

Question 1

Critically evaluate Pakistan's foreign policy in the regional context. To what extent has it balanced its strategic interest with regional cooperation and stability.

1) Introduction:-

Foreign policy is the tool through which states protect their interests, maintain security and engage with neighbors and the wide world. Pakistan located at the confluence of central Asia, South Asia, and Middle East; its geostrategic position made it vulnerable and important at the same point; foreign policy is critical in safeguarding its security, economic well being and regional influence. Pakistan's foreign policy is shaped by its rivalry with India, economic and military partnership with China, and middle east, security concerns with Afghanistan and trade via Indian Ocean with global and regional countries. Pakistan's foreign policy in the regional context has successfully protected its strategic interest but struggled to promote sustainable cooperation and stability.

2) Core Strategic driver's of Pakistan's foreign policy: a Critical Evaluation

(A) India as the defining strategic challenge:

Since 1947 Pakistan's foreign policy with India is shaped by rivalry such as territorial disputes, arms competition and conventional military modernization. Several successful accords have been established for addressing conflicts such as Indus Water Treaty (**IWT**) 1960, Simla agreement (**1972**), Lahore declaration (**1999**), Tashkent Declaration (**1966**) to end the 1965 War. But the Kashmir issue has always been a bone of contention between the two states.

Both states have fought major wars 1947, 1961, 1971 and Kargil War (1999), compounded by cross border insurgencies. Recent Peshawar attack incident leads to 4 day military escalation, Pulwama attack (2019) has further deteriorated the relations.

Economic relations are negligible due to security tensions, domestic political pressure and weak institutional mechanisms such as **SAARC**. China-Pakistan Strategic Partnership and US-India ties forming two opposite blocks stifled the bilateral relations. Analysts estimated that trade could potentially exceed to **\$10-12 B/year** but all above factors halt it. Moreover, limited cultural exchange, visa restrictions and minimal people-to-people interaction has impeded the cooperation between them.

(B) Afghanistan-Pakistan relations:
Strategic Priorities and Stability Challenges:

Pakistan's foreign policy has historically been driven by border security with Afghanistan and influence over Kabul's political landscape. During Afghan-Soviet War Pakistan supported Afghan mujahideens to fight with Soviet union. During the 1990s, after the withdrawal of USSR, Pakistan helped Taliban to establish a regime. Following the US-led invasion after 9/11, Pakistan's policy did paradigm shift, aligning more with western powers against certain militant groups. Since Taliban's return to power in 2021, Pakistan has engaged in pragmatic diplomacy, hosted nearly 3 million Afghan refugees and supported trade of Afghanistan with other countries because Afghanistan being a landlocked country has limited access to warm waters. However, this relationship has fraught with challenges.

Challenges

Cross-border
Terrorism

Refugees

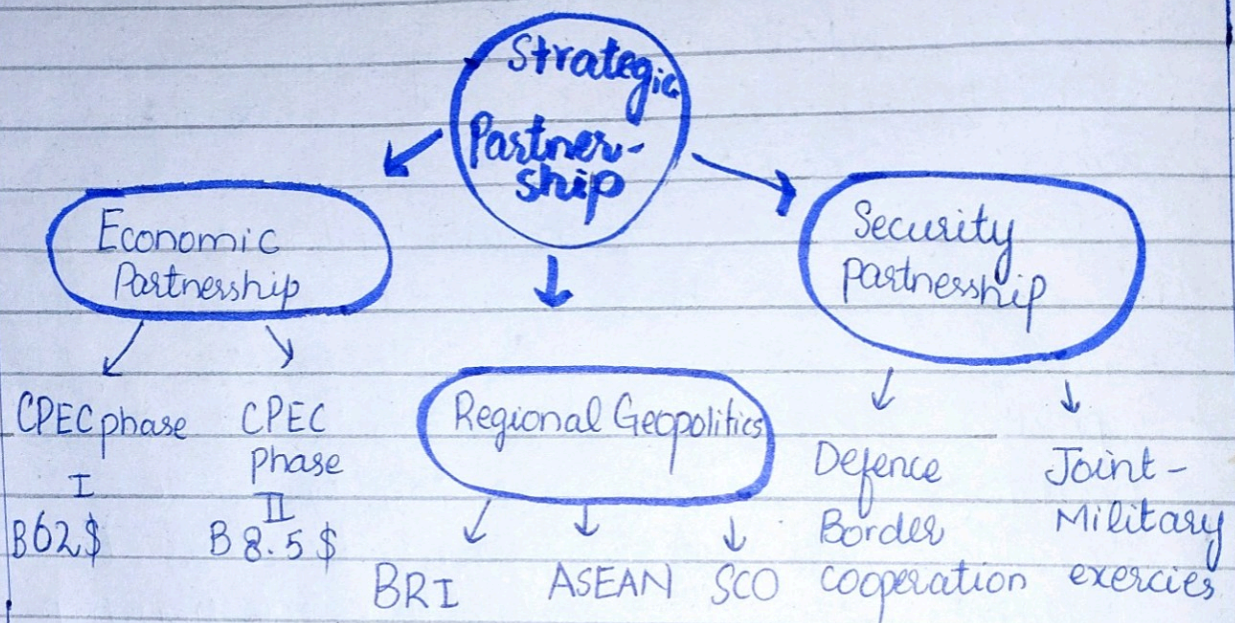
Durand line

Kabul River
dispute

Recent Military escalation and air-strikes followed by Doha talks mediated by QATAR, Turkey and China halted the full-scale war, but diplomatic cooperation is undermined by porous border and TTP backed by Kabul. It also deteriorated trade relations. Overall, Pakistan's foreign policy with Afghanistan is balancing between security and strategic interest.

