



# QUARTERLY

A Periodical of INSIGHTS

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ  
عَلَّمَ الْإِنْسَانَ مَا كَمْ يَعْلَمُ  
TAUGHT MAN THAT WHICH HE KNEW NOT

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# E9 QUARTERLY

## CONTENTS

Insights	Page No
<b>Editorial Note</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>The Indus River as Civilisational Spine of Pakistan's Identity</b> <i>Dr M. A. Gul</i>	<b>1</b>
<b>China–Russia Replacing the United States as Interlocutors between India and Pakistan</b> <i>Dr M. A. Gul</i>	<b>6</b>
<b>Geostrategic Dynamics of the South China Sea</b> <i>Khanzada Bilal</i>	<b>12</b>
<b>The Crescent of Terrorism: Myths and Reality</b> <i>Ayesha Afgun</i>	<b>18</b>
<b>India's Pursuit of Hypersonic Weapons and Its Implications for Pakistan</b> <i>Umair Ahmad</i>	<b>25</b>
<b>Digital Payments: Challenges and Opportunities for Pakistan</b> <i>Muhammad Umar Farooq Baloch</i>	<b>31</b>
<b>Unity in Diversity: Exploring Pakistan's Linguistic Landscape</b> <i>Saliha Waseem</i>	<b>38</b>

**Insights**

Page No

**Drowning Coast: Environmental Degradation and Sewage Reform in Karachi** 49

*Noor Ul Ain Tahir*

**A Review of Pakistan's Free Trade Agreements** 55

*Muhammad Abdur Rehman*

**Beyond the Optics: Probing Legality of Pakistan's Repatriation of Afghans** 62

*Habib Ullah*

**Book Review**

**Has China Won? The Chinese Challenge to American Primacy** 68

*Dr M.A. Gul*



## Editorial Note

The fourth issue of volume 4, 2025, E9 Quarterly, a distinctive compilation of ten insights written during the fourth quarter of 2025, is now in your hands. These insights delve into Pakistan's economic, political, and security challenges, underlining the urgent challenges of governance in a changing world. Ten diverse insights converge on a central theme: how Pakistan negotiates identity, security, and progress amid an increasingly multipolar and interconnected global order.

The issue opens with 'The Indus River as the Civilisational Spine of Pakistan's Identity', a compelling reminder that the Indus is more than a river; it is Pakistan's enduring metaphor of continuity, flowing from prehistoric Soanian toolmakers to the post-colonial state. It elaborates how rediscovering this civilisational lineage can furnish Pakistan with a unifying, non-sectarian identity and a potent source of cultural diplomacy.

'China-Russia Replacing the United States as Interlocutors between India and Pakistan' turns to the strategic chessboard. It charts Washington's diminishing credibility in South Asia. It imagines a new mediation architecture anchored in the Sino-Russian partnership, one that might restore balance to a region long held hostage by unilateral alignments.

'Geostrategic Dynamics of the South China Sea' expands this vision eastward. This analysis of maritime rivalries reveals how control over the South China Sea has become shorthand for control over the 21st-century world order, linking trade routes, energy corridors, and military deterrence in a single geopolitical knot.

'The Crescent of Terrorism: Myths and Reality' interrogates the politics of fear. It dismantles the post-9/11 discourse of "Islamic terrorism", exposing how it has been weaponised to legitimise interventions and sustain economic exploitation under the banner of counterterrorism.

'India's Pursuit of Hypersonic Weapons and Its Implications for Pakistan' offers a sobering assessment of emerging military technologies. This insight warns that India's hypersonic programme could compress crisis-response times to seconds, eroding deterrence stability and intensifying the nuclear dilemma in South Asia.

Economic transformation takes Centre Stage in 'Digital Payments: Challenges and Opportunities for Pakistan'. It maps the nation's fintech revolution, powered by RAAST and Roshan Digital Accounts, while cautioning that regulatory inertia and limited global integration still constrain Pakistan's digital promise.

'Unity in Diversity: Exploring Pakistan's Linguistic Landscape' celebrates the polyphony of 80 languages that enrich Pakistan's identity. This piece turns linguistic diversity into a call for inclusive policymaking, arguing that cultural preservation is not nostalgia but a form of national resilience.

Environmental realism arrives through 'Drowning Coast: Environmental Degradation and Sewage Reform in Karachi'. Investigation into Karachi's polluted shores exposes how institutional fragmentation and weak enforcement jeopardise marine life and the city's blue economy, urging integrated coastal governance.

'Assessing Pakistan's Free Trade Agreements' dissects two decades of trade diplomacy. It reveals how FTAs, while expanding markets, have entrenched structural trade deficits, making the case for diversification, value addition, and smarter commercial diplomacy in a global economy moving beyond traditional blocs.

Finally, 'Beyond the Optics: Probing into the Legality of Pakistan's Repatriation of Afghans' revisits one of Pakistan's most contentious contemporary policies. This legal analysis situates the repatriation drive within domestic law and evolving norms of international practice, urging a balance between sovereignty, security, and humanitarian obligations.

With its unique insight into national security matters, we hope this publication will help our esteemed readers maintain a comprehensive understanding of the current strategic landscape. We strongly urge you to share your expertise through short pieces of writing. These can include policy analyses, case studies, or thought pieces on current geopolitical and economic issues in Pakistan and its neighbouring regions. We value well-researched and balanced perspectives that can contribute to a deeper understanding of the region.

# The Indus River as Civilisational Spine of Pakistan's Identity

*Dr M. A. Gul*

## Abstract

*This INSIGHT argues that the Indus River functions as Pakistan's civilisational spine, connecting Soanian prehistory, the Indus Valley and Gandhara eras, Islamic polities, and modern statehood. It shows how archaeology, culture and political economy converge around the river to form a durable, cross-epoch national narrative. Recovering the Indus narrative offers a non-sectarian identity axis that can strengthen soft power, cultural diplomacy and social cohesion. The author recommends coordinated heritage promotion, curricular integration, and tourism diplomacy to turn this legacy into concrete statecraft. Practical impact requires a professional, strategic policy framework rather than piecemeal or purely symbolic efforts.*

**Keywords:** Indus Valley Civilisation, Civilisational Identity, Soft Power, Historical Geography.

Civilisations often draw their identity from the rivers that nurture them. Egypt is synonymous with the Nile; Mesopotamia with the Tigris and Euphrates; and China with the Yellow River. In South Asia, the Indus River has played a similar role. Indeed, the very name "India" derives from the Indus, though the river itself lies almost entirely within Pakistan today. Unlike the Gangetic heartland that shaped Indian identity, Pakistan's geopolitical identity has historically been anchored in the Indus Basin.

This Insight traces the civilisational, cultural, and political significance of the Indus across epochs, highlighting its role as the constant thread in Pakistan's historical identity.

The earliest human communities in present-day Pakistan clustered around the Soan Valley, a tributary of the Indus near Rawalpindi. The Soanian culture (500,000–125,000 years ago) produced stone tools—hand axes, cleavers, and scrapers demonstrating an intimate relationship with the riverine environment that offered water, game, and fertile plains for primitive subsistence.<sup>1</sup>

The Mehrgarh settlement in Balochistan (c. 7000–2600 BCE) marks one of the world's earliest farming communities.<sup>2</sup> While geographically west of the Indus, Mehrgarh's surplus-based economy and technological innovations (pottery, dentistry, domestication) laid the groundwork for urbanisation in the Indus floodplains. Thus, Mehrgarh represents the formative stage of the Indus Valley Civilisation (IVC), where the river was to become the proper civilisational lifeline.

The IVC (c. 3300–1300 BCE), named after the river itself, was South Asia's first urban civilisation. Cities like Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro flourished along its banks, featuring grid-planned streets, drainage systems, and advanced trade networks.<sup>3</sup> Agriculture depended on the river's floods, while its course linked settlements from the Himalayas to the Arabian Sea. Unlike Egypt or Mesopotamia, the IVC displayed remarkable cultural uniformity across a vast expanse, a unity forged by the Indus River.

**By foregrounding the Indus as the shared denominator of all epochs—prehistoric, Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, and modern—Pakistan can present itself as both an ancient civilisation and a modern nation, enhancing its soft power and public diplomacy outreach.**

Centuries later, the Gandhara civilisation (6th century BCE – 11th century CE) emerged in the upper Indus Basin, around Peshawar, Swat, and Taxila. Gandhara became a crucible of Buddhist philosophy, art, and education, blending Hellenistic and Indian influences under Indo-Greek, Kushan, and later rulers.<sup>4</sup> The Indus and its tributaries served as conduits of the Silk Road, enabling trade and the spread of Buddhism into Central and East Asia.

The Hindu Shahi dynasty (9<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> century CE), ruling from forts in the Indus and Kabul valleys, represented the last great pre-Islamic polity of the region.

Their capitals, such as Hund and Udigram, were riverine strongholds, again affirming the centrality of the Indus system.<sup>5</sup>

With the arrival of Islam in the 8th Century and its consolidation under the Ghaznavids, Ghurids, Delhi Sultans, and eventually the Mughals, the Indus Basin again became a prized frontier. Lahore, Multan, and Thatta, all Indus cities, served as cultural and administrative centres.<sup>6</sup> Sufi traditions that spread Islam in the region were deeply tied to the river's towns and rural networks.

Under British rule, the Indus became central to the world's most extensive irrigation system, the Punjab Canal Colonies, transforming agrarian production and demographic patterns.<sup>7</sup> At independence in 1947, Pakistan inherited the Indus Basin as its geographic core. The Indus Waters Treaty (1960) further underscored its strategic importance, cementing the river as both an economic lifeline and a political symbol of sovereignty.

Today, the Indus remains the spine of Pakistan's identity in multiple dimensions:

- **Geographical:** It unites disparate provinces into one ecological unit.
- **Historical:** From Soanian toolmakers to Mughal emperors, it has been constant.
- **Cultural:** Sufi poetry, Sindhi folklore, and Punjabi agrarian rhythms are steeped in the Indus.
- **Political:** The river is at the heart of federal arrangements, resource disputes, and national survival.

In contemporary times, Pakistan's public diplomacy and nation-branding often emphasise its Islamic identity, geopolitical location, or security concerns.

Yet the Indus River provides an additional, unifying civilisational narrative that can complement the Islamic dimension of identity.

By presenting itself internationally as the heir of the Indus Valley, Gandhara, and Sufi traditions, Pakistan can craft a narrative of continuity that highlights tolerance, cultural pluralism, and antiquity. This approach allows Pakistan to project its identity not solely through religion or politics but also through a 5,000-year civilisational legacy rooted in the Indus Basin.

Pakistan has done some policy work to integrate the IVC narrative for promoting national identity and cohesion. However, the efforts are disjointed with little impact on the ground. The policy framework needs a wholesome strategy to be driven by passionate and professional people. Some guidelines for a strategy are as follows:

- Promoting archaeological heritage sites (Mohenjo-Daro, Harappa, Taxila) as global cultural treasures.
- Developing museums and cultural diplomacy initiatives around the “Indus identity.”
- Integrating the Indus narrative into curricula and tourism branding.
- Using the Indus story to bridge Pakistan’s Islamic identity with its pre-Islamic heritage, positioning Islam as the latest and most enduring layer of a much older Indus-centred identity.

By foregrounding the Indus as the shared denominator of all epochs, prehistoric, Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, and modern, Pakistan can present itself as both an ancient civilisation and a modern nation, enhancing its soft power and public diplomacy outreach.<sup>8</sup>

If Pakistan is to understand its place in history, it must recognise itself not only as a political construct of 1947 but as the heir to a 5,000-year-old Indus legacy. Emphasising this legacy in public diplomacy provides Pakistan with a unique opportunity to balance its Islamic identity with its ancient civilisational roots, positioning itself as both timeless and contemporary.

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## About Insight and Author

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# China–Russia Replacing the United States as Interlocutors between India and Pakistan

*Dr M. A. Gul*

## Abstract

*This INSIGHT explores the diminishing effectiveness of US mediation in managing India–Pakistan crises and argues for a reoriented framework led by China and Russia. The study contends that Washington’s strategic alignment with New Delhi has reinforced Indian assertiveness and eroded prospects for genuine dialogue with Islamabad. In contrast, a China–Russia partnership—leveraging their respective ties with Pakistan and India—could offer a more balanced, multipolar, and sustainable approach to regional peace. Through institutional platforms like the SCO and potential quadrilateral mechanisms, this model emphasises regional ownership and long-term stability over episodic U.S.-driven crisis management.*

**Keywords:** China–Russia Mediation, South Asian Security Architecture, Crisis Diplomacy, Multipolar Regional Order.

Since the end of the Cold War, the US has consistently cast itself as the principal crisis manager in South Asia, particularly during moments of acute military escalation between Pakistan and India. Each of these episodes saw the US assume the role of mediator, but rather than producing a durable peace, US involvement has perpetuated a cycle of dependency on Washington’s diplomacy.<sup>1</sup>

Over time, the efficacy of US mediation has diminished. India, emboldened by growing US support, has distanced itself from bilateralism with Pakistan, while Washington’s strategic tilt toward New Delhi has reinforced Indian assertiveness.

Against this backdrop, a fundamental rethinking of the mediation framework in South Asia is required.

This Insight argues that the time has come to consider a China–Russia mediated arrangement, which, given both countries’ unique leverage with Pakistan and India respectively, could offer a more balanced and sustainable path to peace.

