

Essay:

Regional blocs and challenges to Pakistan's Foreign policy:

I Introduction:

- The paradox of interdependence: nations unite for blocs for strength yet lose freedom of manoeuvre.
- Pakistan's Foreign policy caught between regional alliances and sovereign imperatives.

II Conceptual Framework:

1. The idea of Regionalism.

- From the League of Nations to modern groupings (EU, ASEAN, SCO)
- Russell's view: cooperation as a rational antidote to anarchy.

2. Pakistan Foreign Policy Goals:

- Security, economic growth, balanced relations with great powers.
- Guided by "friend to all, enemy to none" but tested by shifting blocs.

III.

Historical Backdrop:

3.

Cold War alignments:

- SEATO and CENTO; reliance on U.S.
- Lessons from over-dependence (cited by Ayesha Jaleel in the state of Martial Rule)

4.

Non-Aligned Movements and Islamic Summits:

- Tensions between ideological affinity and strategic necessity.

IV.

Contemporary Regional blocs:

5.

SAARC's Democracy:

India - Pakistan hostility undermining south Asian Cooperation.

6.

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)

- Opportunities for counter-terrorism and trade; constraints due to India - China rivalry.

7.

China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

- Economic lifeline but heightens U.S. suspicions; reference: Andrew Small's 'The China-Pakistan'.

8. Gulf Cooperation Council:

- Energy dependence and expatriate labour; balancing Saudi-Iran rivalry.

9. Organization of Islamic Cooperation:

- Symbolic solidarity, limited strategic leverage.

10. Economic blocs: RCEP and EU GSP+

- Trade benefits vs. human rights conditionalities.

V. Core Challenges to Foreign Policy:

11. Geopolitical Tug of War:

- US-China competition and pressure to choose sides.

12. Security dilemmas:

- Afghan instability spilling into Pakistan despite regional forums.

13. Economic Vulnerabilities:

- Debt diplomacy concerns and IMF dependence.

14.

Ideological and domestic Constraints:

- Civil-Military imbalance (cited in Asghil Shah's *The Army and Democracy*)

15.

Climate and Water Politics:

- Regional environmental crises demanding collective action yet sparking disputes.

VI.

Policy Recommendations and way Forward:

16.

Balanced Multilateralism:

- "Friends with all, entangling alliances with none."
- Diversification of trade partners, proactive diplomacy, internal economic reform.

VII.

Conclusion:

- Echo Russell's belief that reasoned cooperation, not blind alliance, ensures survival.
- Pakistan must transform regional challenges into opportunities for a sovereign, people-centric foreign policy.

"Nations, like individuals," Bernard Russell, "must learn that cooperation is a higher wisdom conflict." In the twenty-First century, this wisdom is institutionalized through regional blocs - economic and strategic groupings that promise collective strength but quietly circumscribe national freedom. For Pakistan, a state born of ideological conviction yet situated at the hinge of South, central and West Asia, these blocs presents both lifelines and labyrinths. From the unrealised dreams of SAARC to the high-stakes embrace of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, Islamabad's foreign policy has become a delicate choreography of opportunity and constraint. Historical entanglements in SEATO and CENTO caution against over-reliance on alliances, while contemporary pressures - from Gulf rivalries to the US-China great-powers contest - demand an artful balance.

The idea of Regionalism, which Bernard Russell called "the rational antidote to the anarchy of sovereign states," gives a neighbouring countries

a way to turn proximity into strength/cooperation and to strength ^{their} collective voice against large powers. The European Union's evolution from the Coal and Steel community proves that shared institutions can make war unlikely, yet Pakistan's own attempt through SAARC has stalled because of mistrust born of the 1971 war and incidents like 2016 Uri attack. Historian Ayesha Jalal warns that "cooperation cannot thrive where the logic of security outpaces the logic of trade," a lesson South Asia Reflects. Pakistan's 2017 entry into the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, however, shows regionalism can succeed when rivalries are carefully managed. Thus, while regional blocs promise stability and growth, their value for Pakistan depends on trust and balanced diplomacy.

Pakistan's foreign policy centres on safeguarding national security while pursuing economic growth and balanced global ties. At first, seeks to protect territorial integrity in a region shaped by rivalry with India and instability in Afghanistan, and

second aims to build economic strength through diversified trade and investment. This dual focus is evident from Cold war alliances with the United States to the long standing partnership with ~~India~~ China and recent initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the EU's GSP+ trade status. Thus, Pakistan's diplomacy remains a careful effort to achieve security without isolation and growth without overdependence on any single power.