(C) Pakistan-China Relations: Strategic Partnership and Regional Cooperation:

Pakistan's foreign policy with China represents one of its most successful example of balancing strategic interests and regional cooperation.



Moreover, domestic public trust on China-Pakistan friendship has further strengthened the cooperation. China as the major contributor to Pakistan's infrastructure and Ports establishment, rails, roads, technological innovation, agricultural advancement fostered the cooperation. But Anti-American Stance of China can push Pakistan to limit bilateral relations with Washington. So, Pakistan needs a balanced comprehensive approach to maintain relationships with both countries in order to pursue Strategic interest.

(D) Pakistan-Iran relations: Balancing security, Ideology and Economic interest:

Pakistan's foreign policy with Iran has been shaped by geographic proximity, sectarian dynamics and regional stability. Economically Iran has been a potential partner in energy and trade, notable **Iran-**

Pakistan gas pipeline. Trade relations are modest and often constrained by border security issues and regulatory barriers. Practically, Pakistan has attempted cooperative engagement, including joint border management but this relation is complicated by sectarian tensions particularly the spillover of Shia-Sunni violence. Moreover, the recent defence pact of Pak-Saudi can lead to a more alignment of Tehran because of Tehran-Riyadh historical sectarian contention. Critically, Pakistan's Iran policy demonstrates that strategic and economic interest can be partially pursued but unresolved security and sectarian tensions can constrain the effectiveness of bilateral cooperation.

3) Where Pakistan's Strategic interest have aided or harmed regional cooperation.

(A) Stabilising Contributions:

(i) Economic connectivity with China:

CPEC promises large investment and transport links. Special Economic zones, technological innovation, agricultural modernisation, Sea-ports, Energy cooperation foster cross-border interdependence.

(ii) Pragmatic engagement With Afghanistan: (Doha-talks 2025)

Pakistan has shown pragmatic steps towards stabilizing ties with Kabul by participating in trilateral talks, which halted cross-border attacks. It can be a concrete step towards cooperation on removing terrorism.

(B) Destabilising Outcomes:-

(i) SAARC ineffectiveness and limited South Asian institutionalism:

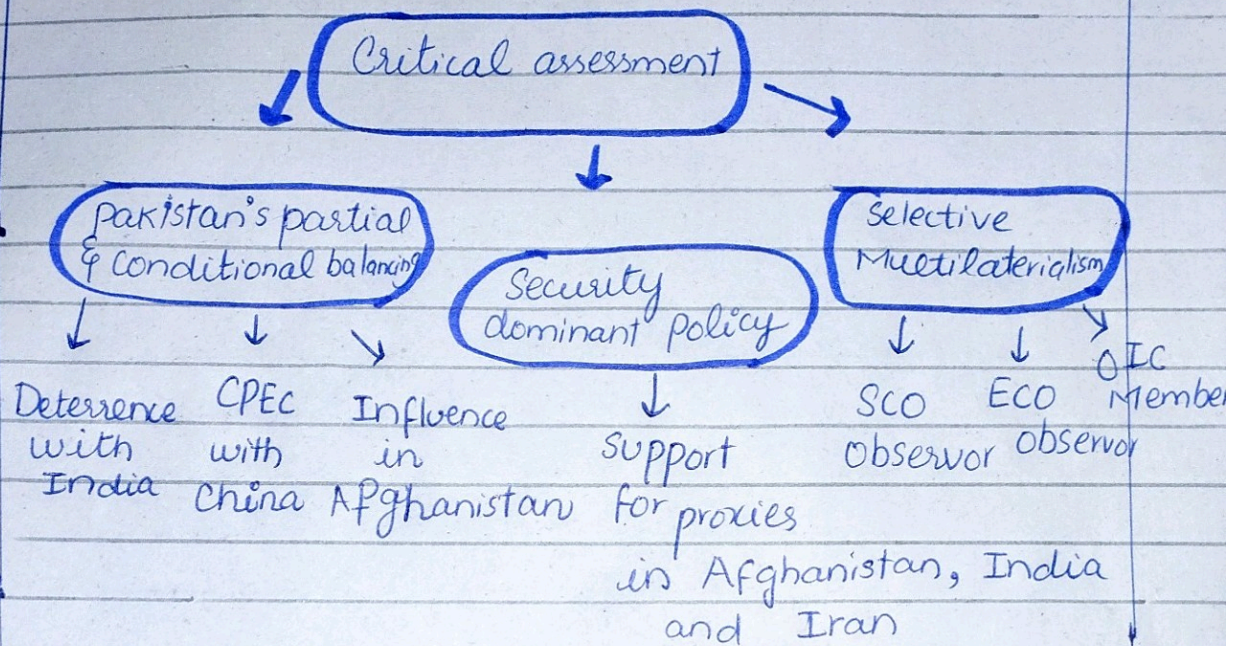
India-Pakistan political disputes have effectively frozen the SAARC. This structural breakdown is a major lost opportunity for regional stability.

(ii) Border disputes with Iran and Afghanistan:

Cross-border attacks, retaliatory strikes and clashes including recent incidents show how security can be a major determinant among states of fragile regional cooperation.

(4) Balancing Strategic interest vs cooperation:

Pakistan has pursued a balancing strategy of regional cooperation.



Conclusion:

Pakistan's foreign policy has largely been shaped by the imperative to safeguard its security and national interest; Particular concerning India, China, Afghanistan and Iran. The historical conflicts with India, economic partnership with China, border clashes and security concerns with Iran and Afghanistan has shaped its foreign policy. Overall, Pakistan's foreign policy reflects security-pattern first, following economic and regional cooperation.