The US role in South Asia has largely been reactive, focused on conflict management rather than conflict resolution. During the Kargil War in 1999, US President Bill Clinton pressed Pakistan to withdraw from the conflict, which helped avert escalation but left Islamabad alienated and reinforced India’s international standing.<sup>2</sup>

**China-Russia mediated arrangement offers a more balanced, multipolar alternative that draws on each country’s unique leverage with Pakistan and India, respectively.**

In 2001–02, following the attack on the Indian Parliament, Washington’s shuttle diplomacy succeeded in defusing tensions. However, it failed to move India and Pakistan toward a meaningful dialogue on Kashmir.

The Mumbai attacks of 2008 marked a turning point, as India suspended the Composite Dialogue, and Washington largely prioritised counterterrorism cooperation with New Delhi over reconciliation with Islamabad.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, after the Pathankot and Uri incidents in 2016, US statements tacitly endorsed India’s so-called “surgical strikes,” lending legitimacy to unilateral Indian military actions.<sup>4</sup>

During the Pulwama–Balakot crisis of 2019, Washington helped de-escalate after Pakistan downed an Indian fighter jet, but its broader posture again privileged India’s narrative while marginalising Pakistan’s concerns.<sup>5</sup>

The 2025 Pahalgam crisis marked a departure. The US adopted an unusually detached stance, reflecting Washington's frustration with India, especially in relation to its deepening energy ties with Russia, which helped Russia immensely during its war with Ukraine. However, even this "cold shoulder" did not translate into pressure for India to engage constructively with Pakistan. This long record demonstrates that US diplomacy has acted as a short-term fire extinguisher but has not paved the way toward sustainable peace in South Asia.

One significant consequence of US involvement has been India's steady withdrawal from any structured engagement with Pakistan. The Composite Dialogue process was effectively terminated after the 2008 Mumbai attacks, while in 2016 India sabotaged the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit in Islamabad, signalling its unwillingness to promote regional integration.<sup>6</sup> In 2019, India unilaterally abrogated Articles 370 and 35A of its Constitution, altering the status of Jammu and Kashmir and foreclosing dialogue.<sup>7</sup>

More recently, New Delhi has challenged the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT), long hailed as one of the most successful conflict management frameworks in international relations, by holding it in abeyance in 2025.<sup>8</sup>

India has also boycotted sporting ties with Pakistan, particularly cricket, thereby extending its strategy of isolation into the cultural domain. These actions, far from reflecting a desire for reconciliation, illustrate a deliberate policy of disassociation, enabled by Washington's diplomatic and strategic patronage.

The scale of this disengagement can be gauged by the decline in bilateral trade. India-Pakistan trade fell from US\$2.6 billion in 2012-13 to less than US\$500 million by 2020-21, before being suspended entirely in 2019 following the abrogation of Article 370.<sup>9</sup> This economic estrangement mirrors the broader political and cultural distancing between the two neighbours.

The limitations of US mediation stem from deeper structural factors. First, Washington's strategic realignment toward India has positioned New Delhi as a central pillar of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy.

This framework, epitomised in the QUAD, envisions India as a counterweight to China, and thus privileges India's security and diplomatic concerns over Pakistan.<sup>10</sup>

Second, Pakistan's engagement with Washington is only transactional, whether for counterterrorism cooperation, tactical crisis management, or to put pressure on India rather than as a partner in long-term stability.

Third, US support for India across defence, economy, and technology has emboldened New Delhi's hardline stance vis-à-vis Pakistan. In the last two decades, the US and India have signed three foundational defence agreements, LEMOA (2016), COMCASA (2018), and BECA (2020), which enable unprecedented interoperability and intelligence sharing. US defence exports to India grew from US\$200 million in 2000 to over US\$20 billion by 2020, marking India as one of Washington's largest arms clients.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, sustained instability in South Asia indirectly serves US strategic objectives by constraining China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). A stable Pakistan-India relationship would enhance the viability of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and its extensions toward Central Asia, something Washington does not consider to be in its strategic interest.

In contrast to the US approach, a China-Russia mediated framework offers structural advantages. India has historically depended on Russia for defence procurement: between 2000 and 2020, approximately 65-70% of India's military imports came from Russia, including key platforms such as the Su-30MKI fighter jets, S-400 air defence systems, and nuclear-powered submarines. Following the Ukraine war, Russia became India's top energy supplier, accounting for 35% of India's crude oil imports in 2023, up from less than 1% in 2021.

Pakistan, meanwhile, enjoys an "all-weather" (iron brother) partnership with China. The CPEC, launched in 2015, represents more than US\$62 billion in pledged infrastructure and energy projects, making it the single most significant component of Beijing's BRI (Sacks, 2021).<sup>12</sup>

China is also Pakistan's largest supplier of military hardware, providing JF-17 fighter aircraft, HQ-9 air defence systems, and naval frigates.

China and Russia are themselves strategic partners, coordinating within platforms such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Both countries have a vested interest in regional stability, given their connectivity projects and aspirations for a multipolar order. The SCO already includes both India and Pakistan, offering a ready-made institutional mechanism that could be leveraged for dialogue. Unlike Washington, whose interests are shaped by global competition with China, Beijing and Moscow would prioritise stability in South Asia to safeguard their own strategic and economic interests.

To operationalise such a framework, several steps are necessary. First, India, Pakistan, China, and Russia could establish a quadrilateral forum dedicated explicitly to South Asian stability.

Second, both countries should adopt confidence-building measures (CBMs), such as agreements on ceasefire monitoring, revitalisation of military hotlines, restarting the stalled cooperation mechanisms like Composite Dialogue, SAARC, etc. and reaffirmation of water-sharing commitments.

Third, discreet Track-II initiatives involving former officials and policy experts could serve as a testing ground for more formal dialogue.

Russia, leveraging its defence and energy ties, is well-positioned to nudge India toward re-engagement, while China can reassure Pakistan that its interests, especially Kashmir, will not be compromised. The aim would not be to impose solutions but to create structured dialogue mechanisms that move beyond Washington's episodic crisis diplomacy. Over time, such a framework could reduce the heavy reliance on US mediation and lay the groundwork for regional ownership of peace.

While the Hindutva-driven politics of the Modi government remain a significant obstacle, the recent US snub of India during the Pahalgam crisis creates a narrow window of opportunity. Sustainable peace in South Asia requires regional ownership, and a China–Russia framework could represent the first genuine step in that direction.

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## About Insight and Author

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# Geostrategic Dynamics of the South China Sea

*Khazada Bilal*

## Abstract

*This INSIGHT discusses that the South China Sea (SCS) has become a focal point of strategic rivalry between the United States (US) and China, with competing territorial claims from multiple regional states. This study explores the geopolitical significance of the SCS, highlighting its role in global trade, energy security, and military power projection. The analysis examines historical disputes, China's assertive maritime strategies, and the US' containment policies, emphasising the implications for regional stability. The findings suggest that increasing tensions in the SCS could reshape power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific, influencing the broader international order.*

**Keywords:** South China Sea, Containment Strategy, Asia-Pacific.

Disputes in the South China Sea (SCS) have gained significant attention due to the ongoing rivalry between the United States (US) and China. The US aims to contain Beijing's rise as a near-peer, and its containment strategy is intensifying competition in the Asia-Pacific region, particularly in the SCS. This insight explores the current geostrategic dynamics of the SCS, emphasising the significance of its geography, the historical context of the issues at hand, and the escalating strategic competition in the region.

The SCS covers around 3.5 million square kilometres, borders China, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, and the Philippines, and provides a significant maritime corridor for global trade.<sup>1</sup> Approximately 30% of global maritime trade, including oil, liquefied natural gas (LNG), and consumer goods, passes through this.

It links the Strait of Malacca (to the West) and the Taiwan Strait (to the East), making it a crucial passage for East Asian economies—about 60% of China's trade and 80% of its energy imports transit through the SCS. At the same time, the US, Japan, South Korea, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries depend on the SCS for trade and supply chain security.

Chinese dynasties, Southeast Asian kingdoms, and European colonial powers navigated the SCS for trade and territorial control for ages without significant disputes. It became disputed in the wake of the Japanese defeat at the hands of the US during World War II, creating a power vacuum once Tokyo was forced to surrender the territories under its control.<sup>2</sup> Surrounding states made competing claims for islands and reefs, citing precedents, colonial treaties, and geographic proximity to assert their rights.

### Political Map of the South China Sea



Source: nationsonline.org

Territorial disputes between littoral states brewed in the 1970s, eventually boiling into clashes for fishing rights and natural resources.<sup>3</sup> The discovery of substantial oil and gas reserves further exacerbated tensions. The disputes extended to control over islands, shoals, banks, reefs, and other features spreading across the SCS. For instance, although small in size and uninhabited, the islands called Paracel and Spratly by the US-led West and Japan, and Xīshā Qúndǎo and Nánshā Qúndǎo by China, are a bone of contention for two main reasons: who owns them to apply the rules, and what can be done in the surrounding waters?

By the 1980s, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Vietnam started establishing a presence on various islands and reefs. The naval skirmish between China and Vietnam in 1988 at Johnson Reef marked a significant escalation of territorial disputes in the region, compelling China to assert its claims.

China, Malaysia, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Taiwan occupy around 70 disputed reefs and islands in the SCS, with over 90 outposts. According to Western reports, China has twenty outposts in the Paracel Islands and seven in the Spratly Islands. In the Spratly only, Malaysia has five features, the Philippines controls nine, and Taiwan has one. Vietnam maintains a presence on 49 - 51 outposts across twenty-seven features, and the status of two construction projects on Cornwallis South Reef is unclear.<sup>4</sup>

In the past two decades, the SCS has become increasingly prominent, driven by China's increasing economic power, focus on the blue water navy, and US-stated policies to contain China's rise. As a non-littoral external player, maintaining ascendancy in the SCS is a geostrategic imperative for the US.

For China, this implies asserting the rights of free and open seas and the right of safe passage in its sea lines of communication (SLOCs). China noticed these forays into what it considers its territories and responded by initiating island-building efforts. Between 2013 and 2015, it asserted its rights by creating around 3,000 acres of artificial islands on coral reefs in the Spratly Isles.<sup>5</sup>

China also enacted maritime laws in 1992 as a signatory to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to protect its maritime rights in the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs).<sup>6</sup> Though the US has not ratified UNCLOS, using sovereignty, economic and military concerns as excuses, it strongly supported the Hague Tribunal 2016 arbitration ruling, favouring the Philippines' rejection of China's Nine-dash Line claim.<sup>7</sup>

### Maritime Claims in the South China Sea



Source: Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative

China does not view its relations with the littoral states of the SCS as a zero-sum game.<sup>8</sup> It continues strengthening its relations with the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, and other nations involved in SCS disputes. China is also actively promoting consultations regarding the "Code of Conduct in the SCS" with ASEAN.

For the US, engaging China's neighbours and supporting them in keeping Beijing embroiled in a local mess of an increased cycle of militarisation and diplomatic tensions is strategically convenient. In its "Pivot to Asia" policy, re-named Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) in February

2022,<sup>9</sup> the US has committed to maintaining its post-1945 and 1991 hegemony.

Its “rules-based order” now focuses more on countering China's rise through alliances such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) between the US, Australia, Japan and India and the Australia-US-United Kingdom (AUKUS).

The US, its allies and partners sharply criticise China's efforts to alter the status quo in the SCS, citing its so-called deepening military ties with Russia and North Korea as destabilising factors.<sup>10</sup>

**If the turmoil keeps increasing in the SCS, the long-term importance of states like Myanmar, India, and Pakistan, which provide China with direct potential access to the Indian Ocean, will increase.**

In response, China highlights that these nations are inciting confrontation and distorting realities to hinder China's development. At the Xiangshan Forum, a Chinese General placed the responsibility for rising tensions squarely on Washington, insisting that US intervention is the primary driver of instability.<sup>11</sup>

Amidst these dynamics of the SCS, smaller littoral states walk on a tightrope and often prefer balancing their relations with the US and China. Conflict does not suit their long-term economic interests. However, hedging and maintaining a balanced foreign policy have significant military implications. Some of these states, like Indonesia, teeter on the edge and shy away from directly supporting potential US military operations in the SCS. Conversely, the Philippines has become more strident towards enhancing the US military's ability to project power in the SCS. The complexity poses a potential threat to the regional maritime security environment.

The SCS remains pivotal in the American struggle to contain China's rise. This has intensified the economic and security challenges for the SCS's littoral states. Suppose the turmoil keeps increasing in the SCS. In that case, it will enhance the long-term importance of states like Myanmar, India, and Pakistan that provide direct access to the Indian Ocean Region if China is blocked in the SCS.

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# The Crescent of Terrorism: Myths and Reality

*Ayesha Afgun*

## Abstract

*This INSIGHT discusses the discourse on terrorism, particularly post-9/11, has been strategically manipulated to serve geopolitical objectives. This paper examines how the US-led West leveraged the "Islamic terrorism" narrative to justify military interventions, regime changes, and resource extractions in the Muslim world. While terrorism was historically present, its post-9/11 framing facilitated the expansion of Western hegemony, especially in resource-rich regions. The study critiques the dichotomous portrayal of violence, wherein attacks by Muslim individuals are labelled as terrorism, while similar acts by others are framed as isolated incidents. By exploring the economic and political benefits derived from the War on Terror, this research highlights the constructed nature of terrorism as a geopolitical tool rather than a purely security-driven phenomenon.*

**Keywords:** Islamic Terrorism, Western Hegemony, War on Terror.

The events of September 2001, commonly known as 9/11, not only shook the United States (US) but also moulded a new geopolitical narrative worldwide that would shape the next two decades. Though terrorism as an element existed pre-9/11, this one single incident became the epicentre toward which the entire world constructed a tale of Islamic extremism as the principal global peril. The phenomenon was more of a domino effect, spreading from the Middle East to Northern Africa and Central Asia to Southeast Asia.