During the cold war Pakistan joined U.S.-led blocs such as SEATO in 1954 and CENTO in 1955 to secure military aid and protection against India and the Soviet Union. These alliances gave short term benefits - modern weapons and economic assistance - but tied Pakistan to Washington's strategic priorities. When conflict with India erupted in 1965 and 1971, the United States withheld crucial support, revealing what historian Ian Talbot calls "the fragility of alliances built on expediency rather than conviction." Therefore, this experience taught Pakistan that

heavy reliance on a single power can compromise autonomy, a lesson that continues to shape its cautious approach to regional blocs today.

Furthermore, in the 1970s Pakistan joined with the Non-Aligned Movement to signal independence from the cold War camps while also championing Islamic solidarity through the 1974 Lahore Islamic Summit.

These parallel efforts sought economic ~~changing~~ cooperation and political leverage beyond U.S. alliances. Yet Pakistan's later role as a key ally in the Afghan Jihad after the 1979 Soviet invasion revealed the limits of non-alignment, as security concerns pulled it back toward Washington. Scholars note that these mixed signals showed Islamabad's difficulty in balancing ideology with strategic necessity, a tension that still influences its regional diplomacy today.

Pakistan joined the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 1985 hoping for trade and dialogue across the sub-continent.

Persistent India-Pakistan hostility, rooted in the 1971 war and sharpened by crises like the 2016 Uri attack, stalled progress and kept regional projects minimal. Analyst Ayesha Jalal argues that "cooperation cannot thrive where the logic of security outpaces the logic of trade," and SAARC's inactivity illustrates that warning. Hence, despite its promise of integration, SAARC remains largely dormant, offering Pakistan little beyond a symbolic platform.

Additionally, Pakistan joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2017 to deepen counter-terrorism cooperation and tap central Asian trade routes. Membership offers access to energy projects and regional connectivity, yet internal tensions—especially the India-China rivalry—limit the bloc's effectiveness. Recent SCO summits in Astana highlight both opportunities for economic integration and the need for careful diplomacy. Consequently, the SCO gives Pakistan valuable engagement with China, Russia, and Central Asia, but demands

balanced navigation to turn potential into real gains

Moreover, The China-Pakistan-Economic Corridor, flagship of Beijing's Belt and Road initiative (BRI) is central to Pakistan growth strategy, promising energy projects, infrastructure, and trade routes to the Arabian Sea. It strengthens the long-standing China-Pakistan partnership and attracts investment, but also raises debt concerns and fuels Indian objections over routes through Gilgit-Baltistan. U.S. suspicion of BRI adds geopolitical strain. Thus, while CPEC offers Pakistan vital economic lifelines, it also ties the country more tightly to China and heightens external pressures on its Foreign Policy.

Pakistan relies heavily on the Gulf Cooperation Council for energy supplies, investment, and the remittances sent home by millions of Pakistani workers in Gulf states. This partnership strengthens economic stability and provides diplomatic support on issues like Kashmir. Yet balancing ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran is

delicate; Islamabad's decision to stay neutral in the 2015 Yemen conflict, while preserving regional friendships, strained relations with Riyadh. This episode shows that how Pakistan must carefully manage sectarian rivalries to maintain the benefits of its GCC connections. Thus, the GCC remains both an economic lifeline and diplomatic balancing act for Pakistan's foreign policy.

Furthermore the Organization of Islamic Cooperation offers Pakistan a global Muslim platform to highlight issues such as the Kashmir dispute and Palestine. It provides moral support and occasional joint statements, reinforcing Pakistan's identity as part of the wider Islamic community. Yet the bloc's limited political and economic clout means its impact is mostly symbolic: the muted OIC response to India's 2019 revocation of Article 370 exposed its inability to act decisively. Consequently, while the OIC strengthens Pakistan's diplomatic narrative, it delivers little concrete leverage, reminding Islamabad that religious solidarity alone cannot secure foreign-policy goals.

Subsequently, Pakistan seeks economic diversification through blocs like the EU's C&P+ scheme and the emerging Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). C&P+ grants tariff concessions that boost exports, but it comes with human rights and governance conditions that Brussels reviews regularly. Joining RCEP could open vast Asian markets, yet Pakistan's weak industrial base and fiscal instability hinder accession. These examples show that while economic blocs can expand trade and investment, they also tie Pakistan's foreign policy to domestic reforms and economic discipline, demanding careful preparation and sustained political will.

