar, Department of Pakistan Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, NUML Islamabad.

muhammadali44139@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The bilateral relationship between Pakistan and the United States underwent significant transformations during the Trump administration (2017–2021), marked by a shift toward transactional diplomacy and conditional cooperation. This article provides a comprehensive appraisal of how President Donald J. Trump's "America First" policy redefined engagement with Pakistan, emphasizing burden-sharing in counterterrorism and conditioning military and economic aid on measurable outcomes. Key policy shifts included the suspension of nearly \$2 billion in security assistance, the termination of trade benefits under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP), and public accusations of Pakistan harboring militant groups. These measures strained diplomatic ties, fueling anti-American sentiment in Pakistan and prompting Islamabad to recalibrate its foreign policy. In response, Pakistan deepened strategic partnerships with China and Russia, notably through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), to reduce dependence on the U.S. The article also examines Pakistan's role in Afghanistan's peace process, highlighting its dual position as both a facilitator and a subject of scrutiny. Geopolitical tensions were further exacerbated by the U.S.'s growing alignment with India, intensifying Pakistan's security dilemmas. Through an analysis of political, military, and economic dynamics, the study reveals that the Trump era underscored the fragility of a relationship historically driven by strategic expediency rather than shared long-term objectives. The findings contribute to broader discussions on how emerging powers navigate shifting alliances in an increasingly multipolar world.

Keywords: Trump Administration, Pakistan-U.S. Relations, Transactional Diplomacy, Counterterrorism, Military Aid, CPEC, Afghanistan Peace Process, Strategic Realignment, Multipolarity, "America First" Policy.

1. Introduction

The bilateral relationship between Pakistan and the United States has been historically complex, marked by oscillations between cooperation and confrontation shaped by geopolitical, strategic, and domestic factors. Since Pakistan's independence in 1947, the United States recognized its strategic importance during the Cold War, especially as a frontline state against Soviet influence in South Asia. The relationship was bolstered through military and economic aid, aligning Pakistan with U.S. interests against communism (Cohen, 2009; Ali, 2023). However, this alliance has endured numerous challenges, including periods of diplomatic estrangement, shifting regional dynamics, and the changing nature of global politics. The post-9/11 era especially

witnessed an intensification of cooperation as Pakistan became a frontline state in the U.S.-led War on Terror, receiving significant military and economic assistance while navigating accusations related to militant groups and sovereignty issues (Ahmad, 2023; Zaidi & Ahmad, 2021). Thus, the Pakistan-U.S. relationship has remained multifaceted, shaped by strategic calculations on both sides amid regional and global power realignments.

The inauguration of President Donald J. Trump in January 2017 ushered in a significant shift in U.S. foreign policy, encapsulated by the “America First” doctrine. This approach prioritized transactional diplomacy, renegotiation of alliances, and an emphasis on bilateral burden-sharing, particularly in the realms of defense and economic cooperation (Ikenson, 2017; Bennett, 2018). Trump's administration was marked by skepticism towards multilateral agreements and foreign aid, advocating a more unilateral stance on international affairs. Consequently, this approach had far-reaching implications for longstanding alliances, including the U.S.-Pakistan partnership. Trump's rhetoric and policies often reflected a transactional view of alliances, pressuring Pakistan to take more tangible actions against terrorism and conditioning military and economic aid on measurable results (Ali, 2024). This policy orientation contrasted with previous U.S. administrations' more engagement-driven approaches and introduced new dynamics of friction and recalibration in bilateral relations.