This insight highlights the spread of terrorism throughout the Muslim world post-9/11. It argues that the bogey of terrorism that spread from Africa to Southeast Asia was created primarily post-9/11. It also discusses the debate surrounding terrorism as a geopolitical tool to leverage gains.

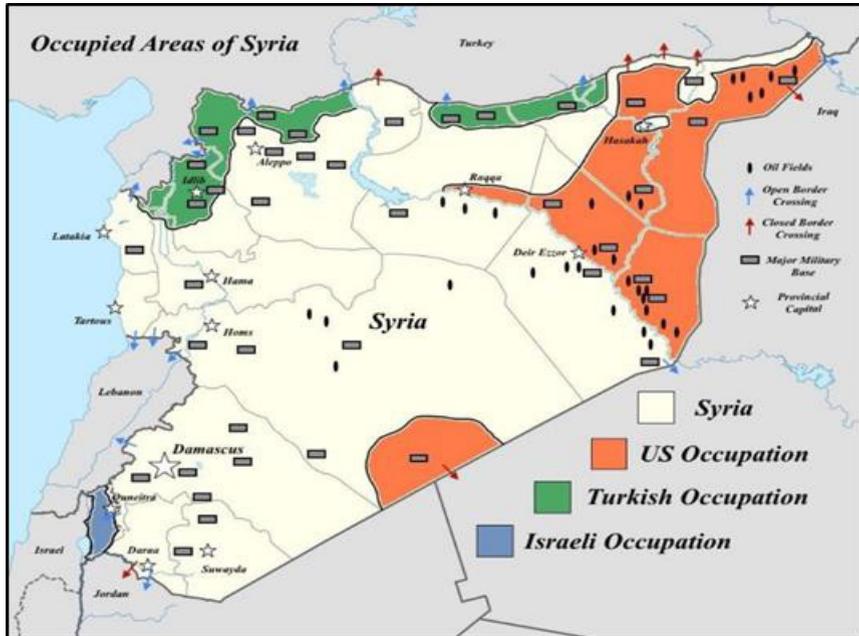
The US-led West has played well the narrative of so-called Islamic terrorism since 2000 in securing its interests in the post-Cold War order. By identifying a monolithic enemy in terrorism, it created a convenient bogeyman through which it justified military interventions, regime changes, and resource extraction while maintaining global hegemony. Though terrorism is wrongfully linked to Islam and Muslims, the irony is not lost in the fact that the majority of the victims of these terrorist groups are Muslims. These groups preach a self-interpreted version of religion, which, in reality, is far from the actual teachings of Islam.

The statistics show that since 9/11, the majority of attacks have taken place in Muslim majority countries. In contrast, the West witnessed only a few and sporadic occurrences, such as the London Bombing (2005), the Paris Attacks (2015) and a few more.<sup>1</sup> When somebody of Muslim ethnicity perpetrates some violent act, it is immediately labelled as ‘terrorism’, implying ideological intent. At the same time, similar acts by other perpetrators, such as mass shootings in the West, are framed as actions of ‘mentally ill’ individuals. The dichotomy in how acts of violence are labelled based on the perpetrator’s background highlights biases and prejudices at the global level.

**Since 2000, the US-led West has manipulated the Islamic terrorism narrative to suit their post-Cold War grand strategic interests and justify military interventions, regime changes, and resource extractions, while maintaining global hegemony against China and Russia.**

Moreover, the recent developments in Syria (figure 1) expose the role of global powers in backing local militias and terrorist organisations to secure control over land and natural resources.<sup>2</sup> This pattern reflects a broader strategy where the West has exploited the terrorism narrative to justify military expansion in strategic regions, including the Middle East, Central Asia, Africa, and Southeast Asia.

**Figure 1:** Map of Syria (Oilfields and Military Bases)



Source: Reddit

Afghanistan, for example, became not just a battleground against the Taliban but also a key site for American geopolitical influence. NATO's involvement in operations like 'Enduring Freedom' demonstrated the West's ability to unite under the banner of counterterrorism while pursuing strategic objectives. Likewise, the establishment of military bases in Iraq, Syria, and the Gulf States illustrates how the terrorism narrative has sustained a prolonged Western military presence, reinforcing their dominance over resource-rich territories. The major terrorist organisations are given in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Major Terrorist Organizations (Africa and Asia)

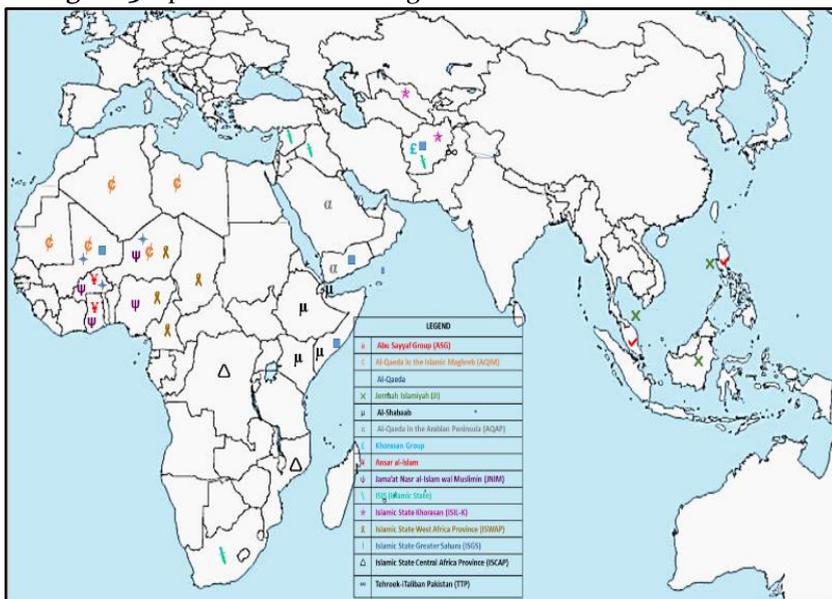
Organization	Region	Countries of Operation	Core Group	Affiliates	Active Years
Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG)	Southeast Asia	Philippines, Malaysia	Foreign Extremists	Islamic State	1991 – Present
Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)	North & West Africa	Algeria, Mali, Libya, Niger, Mauritania	Algerian Extremists	JNIM, Ansar Dine, Katibat al-Murabitum	1998 – Present
Al-Qaeda	Global	Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia, Mali	Sunni Jihadists	AQAP, AQIM, Al-Shabaab, JNIM, Ansar al-Islam, Khorasan Group	1988 – Present
Jemaah Islamiyah (JI)	Southeast Asia	Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines	Indonesian Extremists	Al-Qaeda	1993 – Present
Al-Shabaab	East Africa	Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti	Somali Extremists	Al-Qaeda	1993 – Present
Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)	South Asia	Pakistan, Afghanistan	Afghan Extremists	Al-Qaeda	2007 – Present
Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)	Middle East	Yemen, Saudi Arabia	Yemeni Extremists	None	2009 – Present
Khorasan Group	South Asia	Afghanistan	Afghan	Al-Qaeda	2012 – Present
Ansar al-Islam	West Africa	Burkina Faso, Mali	Regional Extremists	JNIM, AQIM	2016 – Present
Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal (JNIM)	West Africa	Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Algeria	Regional Extremists	AQIM, Ansar Dine Katibat Macina	2017 – Present
ISIS (Islamic State)	Global	Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Africa	Sunni Jihadists	ISIL-K, ISWAP, Abu Sayyaf, IS Central Africa, IS-Greater Sahara	2014 – Present
Islamic State (ISIL-K)	South Asia	Afghanistan, Uzbekistan	Regional Extremists	None	2015 – Present
Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP)	West Africa	Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Cameroon	Boko Haram defectors	None	2015 – Present
Islamic State Greater Sahara (ISGS)	West Africa	Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso	Regional Extremists	ISWAP	2015 – Present
Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP)	Central Asia	DR Congo, Mozambique	Regional Extremists	None	2019 – Present

Source: CIA World Factbook

The so-called spread of terrorism has been hugely lucrative for the Western powers. Defence contractors such as Lockheed Martin, Boeing, and Raytheon have secured billions in profits from arms sales and military operations conducted under the pretext of fighting terrorism.<sup>3</sup> According to a report by the Costs of War Project (2021), the US spent over US\$8 trillion on its post-9/11 wars, much of which flowed to private defence firms and contractors.<sup>4</sup> Arms sales to Middle Eastern allies also sharply rose under the pretext of fighting terrorism.<sup>5</sup> Saudi Arabia alone took 12% of global arms imports from 2014 through 2018, mainly supplied by the US. It would be simplistic to deny the linkage of the arms industry to the West's foreign policy. It has benefited and still benefits from longstanding conflicts and instability.

The invasion of resource-rich countries like Iraq and Libya facilitated the extraction of oil and other minerals. In Iraq, US oil companies secured lucrative contracts following the toppling of Saddam Hussein, while Libya's vast oil reserves became a focal point after the NATO-led intervention in 2011. These interventions were not merely about combating terrorism but securing access to strategic resources, reinforcing the economic underpinnings of the War on Terror. The map below shows the presence of these organisations across Africa and Asia.

**Figure 3: Spread of Terrorist Organisations Across Africa and Asia**



Source: Self-Compiled

The Islamic world is deeply fragmented on sectarian, ethnic, and ideological lines. Hence, it is prone to external manipulation. The West has effectively exploited these fissures to pursue its geopolitical interests. For instance, the 2003 US invasion of Iraq did away with Saddam Hussein's regime, which was tenuously maintaining a balance between the Sunni and Shia populations. This created a power vacuum into which extremist organisations like ISIS moved to capitalise on the resultant chaos.<sup>6</sup>

The case of Libya after NATO's intervention in 2011 is another example. Under the pretext of humanitarian intervention, Muammar Gaddafi's regime was toppled, and what came afterwards was a fractured state overrun by militias and extremist factions. Oil infrastructure in Libya has been targeted and exploited, indicating very strongly the economic incentives of such Western interventions. President Trump's recent statement regarding the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and its funding of terrorist networks raises questions about the US commitment to combating terrorism and implies a form of indirect support. A notable example of this concern is Anwar al-Awlaki, who received education funded by USAID before joining Al-Qaeda.

The War on Terror is less about combating extremism and more about maintaining Western dominance in a rapidly changing global order. As terrorism recedes from US national security priorities, its legacy remains a stark reminder of how global narratives can be manipulated to serve powerful interests at the expense of the vulnerable population.

The US National Security Strategy (NSS) from 2001 to 2008 featured terrorism as its dominant theme. However, the Biden administration's 2022 USNSS shows great power competition with China and Russia as the main threat. This reflects a very real fact of life: terrorism, while rightly still a concern, has largely outlived its utility as a unifying narrative in the early years of the 21st century for interventions by the West.

In the aftermath, with 20 years of hindsight, one can conclude that the so-called label of Islamic terrorism, as it has arisen, is, to a great extent, a construct serving the strategic interests of Western powers. It would not be inaccurate to say that these so-called Islamic terrorist organisations have, at times, operated as US-led Western proxies. The narrative was created to dismantle the Muslim world and solidify Western influence in different regions. These faultlines in the Islamic world conferred several economic and geopolitical benefits to many global powers and their allies in the form of arms sales, expansion of the military-industrial complex, and access to key resources, thus assisting them to retain their global hegemony.

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# India's Pursuit of Hypersonic Weapons and Its Implications for Pakistan

*Umair Ahmad*

## Abstract

*This INSIGHT discusses that Hypersonic Weapons (HWs) capable of exceeding Mach 5 speed (>1 mile/sec) are a transformative advancement in missile technology. India's aggressive pursuit of these HWs introduces a broad spectrum of implications and challenges for regional security and stability. HWs are broadly of two types: Hypersonic Glide Vehicles (HGVs) and Hypersonic Cruise Missiles (HCMs). Their enormous speed, manoeuvrability, and pinpoint accuracy make them the most lethal missiles, significantly complicating and challenging existing air defence paradigms. This insight argues that the Indian pursuit of Hypersonic Weapons is a potent threat to the strategic stability between India and Pakistan.*

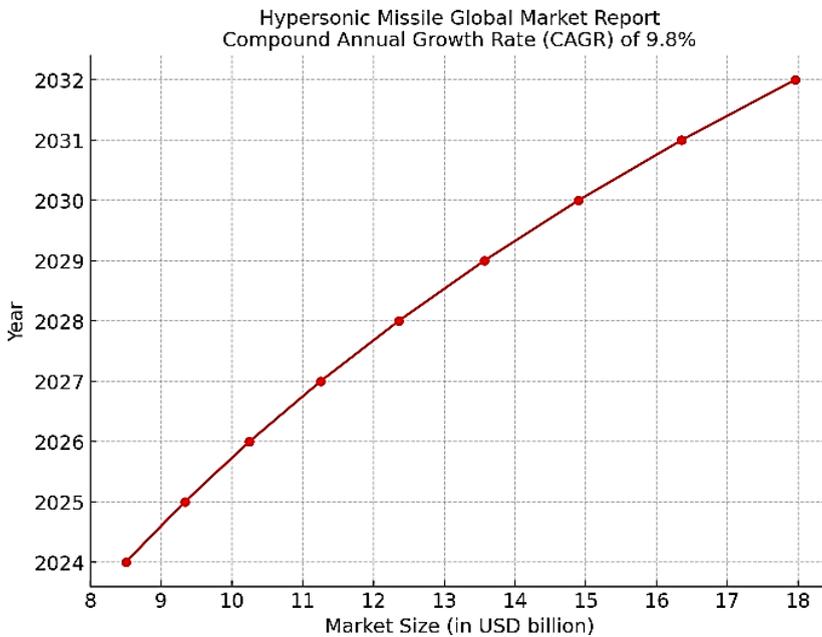
**Keywords:** Hypersonic Weapons, Missile Technology, Regional Security, Air Defence Paradigm.