Additionally, Pakistan faces the growing geopolitical tug of war as rivalry between the United States and China intensifies. Its long-standing strategic partnership with Beijing, reinforced by CPEC, brings investment and infrastructure, while ties with Washington provide military cooperation, technology, and access to global financial institutions. Yet leaning too far toward

Far toward either side risks alienating the other; U.S. Skepticism of BRI projects and China's unease over Pakistan's occasional security cooperation with the West highlighted this tension. Therefore, analysts warn that choosing one camp could limit Pakistan's diplomatic options, so its foreign policy must maintain a careful balance to protect both economic gains and strategic autonomy.

Additionally, Pakistan Foreign policy is strained by Persistent security dilemmas, especially along its western and eastern borders. The return of the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2021 has revived cross-border militancy and refugee pressures, while the enduring rivalry with India keeps defence spending high and dialogue fragile. Despite participation in forums like the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group, regional blocs have offered limited relief because mistrust and competing interests block joint action. These overlapping threats force Islamabad to prioritise military readiness, often at the expense of economic and diplomatic initiatives, making security a constant constraint on its foreign Policy choices.

Moreover, Pakistan's foreign policy is heavily shaped by economic vulnerabilities, including chronic current-account deficits, a narrow export base, and dependence on external financing. Reliance on IMF programmes, Saudi and Chinese loans, and remittances from the Gulf limits diplomatic flexibility, as each partner attaches its own conditions. Episodes like the 2023 balance of payments crisis showed how financial stress can overshadow strategic goals, forcing Islamabad to seek bailouts rather than negotiate from strength. Consequently, economic fragility not only constrains policy choices but also magnifies the leverage of powerful states and regional blocs over Pakistan's external relations.

Additionally, Pakistan's Foreign Policy is also shaped by ideological and domestic constraints. The country's founding narrative as a homeland for Muslims drives expectations to champion causes like Kashmir and Palestine, limiting flexibility in dealing with India or Israel. At home, civil-military tensions, frequent government changes, and pressure from religious parties for

disrupt policy continuity. Episodes such as the backlash to attempts at trade normalisation with India reveal how domestic opinion can override pragmatic diplomacy. Here, without internal ~~consensus~~ consensus and stable governance, even the best crafted regional strategies remain vulnerable to sudden political shifts.

Moreover, Pakistan Foreign Policy increasingly shapes the climate and water politics, as melting Himalayan glaciers, erratic monsoons, and transboundary rivers heighten regional tensions. The Indus Waters Treaty (1960) still governs water sharing with India, but disputes over projects like Kishanganga Dam spark recurring diplomatic friction. At the same time, Pakistan is among the world's most climate vulnerable states, as shown by the 2022 and 2025 floods that caused billions in damage and required international aid. Therefore, these pressures push Islamabad to seek cooperation in forums such as the SCO, and UN climate negotiations, yet competing national interests often limit progress, making climate security a rising foreign-policy challenge.

Furthermore, Pakistan should pursue balanced multilateralism to safeguard autonomy while benefiting from diverse alliances. This means deepening ties with China and SCO for regional connectivity, maintaining constructive relations with the United States and EU for trade and technology, and actively engaging blocs such as GCC, OIC and ASEAN without over-reliance on any single partner. Diplomatic Scholar Mabeha Lodhi notes that "strategic flexibility, not strategic choice, best serves Pakistan interests. Therefore, by diversifying partnerships and supporting international norms - climate accords, trade regimes and counter-terrorism frameworks - Islamabad can turn regional competition into opportunity while avoiding the trap of great power dependency.

The Echoing Bertrand Russell conviction that "reasoned cooperation, ^{not} blind alliance, ensures survival", Pakistan's Foreign Policy must rise above reactive alignments and instead craft partnerships guided by national interest and regional harmony. The Country's experience with Cold War blocs,

the mixed record of SAARC and the OIC, and the delicate relations between Washington and Beijing all underscore the limits of one-sided commitments. By investing in economic resilience, fostering dialogue with neighbours and practised/practising balanced multilateralism, Islamabad can convert regional rivalries into avenue of trade, energy, and climate cooperation.

Only through such rational, people-centred diplomacy can Pakistan safeguard sovereignty while contributing to a more stable South Asian order.