It is more important to study Pakistan's relations with the U.S. during Trump's administration due to the presence of many global uncertainties coupled with the transformation of world politics at the time. Putting more focus on counterterrorism cooperation, revisiting the country's duties in Afghanistan and taking a hardline against Pakistan's support for militants, the Trump administration reshaped the bilateral relationship. In this situation, Pakistan had to handle its national interests as it adjusted its tense relationship with a key international power. Besides, issues in the area around Afghanistan and India further complicated the way Canada handled its diplomacy (Misson, 2022). For this reason, the paper covers how Pakistan's foreign policy coped with these issues and adjusted to the new priorities set by the Trump administration. It is important to analyze this period by exploring how and why Pakistan acted in the diplomatic arena throughout this significant era. Combining ideas from political science, international relations and strategic studies, the author highlights the nature of Pakistan-U.S. relations during those years (Ali, 2024). It also helps outline how new powers and traditional groups relate under current shifts in global influence. Since these issues keep having regional, security and economic impacts, it is vital to understand them. Hence, this research provides a new insight into how the Trump administration shaped Pakistan's foreign affairs and may be used as a standard in analyzing future diplomatic relationships among various nations.

2. Historical Context of Pakistan–U.S. Relations

The bilateral relationship between Pakistan and the United States since Pakistan's independence in 1947 has been marked by strategic alignments, shifting alliances, and complex geopolitical considerations. The early years of this partnership were largely shaped by Cold War imperatives, with the United States viewing Pakistan as a crucial ally in its containment strategy against the Soviet Union. Pakistan's geographic proximity to the Soviet Union and China made it an invaluable strategic partner in South Asia. During the 1950s and 1960s, Pakistan actively participated in U.S.-led

military alliances such as the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), which were designed to curb communist influence in the region (Ali, 2023; Mushtaq, 2019). The U.S. provided substantial military and economic assistance to Pakistan, helping to bolster its armed forces and infrastructure (Cohen, 2009). However, despite this cooperation, the relationship experienced fluctuations, particularly due to Pakistan's closer ties with China and its pursuit of nuclear capabilities, which raised concerns in Washington (Ahmed, 2022; Nguyen, 2020).

Significant shifts occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, reflecting both tensions and cooperation shaped by regional conflicts and global power dynamics. The 1971 Indo-Pakistani War and the subsequent creation of Bangladesh strained relations between the two countries, as the U.S. suspended military aid in response to Pakistan's military actions in East Pakistan (McMahon, 1988; State.gov, 2024). Nonetheless, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 realigned interests, prompting a renewed U.S.-Pakistan alliance focused on countering Soviet influence. Pakistan became a frontline state in supporting the Afghan mujahideen, receiving extensive military and financial support from the United States (Hilali, 2017; Akhtar, 2008). This period reinforced Pakistan's strategic importance but also laid the groundwork for future complexities, as the U.S. alliance with Pakistan was primarily driven by geopolitical exigencies rather than shared long-term goals. The post-Cold War era introduced new challenges, with the U.S. imposing sanctions on Pakistan due to its nuclear program and concerns about governance, signaling a cooling of ties (Bazai et al., 2023; Soherwardi, 2010).

The post-9/11 period marked another pivotal phase in Pakistan-U.S. relations, characterized by intensified cooperation and profound challenges. Following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, Pakistan emerged as a frontline ally in the U.S.-led Global War on Terror. Islamabad provided critical logistical support, intelligence sharing, and access to military bases for operations in Afghanistan, resulting in a substantial increase in U.S. military and economic aid (Sunawar, 2015; Katz, 2016). This cooperation was vital in the efforts to dismantle terrorist networks; however, it was accompanied by persistent tensions. The U.S. frequently criticized Pakistan for allegedly harboring militant groups, while Pakistani sovereignty was challenged by U.S. drone strikes on its territory, which caused civilian casualties and domestic unrest (Zaidi & Ahmad, 2021; Mahmood & Jetter, 2023). Additionally, Pakistan's evolving relationship with China and growing skepticism towards U.S. policies introduced further strains. Nevertheless, the mutual dependency continued, with Pakistan playing a key role in regional stability and the U.S. maintaining strategic interests in South Asia. By the time of the Trump administration, these accumulated complexities framed a bilateral relationship characterized by both strategic cooperation and growing distrust (Ahmad, 2023; Ali, 2024).