**H**ypersonic Weapons (HWs) capable of exceeding Mach 5 speed (>1 mile/sec) are a transformative advancement in missile technology. India's aggressive pursuit of these HWs introduces a broad spectrum of implications and challenges for regional security and stability. HWs are broadly of two types: Hypersonic Glide Vehicles (HGVs) and Hypersonic Cruise Missiles (HCMs). Their enormous speed, manoeuvrability, and pinpoint accuracy make them the most lethal missiles, significantly complicating and challenging existing air defence paradigms. This insight argues that the Indian pursuit of Hypersonic Weapons is a potent threat to the strategic stability between India and Pakistan.

India, among a few other countries, has demonstrated hypersonic capabilities worldwide. A growing global appetite for HWs is at its peak these days. The graph shows the current and future projections of the Hypersonic market.

Rapid growth in the Hypersonic Missile market has been witnessed in recent years. By the end of this decade, it is expected to grow from US\$8.5 billion in 2024 to US\$18 billion in 2032, with an overall compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 9.8%.

China and Russia are leading the HW race, followed by the US, India, and North Korea. Major powers started concentrating efforts to attain hypersonic weapons in the 21st century, especially after the US withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty in 2002, catalysing the HW race.



**Source:** Hypersonic Missile Market<sup>1</sup>

However, the US did not prioritise the pursuit of HWs; instead, it invested in parallel technologies. The status of the current global hypersonic inventory is as follows.<sup>2</sup>

Country	Hypersonic Missile Name & Type	Estimated Peak Speed	Range (Kms)	Current Status
Russia	Avangard HGV	Mach 27	6000	Operational
	Kinzhal (Air Launch Hypersonic Ballistic Missile)	Mach 10	3000	Operational
	Tsirkon/Zircon Ship/Submarine Launch HCM	Mach 9	500	Operational
China	DF-ZF, MRBM, HGV	Mach 10	2000	Operational
US	Dark Eagle Long Range HGV	Mach 5	2500	Tested (Dec 12, 2024)
India	<b>Long Range Anti-Ship Hypersonic Missile (Unnamed)</b>	<b>Mach 5</b>	<b>1500</b>	<b>Tested (Nov 16, 2024)</b>
North Korea	Hwasong-8 (HGV)	Mach 12	1500	Tested (Jan 7, 2025)

**Source:** Bugos, S. & Reif, K. (2021). Understanding Hypersonic Weapons<sup>3</sup>

Russia has the most active and diverse arsenal of HWs in its inventory and is India's primary defence partner. India's Hypersonic ambitions date back to the early 2000s, when the then-president of India, Abdul Kalam, discussed the idea of the Brahmos 2 hypersonic missile; later, in 2009, India signed an MoU with Russia in the field of Hypersonic Missiles, and work started jointly by India's Defence and Research Organisation (DRDO) and Russia's Mashinostroyeniya.<sup>4</sup> Both countries are part of the MTCR (Missile Technology Control Regime), further facilitating India's access to advanced, sensitive, and restricted missile technology.<sup>5</sup>

On November 16, 2024, India's DRDO successfully tested the country's first Long Range Hypersonic Missile (an anti-ship missile) from Abdul Kalam Island near the coast of Odisha.

The missile is reported to have a range of 1500 km. It is capable of carrying both conventional and nuclear payloads. Its range covers the whole of Pakistan and essential choke points in the South China Sea (SCS). This test shows India's aggressive Military modernisation, ultimately threatening regional stability.

The following timeline depicts the development of the Indian Hypersonic Weapon Programme.



**Source:** Illustrated by the Author

The induction of HWs by India would significantly alter the complex and delicate security architecture of the South Asian region.<sup>6</sup> Pakistan does not possess these HWs and has no defence technology to intercept them, making it vulnerable. This would have multifaceted and adverse implications for Pakistan, as India and Pakistan are both overtly nuclearised neighbouring nations that share a history of persistent, recurring conflicts.<sup>7</sup>

**India's pursuit of hypersonic weapons is a potent threat to the strategic stability of South Asia.**

The desire to acquire these HWs and the subsequent offensive and defensive measures (based on the action-reaction model) to counter them can trigger an arms race, ultimately destabilising the region. As crisis stability is essential to strategic stability, these dual-capable ultra-high-speed HWs can reach the target quickly, reducing crucial response time and options that cause crisis instability.<sup>8</sup>

These Indian HWs would further reduce the short-range missile flight time, which is currently 5-10 minutes between India and Pakistan, to 2-3 minutes.

This means that the Observe, Orient, Decode, and Act (OODA) loop, which most countries use to assess and respond to the threat, would be considerably compressed, increasing the chances of misperception and accidental launches.

Indian asymmetric increase in strike capabilities can also complicate the complex naval security calculus of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). HWs would enhance India's Anti-Access and Area Denial (A<sub>2</sub>/AD) capabilities in IOR, which is of increasing strategic importance to Pakistan.<sup>9</sup>

India receives free passes and technological transfers from Russia and the US in the defence sector. At the same time, the US is imposing discriminatory sanctions on Pakistan's missile programme. SAARC is not functioning; however, Pakistan can diplomatically engage with South Asian countries other than India and take them into confidence to formulate some regional arms control measures.

Pakistan has to respond to this significant military modernisation of India and counter this by exploring all options. There is no publicly disclosed evidence of Pakistan developing domestic hypersonic technology. However, Pakistan has a very well-established indigenous missile programme that can look into creating its own HWs (after doing a cost-benefit analysis). On a parallel, Pakistan can further synthesise its second strike capability, develop Anti-Satellite (ASAT) capability to deter India from a counterforce strike and invest in missile defence systems, such as air defence and counter-hypersonic systems, possibly with countries like China or Russia, to reduce the threat posed by advanced missile technologies.

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# Digital Payments: Challenges and Opportunities for Pakistan

*Muhammad Umar Farooq Baloch*

## Abstract

*This INSIGHT explores the dynamic landscape of Cross-Border Digital Payments (CBDPs) in Pakistan, highlighting both the immense potential and persistent challenges in achieving seamless financial integration. With remittances, exports, and fintech innovation at its core, Pakistan's evolving payment ecosystem—anchored by initiatives like RAAST and the Roshan Digital Account—faces obstacles such as high transaction costs, limited interoperability, and regulatory fragmentation. Strategic reforms in regulatory frameworks, global fintech collaboration, and infrastructure modernisation are essential for optimising Pakistan's role in the global digital economy.*

**Keywords:** Payment Ecosystem, Cross-Border Digital Payments, Fintech.

Cross-border digital payments (CBDPs) are vital to global trade, remittances, and financial inclusion. With Pakistan's large diaspora and growing digital economy, optimising CBDPs presents challenges and opportunities. This Insight examines Pakistan's CBDPs landscape, key hurdles, and growth prospects.

CBDPs are crucial for Pakistan for several reasons. Firstly, boosting exports is essential for sustained economic growth. Higher exports generate foreign exchange and often lead to an increase in imports. Secondly, remittances from expatriate Pakistanis are vital for stabilising the economy, as they provide a steady inflow of foreign currency.

Furthermore, investments by expatriates and other foreign stakeholders, particularly in small and medium enterprises, play a key role in fostering economic growth, driving innovation, and creating employment opportunities.

Pakistan's cross-border transactions primarily depend on traditional banks and Money Transfer Operators (MTOs) like Western Union and MoneyGram.<sup>1</sup> Mobile wallets and fintech platforms like JazzCash and Nayapay ease domestic transactions, but cross-border transfers remain costly and inefficient.<sup>2</sup>

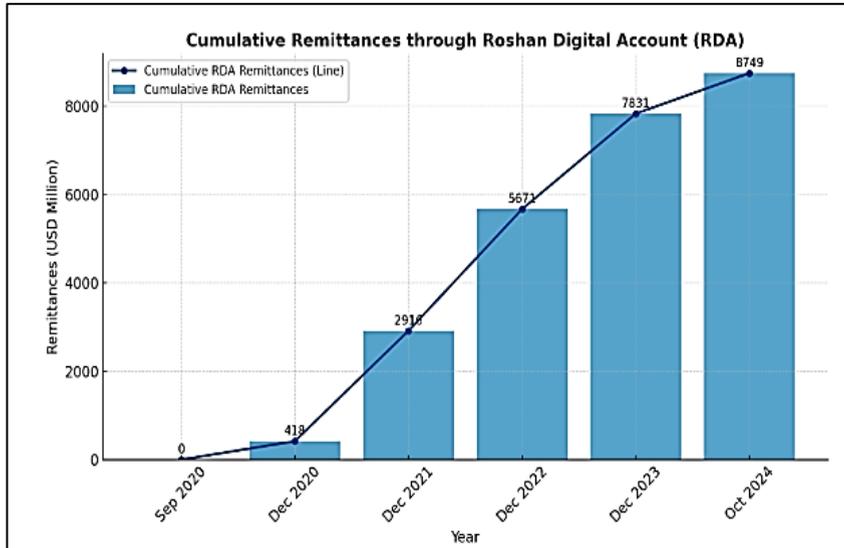
Countries worldwide are advancing digital payment ecosystems, with Singapore in the lead. The cornerstone of Singapore's success is its Fast and Secure Transfers (FAST) system, providing near-instant domestic fund transfers.<sup>3</sup>

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimated (2021) that FAST contributed 0.5%–1.5% to Singapore's annual GDP growth. The Singapore Fintech Association (SFA) reported (2022) a 20% yearly growth in Singapore's digital payment market, driven by FAST.<sup>4</sup>

Recently, Pakistan has improved its digital payment ecosystem, particularly for cross-border transactions, to enhance remittances and international trade. A key development is the launch of RAAST ID, an instant payment system by the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP), which primarily caters to domestic transactions but sets the foundation for future international integration.

**Enhancing interoperability, reducing transaction costs, and adopting fintech innovations are necessary for Pakistan's cross-border payments and monetary flow.**

The SBP has launched the Roshan Digital Account (RDA) for non-resident Pakistanis to manage their accounts from abroad. It allows secure investments in Pakistan's real estate, stock market, and government securities and facilitates tax-free remittances. The graph shows cumulative remittances through RDA over the last five years.<sup>5</sup>



The graph illustrates a steady upward trend in cumulative remittances through the RDA from September 2020 to October 2024, increasing from zero to US\$8,749 million. The period from 2020 to 2022 saw rapid growth, driven by strong early adoption, policy incentives, and increased trust among overseas Pakistanis. While remittances continued to rise, the growth rate began to slow after 2023, suggesting market maturity and potential saturation. Despite this, the RDA has maintained its role as a reliable remittance channel. <sup>6</sup>

Similarly, Pakistan has made significant regulatory advancements by enhancing its compliance with Financial Action Task Force (FATF) standards for Anti-Money Laundering (AML) and Combating the Financing of Terrorism (CFT). This effort has improved the country's reputation with international financial institutions and has been essential for facilitating secure cross-border transactions. <sup>7</sup>

Digital payment adoption in Pakistan has great potential to simplify cross-border transactions; however, it faces numerous challenges that must be overcome. The country's digital infrastructure, both physical and regulatory, is still underdeveloped. Additionally, complex regulatory mechanisms pose a challenge, as strict CBDP policies and compliance with AML standards slow down the process.

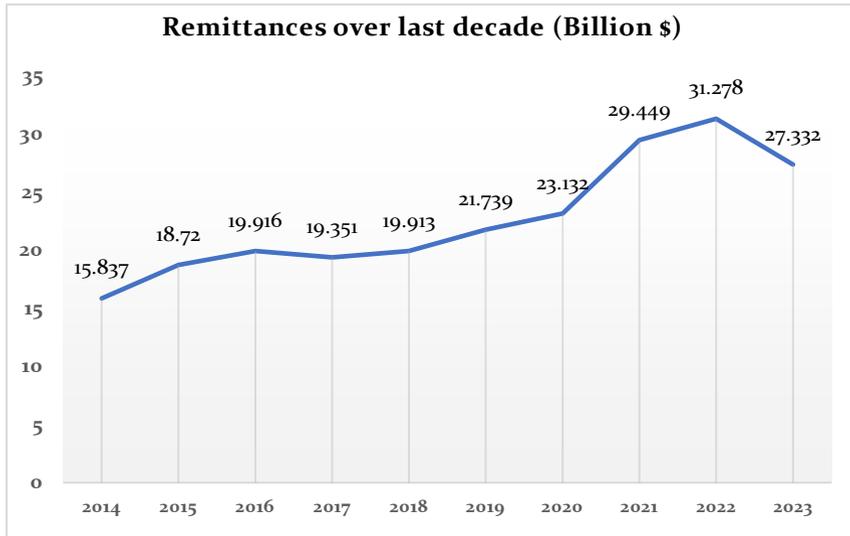
Moreover, limited integration of domestic payment platforms with global systems hinders seamless money transfers to other countries. An exacerbating issue is that Pakistan lacks established entities to collaborate with international financial platforms. A notable example of this challenge is PayPal, which ceased operations in Pakistan due to inadequate support and infrastructure to meet its operational requirements.<sup>8</sup> Limited global integration with international payment systems such as PayPal, Stripe, and Google Pay restricts freelancers, e-commerce businesses, and IT service providers from receiving payments seamlessly.

Interoperability among different payment systems is also essential to operate CBDPs effectively. However, Pakistan's digital payment ecosystem remains fragmented, with limited interoperability between domestic and international payment systems. As the use of digital payments increases, the risks associated with cybersecurity also rise, presenting significant challenges to the security and reliability of CBDPs. It is essential to focus on managing the current account deficit. CBDPs should include policies and regulations facilitating payments from Pakistan to other countries. For instance, these systems should enable expatriates to receive investment returns through the Resident Foreign Currency Accounts and allow parents to cover their children's expenses while studying abroad.

High transaction costs associated with traditional banking channels discourage individuals and businesses from choosing CBDPs. Conventional remittance services typically charge 5-7% per transaction, making informal money transfer networks, such as Hawala and Hundi, more appealing. According to the World Bank's 2022 report, Pakistan's average remittance fee is 6.3%, significantly higher than the global average of 4.7%, further discouraging the use of formal digital channels.

In 2022, a significant portion of remittances was funnelled into the Hundi market, reportedly due to the government's artificial cap on the dollar-to-rupee exchange rate. This situation led to the first decline in annual remittances since 2017, with a decrease observed in fiscal year 2023.

Analysts and currency dealers attributed the US\$4.25 billion drop in remittances in the previous fiscal year to the activities in the Hundi market, as illustrated in the graph.



Despite ongoing challenges, significant opportunities exist to transform Pakistan's payment ecosystem to facilitate CBDPs. Digitising remittance channels could significantly enhance the inflow of remittances. Additionally, collaborating with global fintech companies, such as China-based Alipay+, can provide innovative solutions tailored to Pakistan's unique financial landscape, creating new possibilities for individuals and businesses.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, exploring blockchain technology could revolutionise CBDPs by offering cost-effective and efficient transactions while enhancing transaction speed and security. Reforming regulatory frameworks is essential for streamlining digital cross-border transactions while maintaining compliance with international standards. According to the IMF, Pakistan's regulatory framework for digital payments is still evolving, which has hindered the adoption of secure and interoperable payment systems.

Pakistan is at a crucial juncture. Embracing a strong digital infrastructure and a unified national strategy for capacity-building and development management offers the country a significant opportunity. This strategy should involve key stakeholders, including the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP), the Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan (SECP), the Ministry of Finance, the Establishment Division, banking and non-banking financial institutions, fintech companies, and law enforcement agencies.

CBDPs require the authorities' attention, both fiscally and monetarily. Addressing various aspects separately, such as regulations, financial inclusion, technological infrastructure, and international partnerships, may lead to fragmented efforts and unsatisfactory results.

Therefore, embracing a strong digital infrastructure and comprehensive national policy is needed to guide the implementation of cross-border payments, ensuring that all aspects are holistically integrated. This strategy would involve key stakeholders, including the SBP, the Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan (SECP), the Ministry of Finance, the Establishment Division, banking and non-banking financial institutions, fintech companies, and law enforcement agencies. Key stakeholders will only struggle to regulate CBDPs in Pakistan without an integrated national approach.

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# Unity in Diversity: Exploring Pakistan's Linguistic Landscape

*Saliha Waseem*

## Abstract

*This INSIGHT explores Pakistan's vast linguistic diversity, comprising over 80 languages from major families like Indo-European, Dravidian, and Dardic, shaped by history, migration, and geography. It highlights the sociopolitical role of Urdu as a unifying language and English as a colonial legacy, while analysing regional language trends and threats to endangered tongues. Emphasising policy gaps and preservation challenges, the report underscores the need for institutional support to sustain Pakistan's rich linguistic heritage.*

**Keywords:** Linguistic Diversity, Dravidian, Colonial Legacy.

Pakistan is a country of 241 million people, standing testimony to the dictum of unity in diversity manifested in 68 indigenous languages and 12 non-indigenous languages spoken in the country.<sup>1</sup> The country's linguistic composition is shaped by various historical factors, including the presence of distinct ethnic groups and their associated cultural traditions.

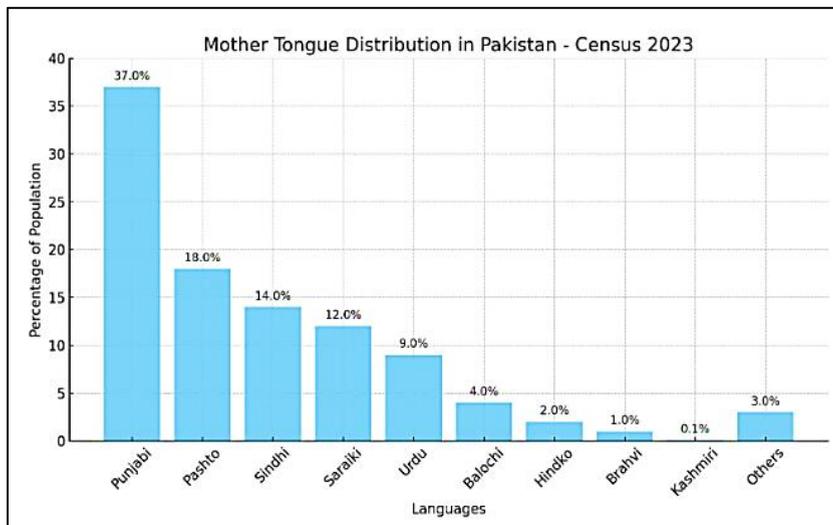
This insight examines Pakistan's linguistic landscape by exploring language demographics, historical developments, and societal impacts, alongside the challenges of language preservation and the danger of extinction.

Pakistan's geographic location and its history have deeply influenced its linguistic diversity.

The 70 to 80 languages spoken across the country belong to four prominent linguistic families: Indo-European (Urdu, Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi, Saraiki, and Balochi), Dravidian (Brahui), Language Isolates (Burushaski), and Sign Languages.<sup>2</sup> A detailed breakdown of these languages is provided in the table at the end of this insight. Pakistan's plural and multilingual social fabric has evolved over centuries of migrations, invasions, and trade.

The 2023 report by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) reveals that Punjabi remains the most widely spoken language, with 37% of Pakistanis identifying it as their mother tongue, followed by Pashto (18%), Sindhi (14%), Saraiki (12%), and Balochi (3%).<sup>3</sup> Other regional languages account for 6% of the population. Urdu, the national language, is the mother tongue of 9% of Pakistanis.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, Urdu serves as the primary means of communication, acting as a lingua franca that fosters interaction between different regions, thereby promoting national cohesion.

Figure 1



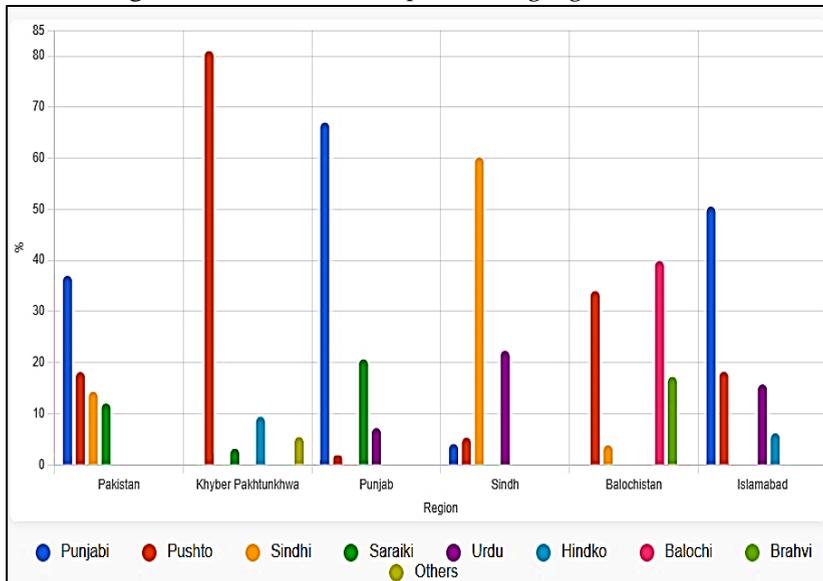
Source: PBS Population and Housing Census Report 2023

The role of Urdu in shaping national identity has been pivotal. Only 9% of Pakistanis speak it as their mother tongue, but over 70% of the population can understand it, making it a crucial unifying force. Its constitutional recognition under Article 251 of the 1973 Constitution, along with its historical significance in the independence movement, has cemented its importance in governance, media, and education.<sup>5</sup>

**The preservation of Pakistan's linguistic diversity is essential for safeguarding its cultural heritage, reinforcing national unity, and enhancing its soft power globally.**

Moreover, English remains the official language alongside Urdu, a legacy of British colonial rule, and is widely used in government, higher education, business, and the legal system. With 49% of the population speaking or understanding English, Pakistan is the fourth-largest English-speaking country globally, after the United States, India, and Nigeria,<sup>6</sup> primarily due to these countries' larger populations compared to other English-speaking nations.

**Figure 2: The Four Most Spoken Languages of Pakistan**

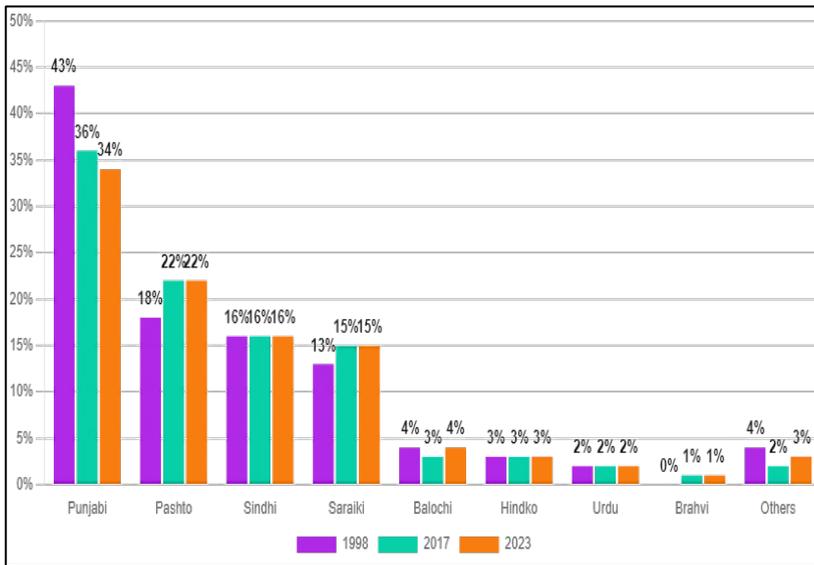


**Source:** PBS Population and Housing Census Report 2023

<b>Region</b>	<b>Most Spoken Languages (with %)</b>
Pakistan	Punjabi (36.98), Pushto (18.15), Sindhi (14.31), Saraiki (12.00)
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	Pushto (81.00), Hindko (9.39), Others (5.44), Saraiki (3.17)
Punjab	Punjabi (67.00), Saraiki (20.64), Urdu (7.18), Pushto (1.87)
Sindh	Sindhi (60.14), Urdu (22.30), Punjabi (4.07), Pushto (5.31)
Balochistan	Balochi (39.91), Pushto (34.03), Brahvi (17.22), Sindhi (3.81)
Islamabad	Punjabi (50.57), Urdu (15.72), Pushto (18.21), Hindko (6.17)

The linguistic patterns across Pakistan's provinces are diverse, reflecting migration trends and historical influences. Punjab is predominantly Punjabi-speaking (67%), with Saraiki-speaking (20.6%) forming a significant minority.<sup>7</sup> Sindh has a linguistically diverse profile, with Sindhi speakers accounting for 60% and Urdu speakers for 22.3%. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), Pashto is the dominant language, accounting for 81%, followed by Hindko at 9.39%. Balochistan exhibits a rich linguistic diversity, with Balochi (39.91%) and Pashto (34.3%) being the most widely spoken languages. Gilgiti is spoken by 0.5% of the population of Gilgit-Baltistan, and Balti is spoken by 0.3%. Islamabad, the federal capital, is a hub of urban linguistic diversity, with Punjabi (50.5%), Pashto (18%), and Urdu (15.7%) being widely spoken languages.<sup>8</sup>

Figure 3: Source: Gallup Big Data Analysis of the 2023 Census Volume 1



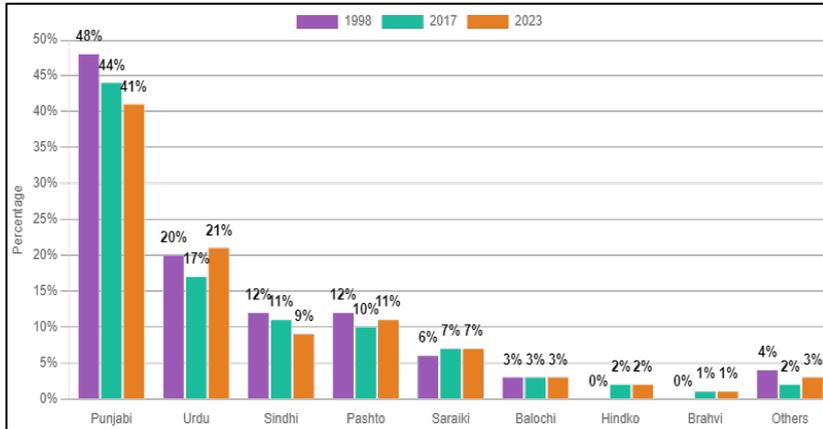
**Source:** PBS Population and Housing Census Report 2023

An analysis of census data from 1998, 2017, and 2023 highlights major linguistic trends. The percentage of Punjabi speakers has declined from 44% in 1998 to 37% in 2023, while the rate of Urdu speakers has increased from 8% to 9%.

The number of Pashto and Saraiki speakers increased between 1998 and 2017, but their proportion remained constant in the 2023 census.

\*Hindko and Brahvi languages were not included in the 1998 census.