3. Trump Administration's Policy Shifts

The Trump administration brought a distinctly transactional and conditional approach to U.S. foreign aid and bilateral cooperation, fundamentally altering its relationship with Pakistan. Emblematic of President Donald J. Trump's "America First" foreign policy, this era was marked by an insistence on tangible returns from allied nations, particularly in terms of burden-sharing in defense and counterterrorism efforts (Ali, 2024). Unlike previous administrations that maintained a relatively engagement-

driven and long-term partnership approach, the Trump administration viewed alliances through a more pragmatic lens, often linking aid directly to outcomes and compliance. This marked shift introduced new dynamics of pressure, with an emphasis on Pakistan demonstrating concrete actions against terrorist groups allegedly operating within its borders. The administration's rhetoric and policy documents underscored a demand for Pakistan to "do more" in counterterrorism, reflecting a strategic recalibration driven by perceived asymmetries in responsibility (Ikenson, 2017; Ali, 2024). This transactional approach disrupted previous modes of engagement, signaling a period where Pakistan's cooperation was conditional on clear policy alignments and measurable results.

A key manifestation of this shift was the suspension of approximately \$2 billion in military aid to Pakistan, a dramatic move that sent ripples through bilateral relations (Ali, 2024). The Trump administration linked this suspension explicitly to Pakistan's alleged failure to take decisive action against terrorist organizations, particularly those implicated in attacks against U.S. interests in Afghanistan and the region. This aid suspension served both as a punitive measure and a leverage tool designed to compel Islamabad to reconsider its strategic calculations regarding militant groups. Additionally, the administration increased pressure on Pakistan to sever ties with groups like the Haqqani Network and the Taliban, whom Washington accused of finding safe havens within Pakistani territory (Ahmad, 2023; Ali, 2024). This policy pivot reflected a broader U.S. strategic shift from time-bound engagement in Afghanistan to a more condition-based strategy, wherein Pakistan's cooperation was pivotal but closely scrutinized. The administration's emphasis on counterterrorism burden-sharing not only strained diplomatic ties but also forced Pakistan to engage in complex recalibrations of its foreign policy and regional strategy (Ali, 2024).

President Trump's public statements and policy positions revealed deep skepticism regarding Pakistan's role in Afghanistan's peace process and its alleged support for militants. Trump frequently accused Pakistan of harboring terrorist groups while simultaneously benefiting from substantial U.S. aid, a contradiction that he highlighted in public speeches and on social media platforms (Ali, 2024). These allegations exacerbated tensions, casting Pakistan in a negative light within U.S. policy circles and complicating diplomatic efforts. The administration's hardline stance also included demands for Pakistan to facilitate a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan that aligned with U.S. interests, particularly the dismantling of terrorist networks and cessation of cross-border attacks (Ahmad, 2023). Pakistan, in response, defended its strategic interests, denying support for terrorism while emphasizing its contributions to regional stability and the peace process. This friction underscored the complexities of U.S.-Pakistan relations under Trump, where policy shifts were driven by both realpolitik considerations and a heightened focus on counterterrorism accountability (Ali, 2024). The transactional nature of the Trump administration's policies thus transformed the bilateral relationship into a more contentious and conditional engagement, with implications that continue to reverberate in subsequent U.S. administrations.

4. Political Dynamics

The policies of the Trump administration had significant repercussions on Pakistan's domestic politics and foreign policy orientation. The administration's public criticisms and aid suspensions sparked nationalistic sentiments within Pakistan, fueling anti-

American rhetoric among political elites and the general public alike (Ali, 2024). Political parties across the spectrum leveraged this narrative to consolidate internal support, portraying Pakistan as a victim of unjust American pressure while emphasizing sovereignty and self-reliance. The increasing skepticism of U.S. intentions intensified debates within Pakistan regarding the country's foreign policy trajectory, prompting calls for diversification of international partnerships and reduced dependence on the United States (Ahmad, 2023). Consequently, domestic political discourse became intertwined with foreign policy considerations, with Pakistan's leadership balancing between engaging Washington pragmatically and affirming its strategic autonomy in the face of growing external pressures (Ali, 2024).