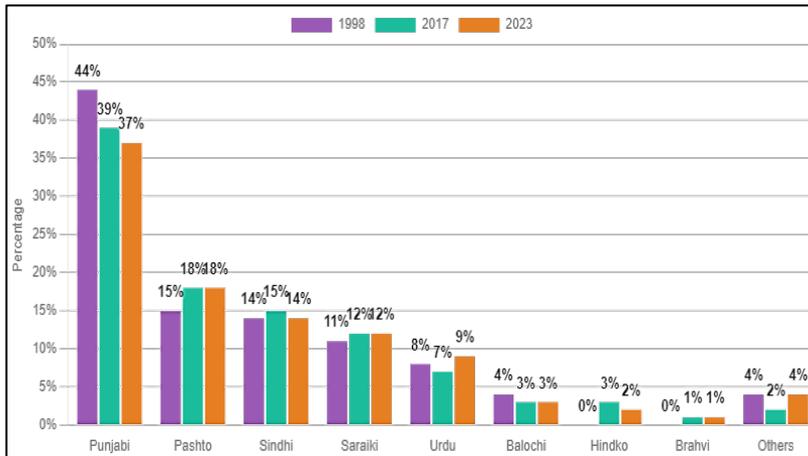
**Figure 4:** Regional Language Distribution in Urban Areas, Comparison of 1998 and 2017 Censuses



**Source:** PBS Population and Housing Census Report 2023

Sindhi speaking fluctuated, peaking at 15% in 2017 before reverting to 14% in 2023. Balochi speaking has declined steadily, dropping from 4% in 1998 to 3% in 2023. Demographic changes, urban migration, and economic mobility shape these linguistic patterns.<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 5:** Regional Language Distribution in Rural Areas Comparison of 1998 and 2017 Censuses



**Source:** PBS Population and Housing Census Report 2023

Further analysis of linguistic trends from 1998, 2017, and 2023 censuses reveals notable differences between rural and urban areas over the past 25 years. In rural regions, the proportion of Punjabi-speaking people has declined from 43% in 1998 to 34% in 2023, while the proportion of Pashto-speaking people has increased from 18% to 22%. Urdu-speaking remained stable at 2%. The number of Punjabi speakers in urban areas declined, dropping from 48% in 1998 to 41% in 2023. Pashto-speaking initially grew, rising from 10% in 1998 to 12% in 2017, but later declined slightly to 11% in 2023. Meanwhile, the Urdu-speaking population fluctuated, decreasing from 20% in 1998 to 17% in 2017, before increasing again to 21% in 2023, reflecting its growing presence in urban centres.<sup>10</sup> These shifts highlight the rising role of urbanisation, bilingualism, and digital communication in shaping linguistic usage.

Moreover, various linguistic elements, including oral traditions, scripts, and dialects, contribute to Pakistan's rich linguistic heritage. Urdu orthographies with unique diacritics are employed in Saraiki and Kashmiri. Perso-Arabic scripts, most notably Nastaliq calligraphy, are adapted in Urdu and mainstream regional languages.<sup>11</sup> Balti shifted from Tibetan to Persian-Arabic script, mirroring historical shifts, whereas Isolate Languages like Burushaski lack standardised scripts, alternating between Arabic and Latin. Arabic-based scripts with special markers are used for minority languages such as Wakhi and Shina, while Latin variants are used for digital media.<sup>12</sup>

Despite its rich linguistic diversity, Pakistan faces challenges in preserving its regional languages. Due to weak institutional support, 18 indigenous languages, including Brahui (Balochistan), Shina (Gilgit-Baltistan, Azad Kashmir, KPK), and Burushaski (Northern Gilgit-Baltistan), are classified as endangered.<sup>13</sup> Educational barriers also persist, as the dominance of Urdu and English marginalises non-Urdu-speaking individuals, limiting access to education and economic opportunities. Gaps in policy implementation further hinder the full integration of regional languages into governance and education.

Moreover, globalisation and urbanisation have accelerated cultural erosion, threatening the continued use of local languages in daily life and media representation.

Nevertheless, efforts to promote Pakistan's linguistic diversity have been initiated through various institutions. The National Language Promotion Department (NLPD) leads Urdu standardisation through dictionaries and educational integration<sup>14</sup>.

The Pakistan Academy of Letters works on language translation and digitisation. Provincial bodies like the Punjabi Adabi Board and Sindhi Language Authority implement localised revitalisation programmes, including digital archiving and media projects.<sup>15</sup> For minority languages, the Forum for Language Initiatives (FLI) develops orthographies, teaching materials, and training programmes.<sup>16</sup>

To further promote linguistic diversity and preservation, the government can implement various recommendations. In the domain of media and culture, regional language content should be increased across state-owned platforms, such as PTV and Radio Pakistan, as well as digital media.

Subtitles and dubbing of media content in regional languages should also be encouraged. On the institutional level, the government should support organisations that work to translate, preserve, and digitise indigenous languages, such as the Pakistan Academy of Letters (PAL).

Therefore, Pakistan's linguistic diversity is a cultural asset and a pillar of national identity and strength. Although globalisation inevitably leads to linguistic erosion, progressive measures can be taken to ensure the survival of regional languages. Benedict Anderson aptly noted, "Languages are not just tools of communication but also symbols of identity. When a nation recognises multiple languages, it strengthens community bonds and fosters a shared national identity".<sup>17</sup>

**Table 1:** Languages by Region (Sources: Pakistan Bureau of Statistics-2023, Ethnologue-2023)

Province/ Region	Language	Region within Province	% of Speakers	Language/Dialect Status
<b>Punjab</b>	Punjabi	Lahore, Faisalabad	37%	Language (Macrolanguage)
	Saraiki	Multan, Dera Ghazi Khan	12%	Dialect of Punjabi (arguably a separate language)
	Pahari-Potwari	Rawalpindi	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Punjabi/Lahnda
	Western Punjabi	Lahore, Faisalabad	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Punjabi
<b>Sindh</b>	Sindhi	Karachi, Hyderabad	14%	Language
	Memoni	Karachi, Thatta	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Gujarati
	Marwari	Hyderabad, Thatta	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Rajasthani
	Parkari Koli	Sanghar, Badin	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Koli
	Kateviri	Mirpurkhas, Sanghar	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Koli
	Oadki	Hyderabad, Sukkur	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Rajasthani
	Lasi	Thatta, Badin	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Sindhi
	Loarki	Thatta, Badin	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Rajasthani
	Dhatki	Lasbela	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Marwari/Sindhi
	Kachi Koli	Hyderabad, Khipro	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Koli
	Vaghri	Thatta, Badin	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Rajasthani
	Wadiyari Koli	Khipro, Thatta	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Koli
	Jogi	Umerkot, Tharparkar	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Rajasthani
	Kabutra	Mirpurkhas, Sanghar	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Koli
	Khetrani	Tharparkar	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Sindhi/Balochi
	Sindhi Bhil	Tharparkar, Umerkot	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Bhil (Indo-Aryan)
<b>Balochistan</b>	Balochi	Quetta, Gwadar	3%	Language (Eastern/Southern / Western dialects)
	Brahui	Quetta, Kalat	1%	Language (Dravidian)
	Dehwari	Sibi, Barkhan	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Persian
	Sarikoli	Sibi, Kalat	(Among 3%)	Dialect of the Pamiri languages (Iranian)
	Gowro	Mastung	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Balochi
	Dawoodi	Kech, Gwadar	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Balochi
	Eastern Balochi	Quetta, Sibi	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Balochi
	Gawarbati	Kohlu, Dera Bugti	(Among 3%)	Language (Indo-Aryan)
	Jadgali	Khuzdar, Kharan	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Sindhi/ Balochi
	Jandavra	Kharan	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Sindhi
	Goaria	Jafarabad, Dera Allah Yar	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Rajasthani
	Gurgula	Pishin, Loralai	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Balochi
	Aer	Nushki, Chagai	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Sindhi

KPK	Pashto	Peshawar, D.I. Khan	18%	Language (Iranian)
	Hindko	Peshawar, Abbottabad	2%	Dialect of Punjabi/ Lahnda
	Kalasha	Chitral	(Among 3%)	Language (Dardic)
	Khowar	Chitral	(Among 3%)	Language (Dardic)
	Torwali	Swat	(Among 3%)	Language (Dardic)
	Gawri	Mardan, Swat	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Kohistani
	Ghera	Mingora, D.I. Khan	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Pashto
	Ormuri	Peshawar	(Among 3%)	Language (Iranian)
	Chilisso	Swat	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Kohistani
	Mankiyali	Swat, Nowshera	(Among 3%)	Language (Indo-Aryan)
	Palula	Chitral	(Among 3%)	Language (Dardic)
	Kalkoti	Chitral	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Shina
	Komviri	Swat	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Pashto
	Kundal Shahi	Abbottabad, Haripur	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Hindko
	Waneci	Swat	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Pashto
	Ushojo	Chitral	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Shina
	Yadgha	Chitral, Swat	(Among 3%)	Language (Iranian)
	Indus Kohistani	Mansehra	(Among 3%)	Language (Dardic)
GB	Shina	Skardu, Ghizer	(Among 3%)	Language (Dardic)
	Burushaski	Hunza, Nagar	(Among 3%)	Language (Isolate)
	Balti	Skardu, Baltistan	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Tibetan
	Brokskat	Hunza, Nagar	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Shina
	Dameli	Damot	(Among 3%)	Language (Dardic)
	Wakhi	Hunza	(Among 3%)	Language (Iranian)
AJK	Kashmiri	Muzaffarabad	0.1%	Language (Dardic)
	Gojri	Muzaffarabad, Mansehra	(Among 3%)	Dialect of Gujarati
Nationwide	Urdu	Across Pakistan	9%	Language (Indo-Aryan)
	Pakistan Sign Language	Across Pakistan	(Among 3%)	Language (Sign language)
	English	Official language	-	Language (Germanic)
	Persian	Quetta, Mastung	-	Language (Iranian)
	Arabic	Religious education	-	Language (Semitic)
	Bengali	Karachi (Sindh)	-	Language (Indo-Aryan)

Source: Self-Compiled by Author

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## About Insight and Author

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# Drowning Coast: Environmental Degradation and Sewage Reform in Karachi

*Noor Ul Ain Tahir*

## Abstract

*This INSIGHT discusses a severe environmental crisis due to massive coastal pollution from untreated sewage, industrial waste, and poor enforcement of environmental laws in Karachi, Pakistan's largest city and economic hub. Despite multiple legal frameworks and large-scale infrastructure projects like the S-III sewerage plan, pollution levels remain dangerously high, threatening marine ecosystems, public health, and the blue economy. Institutional delays, federal-provincial disputes, and funding challenges have hindered effective sewage treatment and marine conservation. Urgent, coordinated action is required to restore Karachi's coastal environment and safeguard its economic future.*

**Keywords:** Environmental Degradation, Pollution, Marine Ecosystem.

**K**arachi is the largest city of Pakistan, an economic powerhouse, and one of the busiest seaports in South Asia.<sup>1</sup> It plays a crucial role in driving the country's trade and commerce, but an environmental crisis lies beneath the surface of this vital hub. The waters surrounding the port, particularly in the harbour area, are heavily polluted with industrial waste, sewage, and oil spills, posing a threat to the marine ecosystem and the livelihoods of numerous people who depend on the sea.<sup>2</sup>

To address environmental challenges, Pakistan has implemented various rules and regulations. In line with these efforts, the Karachi Port Trust (KPT) established the Marine Pollution Control Department in 1996.<sup>3</sup> However, even after such measures, there has been little to no impact on the pollution at Karachi port.

This insight examines the legal and environmental challenges of coastal pollution at Karachi Port and assesses the effectiveness of sewage treatment initiatives, such as the S-III plan.

The Harbour, which spans over 62 sq km, receives a diverse range of pollutants, including at least 411 million gallons per day (MGD) of liquid effluents, 122 MGD of municipal waste, and 350 MGD of industrial waste.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, operational waste from hundreds of fishing crafts at Karachi Fisheries and Karachi Port also contributes significantly to the pollutants.<sup>5</sup> This ongoing pollution harms marine life, damages fish habitats and mangroves, corrodes ships, and negatively impacts the health of coastal residents and tourists.<sup>6</sup> This escalating pollution crisis has become a national security threat by endangering marine ecosystems, the blue economy, and trade operations.<sup>7</sup>

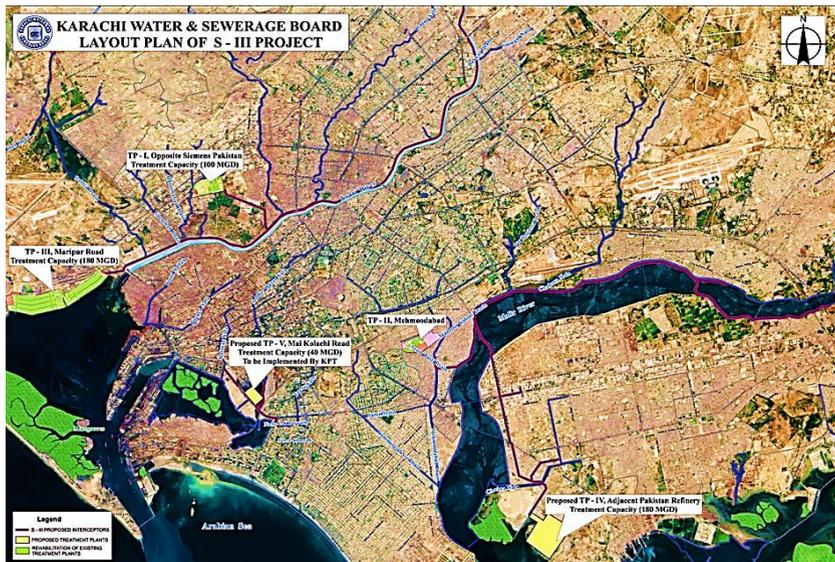
**Despite multiple legal frameworks, institutional efforts, and infrastructure projects, the envisioned goals of sewage treatment and marine conservation remain far from reality.**

This longstanding issue has continued despite various efforts. The Pakistan Environmental Protection Ordinance 1983, promulgated after Pakistan acceded to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), focused on penalising industries rather than helping them transition to eco-friendly processes.

Later, in 1997, the Pakistan Environmental Protection Act<sup>8</sup> came into force, under which owners of industrial units were responsible for treating industrial waste and disposing of wastewater properly. In addition to these national laws, Pakistan is a signatory to several international conventions. These include the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL) and the London Convention and Protocol (1972), which regulate marine pollution by restricting waste disposal at sea;<sup>9</sup> the Basel Convention (1989), which aims to prevent harm from hazardous waste and its transboundary movement.<sup>10</sup>

After the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment devolved environmental responsibilities to the provinces, inconsistencies between federal policies and provincial enforcement created gaps that weakened the effectiveness of international commitments.<sup>11</sup>

To address the deteriorating pollution in Karachi's coastal waters, which has been exacerbated by the poor enforcement of laws and industrial non-compliance, the government has launched several infrastructure projects. These included several sewerage plans, the first being S-I and the second being S-II, both of which focused on modernising Karachi Port to make it competitive in international trade. Alongside these, the Greater Karachi Sewerage Plan (S-III) was introduced, conceived in 2007 and launched in 2013, a major project designed to treat up to 460 MGD, which currently flows untreated into the Arabian Sea,<sup>12</sup> endangering the environment and public health,<sup>13</sup> and to rehabilitate and expand Karachi's sewage treatment capacity by ensuring that wastewater is managed correctly.<sup>14</sup>



Picture showing the S-III Project's layout plan by KWSB, Presentation on S-III, 2016

S-III includes the development of several key sewage treatment plants (STPs) strategically located across the city.<sup>15</sup> TP-I is situated in Haroon Abad, while TP-II was proposed in the Korangi Industrial Area.

TP-III is in Mauri Pur,<sup>16</sup> and TP-IV was planned for construction near Mahmood Abad.

While TP-I and TP-III remain central to the project's implementation, TP-II and TP-IV were eventually discontinued due to land disputes and logistical challenges, as the proposed sites faced issues such as limited space and difficulties in acquiring the necessary land for construction.<sup>17</sup>

TP-I is designed to treat 100 MGD of sewage and is being implemented in phases, starting with an initial capacity of 35 MGD, increasing to 65 MGD, and ultimately reaching its full capacity.<sup>18</sup> As of September 2024, civil works on TP-I are 58% complete, mechanical works are at 29%, while electrical installations are yet to begin. The estimated completion date for TP-I is set for June 2026.<sup>19</sup>

TP-III, located in Mauri Pur, was partially operationalised in 2018 with a treatment capacity of 54 MGD. However, over time, this capacity has decreased to 35 MGD due to inadequate maintenance and infrastructure deterioration.<sup>20</sup> Plans are now in action to upgrade TP-III to treat 180 MGD, with an intended completion date of December 2026.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, trunk sewer systems are being developed to channel sewage from major basins, such as Lyari and Malir, to these treatment facilities.<sup>22</sup> Particularly, a 33-kilometre sewer pipeline from Surjani Town to Mauri Pur has been partly completed to serve the Lyari basin.<sup>23</sup>

Despite progress, the S-III project faced setbacks, with TP-I and TP-III delayed due to a federal-provincial dispute over cost increases, as well as a four-year construction halt from 2019 to 2023 caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>24</sup> The project's cost has escalated to over Rs. 36 billion, from an initial estimate of Rs. 7.9 billion, due to delays, scope expansion, and funding disputes. The federal government initially provided funds but later withdrew its support, shifting the entire financial burden to the Sindh government.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, delays in machinery acquisition, a lack of trained personnel, and ineffective coordination among authorities have considerably slowed implementation efforts.<sup>26</sup>

To help in tackling the pollution crisis in Karachi, the World Bank has committed \$240 million under the Second Karachi Water and Sewerage Services Improvement Project (KWSSIP-II) to support broader improvements in Karachi's water and sanitation infrastructure. However, this funding has been dispersed across multiple projects, including upgrading water supply systems, improving sewage treatment plants, expanding drainage networks, and enhancing the institutional capacity of water utilities, so its impact on the pollution issue has been diluted, making it harder to see significant improvement in a short time.<sup>27</sup>

Rising costs and limited funding have delayed projects, such as S-III. The failure to fully implement these plans has already begun to be reflected in worsening coastal pollution and the degradation of aquatic ecosystems.<sup>28</sup>

In conclusion, the perpetual pollution crisis at Karachi Port serves as a stark reminder of Pakistan's long-standing environmental governance negligence and inefficiencies. Despite multiple legal frameworks, institutional efforts, and infrastructure projects, the envisioned goals of sewage treatment and marine conservation remain largely unattainable. S-III, primarily a joint venture between the Federal and Sindh governments, is now the sole responsibility of the Sindh government after the Federal government withdrew its support, even as project costs soared from Rs. 7.9 billion to over Rs. 36 billion, with some estimates reaching Rs. 54 billion. By urgent, unified action and time-bound goals, Pakistan can still reverse the environmental degradation of its coastal waters and protect the future of its blue economy.

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# A Review of Pakistan's Free Trade Agreements

*Muhammad Abdur Rehman*

## Abstract

*This INSIGHT reviews Pakistan's Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and related trade frameworks from 2003 to 2024, analysing their impact on trade volumes, deficits, and surpluses with key partners such as China, the US, the EU, Malaysia, and others. While FTAs have significantly increased trade, Pakistan often faces trade deficits with larger economies due to structural asymmetries and limited export diversification, heavily relying on textiles. It highlights the need for export diversification, value addition, and proactive commercial diplomacy to enhance Pakistan's trade performance and reduce economic dependency on a few dominant partners.*

**Keywords:** Free Trade Agreements, Trade Frameworks, Export Diversification.

Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) are essential for enhancing trade by reducing tax and tariff barriers between countries. Pakistan has signed numerous trade agreements to improve trade since 2000. According to the Ministry of Commerce, Pakistan had 15 FTAs in effect or under negotiation as of 2024.<sup>1</sup> While exports grew to US\$30.76 billion, imports increased rapidly to US\$80 billion from 2003 to 2024.<sup>2</sup> This review examines key bilateral and preferential trade agreements from 2003 to 2024.<sup>3</sup>

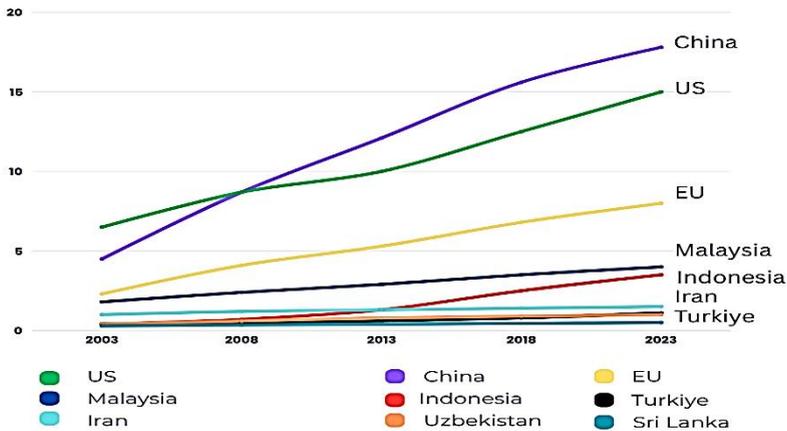
Pakistan's trade agreements vary in scope, structure, and impact on international commerce. These FTAs are comprehensive arrangements to eliminate or substantially reduce tariffs, quotas, and other trade barriers across most economic sectors.

However, Preferential Trade Agreements (PTAs) are more limited in scope, offering reduced tariffs on specific products or sectors.

The Generalised System of Preferences Plus (GSP+) differs fundamentally from a unilateral arrangement in which the European Union (EU) grants preferential tariff treatment to developing countries. Furthermore, Pakistan has a Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) with the United States (US), which serves as a consultative mechanism rather than a market access tool and does not contain specific tariff reduction commitments between the US and Pakistan.

Pakistan signed FTAs, PTAs, GSP+, and TIFA with China, the US, the EU, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Turkey, Indonesia, Iran, and Uzbekistan between 2003 and 2024. Graph 1 illustrates the growth in trade volume before and after the agreements.

**Graph 1:** Graph Showing Pre- and Post-Agreement Trade Volume in Billion Dollars



Source: Compiled by Author

The following discussion presents a graphical representation that illustrates the increase in trade since the implementation of FTAs. A detailed analysis of the trade performance of each participating country follows this. Subsequently, the discussion identifies general patterns of trade deficits and surpluses, as well as notable exceptions, across the data set.

Finally, it includes a product dependency chart, accompanied by an explanation of observed trends and a set of recommendations designed to enhance trade performance without exacerbating trade deficits.

Pakistan's 2007 FTA with China increased trade from US\$4 billion to US\$17.8 billion by 2024, although Pakistan faces a US\$11 billion trade deficit. China represents 23% of Pakistan's trade while Pakistan accounts for less than 1% of China's, creating asymmetry that grants China significant leverage.<sup>4</sup>

The 2005 TIFA with the US expanded trade from US\$2.3 billion to US\$8 billion, with Pakistan maintaining a US\$2 billion surplus. It represents 10% of Pakistan's trade but only 0.3% of the US global trade. This surplus exists due to US policy supporting developing economies, although the export potential is limited, as textiles constitute 60% of exports.

The EU's GSP+ scheme, introduced in 2014, is expected to increase Pakistan-EU trade from US\$10 billion to US\$15 billion by 2023. Pakistan enjoys a US\$3.4 billion surplus, with trade representing 19% of Pakistan's total exports but only 0.2% of the EU's total exports. The status can be suspended during biannual reviews. Furthermore, textile exports to the EU account for 76% of total exports, indicating a lack of diversity.

**Pakistan can significantly strengthen its geoeconomic and geopolitical leverage by expanding into economic markets across Africa, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. It will enhance the existing trade surplus while reducing overdependence on any single economic bloc, such as the US and the EU.**

Pakistan's 2007 Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Malaysia nearly doubled the trade volume to US\$4 billion, although Pakistan faces a US\$1 billion deficit.

Malaysia represents 5% of Pakistan's trade while Pakistan accounts for 0.8% of Malaysia's, giving Malaysia greater leverage.<sup>5</sup>

The 2012 FTA with Indonesia increased trade sevenfold to US\$3.5 billion, resulting in a US\$3.2 billion deficit for Pakistan.

Indonesia represents 4.5% of Pakistan's trade while Pakistan accounts for less than 0.7% of Indonesia's, granting Indonesia significant leverage.<sup>6</sup>

Turkey's 2016 agreement with Pakistan increased trade to US\$1.1 billion, resulting in a US\$0.5 billion deficit for Pakistan. Turkey's exports primarily include machinery and chemicals, whereas Pakistan's exports are more limited, focusing mainly on textiles and agriculture.<sup>7</sup>

Iran's 2004 PTA modestly increased trade to US\$1.5 billion, with Pakistan maintaining a US\$0.5 billion deficit, plus unofficial oil smuggling worth an additional US\$1 billion. Iran's international isolation has constrained trade potential. Iran's international isolation has constrained bilateral trade potential, making Pakistan relatively important.<sup>8</sup>

The 2005 FTA with Sri Lanka increased trade to \$0.5 billion, with Pakistan maintaining a US\$0.3 billion surplus. It represents less than 1% of Pakistan's trade but 4% of Sri Lanka's.<sup>9</sup>

Pakistan enjoys trade surpluses with several countries without formal agreements. Trade with Afghanistan declined from US\$2.5 billion in 2010 to US\$1.5 billion by 2023, with Pakistan maintaining a surplus of approximately US\$700 million.<sup>10</sup> Pakistan also has a US\$631.4 million surplus with Bangladesh and a US\$45 million surplus with Tajikistan.<sup>11</sup>

These trade balances show a specific pattern. Pakistan typically maintains a trade deficit with larger economies, such as those with advanced technological capabilities and sophisticated industrial bases, like China, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Pakistan imports high-value machinery that its domestic industries cannot produce efficiently.

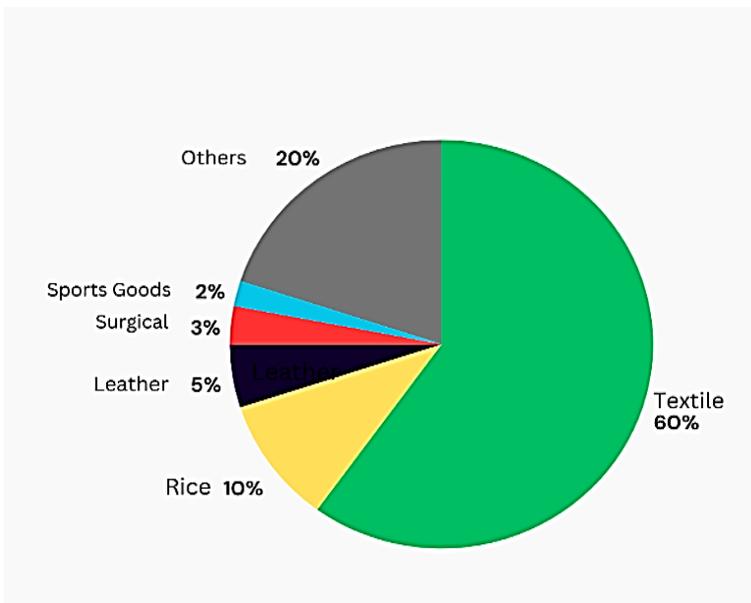
Conversely, Pakistan enjoys trade surpluses with smaller economies with less developed industrial infrastructures. These trading partners, primarily Bangladesh, Central Asia, and Yemen, import Pakistani textiles, agricultural products, surgical instruments, sports goods, and light-manufactured items. Pakistan's comparative advantages in these sectors allow it to maintain positive trade balances with these economies, though the overall volume of this trade remains relatively low.