Diplomatic engagements during the Trump era were often marked by oscillations between cooperation and confrontation, reflecting the complex nature of bilateral relations. Official visits and high-level dialogues continued, underscoring the necessity of maintaining channels of communication despite growing tensions (Ali, 2024). However, public statements by officials from both sides frequently echoed discord, with U.S. leaders expressing frustration over Pakistan's alleged insufficient action against militant groups, while Pakistani officials reiterated their commitment to regional peace and counterterrorism cooperation (Ahmad, 2023). This duality created a diplomatic environment where substantive cooperation was pursued behind closed doors, even as public rhetoric remained strained. The interplay of official diplomacy and public messaging illustrated the delicate balancing act both nations undertook, attempting to safeguard strategic interests amid growing mistrust and diverging priorities (Ali, 2024).

As a result of these tensions, Pakistan began focusing more on China and Russia instead of continuing to depend heavily on the United States. One example of this approach was Pakistan's strong relationship with the BRI through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which would bring major investments and the development of new infrastructure (Ahmad, 2023). Plus, Pakistan tried to enhance its relationship with Russia by looking for ways to cooperate militarily and take action in common regions. Since the Trump administration focused on businesses and did not value diplomatic ties, Pakistan diversified its approach and tried to ensure its main interests in the new multi-power environment (Ali, 2024). By reorienting its foreign policy, Pakistan revealed both its desire to be more independent and the new reality that a range of countries were now finding support from China and Russia in the changing world order.

5. Military and Security Relations

During the Trump administration, military aid and cooperation between the United States and Pakistan underwent significant transformations, reflecting a recalibration of U.S. strategic priorities. One of the most notable shifts was the suspension of nearly \$2 billion in security assistance, a punitive action tied directly to perceived Pakistani inaction against terrorist groups operating within its borders (Ali, 2024). This suspension disrupted long-standing military ties and signaled a move away from the more cooperative military relationship that had characterized the post-9/11 period. U.S. policymakers demanded greater Pakistani accountability, emphasizing that continued assistance was contingent upon verifiable progress in counterterrorism operations. Despite this, certain military-to-military channels remained operational, underscoring the continued recognition of Pakistan's strategic importance in regional

stability. However, the aid suspension underscored growing distrust and indicated a transactional U.S. approach that sought to condition military cooperation on Islamabad's compliance with U.S. counterterrorism objectives (Ahmad, 2023). Consequently, Pakistan's military establishment was compelled to reassess its engagement with the United States, balancing national security interests against shifting American demands.

The Trump administration's evolving military strategy in Afghanistan further complicated the security relationship with Pakistan. As the U.S. transitioned from a time-bound military engagement to a conditional withdrawal based on peace progress, Pakistan found itself at the nexus of U.S. efforts to facilitate a negotiated settlement with the Taliban (Ali, 2024). This strategic shift elevated Pakistan's role as a key regional stakeholder but also increased scrutiny of its ties with Afghan militant groups. The U.S. military presence in the region, which had relied heavily on logistical and intelligence cooperation with Pakistan, began to diminish, compelling adjustments in joint exercises and training programs. While traditional large-scale joint military drills were curtailed, smaller-scale training and intelligence-sharing continued under tighter conditions. These adjustments reflected the uncertainties inherent in the U.S. exit strategy and the complex security environment. Moreover, Pakistan leveraged this transition period to strengthen its own military ties with alternative partners, notably China and Russia, seeking to diversify its security cooperation in light of fluctuating U.S. policies (Ahmad, 2023). The military and security relations under Trump, thus, were defined by conditional cooperation, strategic ambiguity, and a reorientation toward new regional realities.

6. Economic and Trade Relations

The Trump administration's trade policies significantly influenced the economic and trade relations between Pakistan and the United States, introducing new challenges and uncertainties. One of the key policy shifts was the review and eventual termination of Pakistan's eligibility for the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) program in 2018, which had granted preferential duty-free access for numerous Pakistani exports to the U.S. market (Ali, 2024). This decision was framed by Washington as a response to Pakistan's failure to meet certain economic and labor standards, impacting the competitiveness of Pakistani exports, particularly textiles and garments, in the American market. The removal of GSP benefits led to a decline in export volumes to the U.S., causing concern among Pakistani industries that heavily relied on the preferential tariff regime (Ahmad, 2023). Additionally, the broader U.S. stance on trade under Trump, characterized by protectionism and renegotiation of trade agreements, contributed to a less favorable environment for bilateral economic cooperation. These developments underscored the transactional nature of the Trump administration's foreign economic policy, which prioritized immediate economic interests and leverage over long-term partnerships.

Meanwhile, the flow of trade deals between the U.S. and Canada decreased during President Trump's administration. Because of actions taken due to security and counterterrorism issues, Pakistan's government could not access significant U.S. funds for its development and stability projects (Ali, 2024). A drop in aid was further influenced by the US lessening FDI, as many investors decided to wait due to the risky and uncertain environment involving the United States. As Islamabad committed to trading with other nations, the reduced partnership with the United States soon led

them to focus on China through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Ahmad, 2023). In summary, Pakistan introduced a new plan to handle trade and finance that would ensure it does not depend as strongly on America. The administration's actions affected Pakistan's current economic situation as well as shaped its future economic course.

7. Challenges and Opportunities

Political changes introduced by President Trump had major impacts on South Asia's security and diplomatic affairs. Just as Washington reduced its presence in Afghanistan, it grew stricter with Pakistan about counterterrorism and began to treat Pakistan more as a partner in deals. As a result, the area saw higher uncertainties due to Pakistan's important geographical and strategic situation. By shifting its policy, the U.S. made Islamabad responsible for brokering peace in Afghanistan with increased surveillance over its alleged involvement with militant actions (Ali, 2024). As a result, Pakistan's ties with India and Afghanistan grew strained, making it hard to bring about peace in the area. Besides, when ties between India and the United States improved during that period, Pakistan was pressured further and gauging it had fallen behind prompted it to find additional allies and close partnerships in the region (Ahmad, 2023). Such events revealed the problems Pakistan encountered as the regional environment grew increasingly complicated due to the actions and influence of others.

Due to pressure and incentives from the U.S., Pakistan developed a strategy that focused on protecting its interests and supporting ongoing diplomatic efforts. While Pakistan was criticized and aid was stopped, it worked to impress the international community by showcasing its efforts in combating terrorism and supporting regional peace in various ways (Ali, 2024). The government in Islamabad improved relations with China and Russia, both economically and militarily, in order to respond to uncertain U.S. choices. The CPEC represents Pakistan's decision to strengthen ties with other countries, reinforcing its economy and helping develop its infrastructure. Pakistan, at the same time, used its power over the Afghan Taliban to play a key role in talks about peace. This delicate balancing act was aimed at managing external pressures while capitalizing on new opportunities arising from shifting global alignments. Pakistan's response thus reflected a pragmatic adaptation to a challenging international environment marked by both constraints and openings.

Pakistan's participation in the peace negotiations in Afghanistan brought attention to its role in three main regional groups during the Trump era. Thanks to its help, the Afghan government and Taliban were able to negotiate as the United States looked into withdrawn troops, highlighting the weight of Islamabad in Afghan politics. Being linked to different Afghan groups throughout history and seeking a good relationship with its neighbor to prevent conflicts entering the country, made Pakistan's involvement necessary. At the same time, the role exposed Pakistan to much criticism, as some claimed that Islamabad's links to specific militant groups hurt the chances of making peace. Yet, Pakistan held that peace and security in the region could only last if nations cooperated and led efforts to be viewed as a force for peace rather than fighting against others. As Afghanistan experienced many changes, Pakistan had to find ways to handle new challenges and look for chances to encourage a lasting solution. Pakistan's participation in the peace process showed

why it is important to the future stability of South Asia when U.S. and global policies are adjusting.

8. Analysis and Synthesis

The Trump administration's tenure marked a complex chapter in Pakistan–United States bilateral relations, characterized by both cooperation and conflict. The overall impact was a notable cooling of the traditionally strategic partnership, driven primarily by mistrust and shifting priorities. While the U.S. continued to recognize Pakistan's geopolitical importance, especially regarding Afghanistan and counterterrorism, policy shifts such as aid suspension and public criticisms created an atmosphere of uncertainty (Haqqani, 2018). This ambivalence complicated diplomatic engagements, as Islamabad faced the dual challenge of meeting U.S. demands while safeguarding its sovereignty and regional interests. The transactional nature of Trump's diplomacy disrupted previously steady military and economic cooperation, leading to a period where bilateral relations were managed cautiously and pragmatically, with both countries recalibrating their expectations and strategies (Fair, 2019). This era underscored the fragility of alliances built on strategic convenience rather than shared long-term objectives.

Key drivers of cooperation during Trump's presidency included mutual concerns over regional stability, particularly the need for a peaceful resolution in Afghanistan. Despite public tensions, behind-the-scenes collaboration continued in intelligence-sharing and counterterrorism efforts, reflecting a shared understanding of common threats (Rashid, 2019). Conversely, significant conflict drivers were rooted in diverging views on Pakistan's role in harboring militant groups and differing regional policies, especially relating to India and China. The U.S.'s growing strategic partnership with India exacerbated Pakistani insecurities, which in turn influenced Islamabad's foreign policy pivot towards China and Russia (Siddiqi, 2020). Furthermore, Trump's personal rhetoric and unpredictable style contributed to diplomatic strains, reducing trust and complicating dialogue. These factors combined to create a bilateral environment where cooperation was transactional and contingent, and conflict was pronounced but carefully managed.

Strategically, both countries undertook recalibrations in response to evolving geopolitical realities. The United States shifted from a time-bound military engagement in Afghanistan to a conditional withdrawal framework, increasing reliance on Pakistan as a regional facilitator (Khan, 2020). Pakistan, on its part, diversified its diplomatic and security partnerships, seeking to reduce vulnerability to U.S. policy fluctuations by enhancing ties with China under the Belt and Road Initiative and exploring deeper military cooperation with Russia (Rana, 2021). This strategic hedging allowed Pakistan to maintain leverage in regional affairs despite diminished U.S. support. Additionally, both countries adjusted their communication and military coordination mechanisms to maintain necessary cooperation without fully restoring previous levels of trust (Zaidi & Hussain, 2020). The Trump era, therefore, stands as a period of recalibration that tested the resilience of Pakistan–U.S. relations and reshaped their future trajectory.

9. Conclusion

The Trump administration's policies significantly reshaped Pakistan–United States bilateral relations, introducing a transactional and conditional approach that marked a departure from previous engagement-driven strategies. By suspending military aid,

terminating trade benefits, and publicly criticizing Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts, the Trump administration heightened tensions and forced Islamabad to reassess its foreign policy priorities. Throughout this era, officials recognized how easily a convenient partnership could collapse with the passage of time. While they continued to share information and discuss Afghanistan, the existing mistrust and the U.S. desire to be close to India and the strengthening ties between India and China and Pakistan with China intensified matters. The U.S. policy under President Trump encouraged Pakistan to move away from the U.S. by developing closer ties with both China and Russia through CPEC and other steps. As a result, the Trump era revealed that a shared relationship with the United States is difficult to maintain during changes in global politics and the experience led to Pakistan rethinking its role and adopting a more global approach. The lasting impact of these changes pushed by the Trump administration will determine Pakistan's foreign relations with the U.S. as the world keeps changing. Because Trump treated diplomacy as transactions, it not only hindered cooperation between the nations and led Pakistan to seek allies elsewhere but also destroyed some long-standing relationships in the region. Pakistan's decision to expand its relationships abroad reflects the increasing trend among middle powers who wish to be more independent in today's world. During the Afghan peace talks, Pakistan played a significant role, supporting peace while defending its interests and keeping things in check. Given what we have learned, good relations between the U.S. and Pakistan will depend on putting strategic value and mutual respect for independence together within the same framework. Both countries are aware that the Trump administration's impact shows that countries in alliance need to adapt to ever-changing situations and keep adjusting.

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