The US and EU represent notable exceptions to these patterns. Pakistan maintains trade surpluses with these larger economies despite their technological superiority. This anomaly likely stems from a deliberate geopolitical calculation rather than natural economic forces.

By the GSP+ and TIFA, these Western powers have created economic dependency, accounting for over 50% of Pakistan's export market. However, Pakistan represents less than 1% of their total trade volume.

This dependency is compounded by Pakistan's limited export diversification (Graph 2), with textiles accounting for 60% of exports, followed by rice at 10%, resulting in a significant reliance on a few key sectors.

**Graph 2:** Graph Shows the Percentage Contribution of Each Export Category



**Source:** Compiled by Author

Pakistan can significantly strengthen its geoeconomic and geopolitical leverage by expanding into economic markets across Africa, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia.

It will enhance the existing trade surplus while reducing overdependence on any single economic bloc, such as the US and the EU.

Pakistan needs to diversify its export economy to ensure long-term stability. Sectors such as pharmaceuticals and automotive parts have an established industrial base but currently make minimal contributions. With targeted investment, they can reduce over-reliance on textiles and unlock access to new global markets.

Value-added exports would further increase Pakistan's foreign exchange earnings. This applies to agricultural commodities, minerals, and leather goods, where processing can multiply the export value several times over.

By establishing concrete trade targets for ambassadors and diplomatic missions, Pakistan can transform its foreign service into a commercial force. Evaluating diplomatic performance partly based on trade outcomes would incentivise proactive market development and problem-solving for exporters. This approach has proven successful in countries like South Korea and Turkey, where commercial diplomacy drives export growth.

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# Beyond the Optics: Probing Legality of Pakistan's Repatriation of Afghans

*Habib Ullah*

## Abstract

*This INSIGHT assesses the legality of Pakistan's Illegal Foreigners' Repatriation Plan (IFRP), arguing that—contentious as it is—the measure can be grounded in domestic law (notably the Foreigners Act, 1946) and evolving norms of international law. While Pakistan is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention, the paper shows customary non-refoulement and the state's sovereign prerogative to regulate foreigners. Still, it does not categorically bar measured repatriation, especially where credible security concerns exist. Against a backdrop of regional change and comparable Western practices, the author treats IFRP as repatriation rather than unlawful refoulement but stresses the need for robust procedural safeguards for vulnerable groups. Insight recommends calibrated policy instruments that reconcile security and humanitarian duties and calls for transparent mechanisms to protect at-risk individuals during return processes.*

**Keywords:** Repatriation, Refugee Convention, Policy Instrument, Vulnerable Groups.

**T**he Government of Pakistan announced the Illegal Foreigners' Repatriation Plan (IFRP) on September 26, 2023.<sup>1</sup> This plan aims to regulate the presence of foreigners in the country and ensure the repatriation of individuals who reside illegally or have overstayed their visa validity.<sup>2</sup> It does not, *ipso facto*, discriminate based on nationality or country of origin, and extends to all the illegal foreigners residing in Pakistan.<sup>3</sup> However, as Afghans form the most significant foreign population in Pakistan, they are the most substantially covered under the scope of the IFRP.<sup>4</sup>

Nonetheless, all legally registered foreign nationals, including Afghans, residing in Pakistan, remain exempt from the provision of this IFRP.<sup>5</sup>

Many international organisations, such as Amnesty International<sup>6</sup> and Human Rights Watch, have criticised Pakistan for targeting Afghans under the IFRP and allegedly in violation of its international obligations.<sup>7</sup> However, such criticism takes a simplistic view of a complex issue. For over four decades, Pakistan has demonstrated exceptional generosity by hosting millions of refugees, mostly Afghans, earning global recognition as one of the largest refugee-hosting countries.<sup>8</sup> In recent years, however, changing circumstances have compelled Pakistan to reassess its policy regarding foreign nationals, in the light of its national interests. This insight analyses the legality of Pakistan's decision to repatriate Afghans vis-à-vis its international obligations.

The Afghan refugees' influx into Pakistan occurred in four distinct waves, each linked to significant political developments in Afghanistan.<sup>9</sup> The First Wave occurred from 1978 to 1981, on the eve of the end of Daoud Khan's government and the Soviet invasion. The Second Wave came in the 1990s after the Soviet withdrawal and the Taliban's rise. The Third Wave began in 2001, post 9/11 attacks, and the subsequent United States (US)-led NATO invasion. The Fourth Wave occurred in 2021, following the US withdrawal and the Taliban's return to power.<sup>10</sup>

**The decision of Pakistan to repatriate Afghans, pursuant to IFRP, is grounded in both domestic and international law.**

During the fourth wave alone, approximately 600,000 Afghans arrived,<sup>11</sup> many of whom hoped to relocate to Western nations eventually.<sup>12</sup> However, to date, only a small fraction have been relocated, while the vast majority remain in Pakistan, awaiting their turn for years.<sup>13</sup> This situation was further exacerbated when President Trump, after assuming office in January 2025, suspended the United States Refugee Admissions Programme (USRAP), leaving thousands of Afghans in uncertainty.<sup>14</sup>

The Afghan population currently residing in Pakistan holds varying legal statuses, depending on the type of documents they possess. Broadly, they fall into three categories: Proof of Registration (PoR) cardholders, Afghan Citizen Card (ACC) holders, and unregistered Afghans.<sup>15</sup> The IFRP outlines a three-phase repatriation process based on this categorisation.<sup>16</sup>

Phase one aims to cover illegal or unregistered foreigners and those with expired visas or a period of unauthorised stay. Phase two covers the ACC holders.<sup>17</sup> Phase Three, set to begin after 30 June 2025,<sup>18</sup> will address PoR cardholders.<sup>19</sup> Phase one started in October 2023,<sup>20</sup> and phase two is currently underway.<sup>21</sup>

The Government of Pakistan's implementation of IFRP reflects a broader effort to address security challenges, regulate the presence of foreigners, and manage limited resources. A resurgence in militant activity, particularly by the *Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan*, also known as *Fitna al-Khawarij* (TTP/FK), has heightened regional tensions.<sup>22</sup> Some incidents, including suicide attacks in 2023,<sup>23</sup> have involved Afghans, further complicating the security landscape.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, with political stability gradually returning to Afghanistan, since the Taliban's takeover in August 2021, Pakistan considers the conditions increasingly conducive for the return of illegal Afghans.

Given these circumstances, the decision of Pakistan to repatriate Afghans, under IFRP, is not without legal basis—both under domestic and international law. The regulation of foreign nationals residing within a state's territory has, *prima facie*, been recognised as falling within the *domaine réservé*—that is, the exclusive domestic jurisdiction of the state.<sup>25</sup> In Pakistan's domestic legal framework, the IFRP finds its basis in the Foreigners Act, 1946. Specifically, section 3 of the Act empowers the federal government to control foreigners' entry, stay, and departure,<sup>26</sup> while section 3(2)(g) allows for their arrest or detention when necessary for national security.<sup>27</sup>

Under international law, the status of refugees is primarily governed by the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol.<sup>28</sup> Pakistan is neither a party to the convention nor the protocol;<sup>29</sup> hence, it is not legally bound by their specific provisions.

However, the cornerstone of the Convention—the principle of *nonrefoulement*—has evolved into a norm of customary international law.<sup>30</sup> Although articulated in Article 33 of the Convention, this principle is now binding on all states, including non-signatories such as Pakistan.<sup>31</sup>

The principle of *non-refoulement* obliges a state not to expel a refugee to a country where they may face persecution.<sup>32</sup> However, it is not absolute and permits exceptions when individuals threaten the host state's security.<sup>33</sup> The determination of such a threat lies primarily with the host state itself,<sup>34</sup> in this case, Pakistan. As noted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), if specific individuals act on behalf of foreign powers against the host country, the host state is entitled to invoke this exception among a mass of refugees.<sup>35</sup> While IFRP mainly addresses Pakistan's resource constraints and evolving situation in Afghanistan, both of which are justifiable under international law, security concerns posed by TTP/FK further reinforce the applicability of this exception. Therefore, despite not being a signatory to the Refugee Convention, Pakistan is still upholding its spirit. Nonetheless, the IFRP constitutes repatriation rather than *refoulement*.

Furthermore, Pakistan's actions are neither unprecedented nor isolated; instead, they align with the practices of several Western nations, some of which have adopted far stricter measures, arguably violating international law. For instance, in April 2025, the US listed thousands of temporary immigrants as deceased to pressurise them into 'self-deportation'.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, in February 2025, the United Kingdom expelled nearly 19,000 undocumented migrants who had no legal right to remain in the country.<sup>37</sup>

In March 2025, the European Union (EU) also proposed sending migrants without legal status to "return hubs" in third countries, from where they will be deported to their countries of origin.<sup>38</sup>

This move is rooted in the controversial 'EU-Turkey Deal,' signed in March 2016. Under this deal, Türkiye was to curb illegal migration to Greece in exchange for €6 billion to support refugees.<sup>39</sup>

This underscores the West's dual standards—criticising Pakistan's legal repatriation efforts while pursuing harsh policies themselves.

Therefore, while humanitarian concerns remain valid, Pakistan's repatriation decision is grounded in domestic and international law. Given the serious security threats and the state's sovereign right to regulate foreign nationals, the repatriation effort reflects a measured

response to a complex challenge. Like many states, Pakistan strives to balance security needs with humanitarian responsibilities.

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## About Insight and Author

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# BOOK REVIEW

# Has China Won? The Chinese Challenge to American Primacy

*Review by: Dr. M. A. Gul*

**ISBN:** 978-1541768130

**Author:** Kishore Mahbubani

In “Has China Won? The Chinese Challenge to American Primacy”, Kishore Mahbubani delivers a thought-provoking, nuanced examination of the ongoing US-China rivalry framed against global geopolitical shifts. Mahbubani, a seasoned Singaporean diplomat and academic, presents a critical analysis of the evolving power dynamics between the world’s two largest economies, focusing on the sustainability of American hegemony and the rise of China as a global superpower. Rather than predicting a clear winner, Mahbubani delves into whether the US and China can coexist without descending into conflict and whether the US’ current trajectory allows it to adapt to a world where China’s influence is growing.

Has China Won? is whether the US can maintain its global importance in the face of China’s rise. Mahbubani, drawing on his extensive diplomatic experience, argues that the US has failed to adjust its foreign policy and geopolitical strategies to reflect the reality of China’s ascent.

He asserts that America’s post-Cold War assumption of unchallenged global dominance has left it unprepared for a multipolar world. In contrast, China has been methodically and strategically positioning itself to become a significant global player, using economic development, technological innovation, and diplomatic initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative to extend its influence.

Mahbubani does not frame this as a zero-sum contest but rather as a fundamental shift in the global power balance. He challenges the notion that the US should view China's rise as an existential threat, suggesting that the US's anxiety about losing global supremacy could lead to poor strategic decisions, including the possibility of unnecessary conflict.

One of the book's key themes is the contrasting approaches of China and the US in their foreign and domestic policies. Mahbubani critiques the US for clinging to a romantic, ideological approach to global leadership, particularly its promotion of democracy and liberal values, which he argues is increasingly out of sync with the reality of international politics. According to Mahbubani, the US's moralistic stance alienates many countries in the developing world, which often prioritise economic growth and stability over liberal democratic values.

Conversely, China is portrayed as adopting a more pragmatic, non-ideological approach, focusing primarily on economic development, political stability, and strategic partnerships. Mahbubani highlights that China's approach—rooted in a long-term vision of global influence—has allowed it to build stronger ties with countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, where the US has historically been less engaged. He points to China's willingness to work with authoritarian regimes and its avoidance of imposing political conditions on trade and investment as examples of this pragmatic approach.

Mahbubani's analysis of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is critical to his argument about China's strategic vision.

He presents the BRI as an ambitious project to extend China's economic and political influence across multiple continents by building infrastructure, increasing connectivity, and fostering economic partnerships.

Mahbubani sees the BRI as symbolic of China's long-term strategy: a patient, calculated expansion of its influence, often in regions neglected by Western powers.

However, he carefully notes that the BRI is not without its challenges. While it has bolstered China's influence, it has also drawn criticism for creating debt traps in participating countries and furthering China's geopolitical ambitions under the guise of development. Mahbubani acknowledges these concerns but argues that, for many developing nations, the benefits of China's investments outweigh the risks. He contends that China's focus on economic development, rather than political interference, makes it a more attractive partner for many countries.

Mahbubani is critical of US foreign policy, particularly in the post-9/11 era. He argues that America has overextended itself militarily in the Middle East and other regions, diverting attention and resources from the more critical challenge posed by China. He sees these wars, especially the prolonged engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan, as strategic missteps that have eroded America's global standing and weakened its economy.

In contrast, China has avoided major military engagements, focusing instead on building its economic and technological strength. Mahbubani points out that China's leadership has been far more focused on internal development, poverty alleviation, and economic modernisation, allowing it to avoid the pitfalls of military adventurism that have plagued the US.

A central question of the book is whether the US and China can coexist without sliding into conflict. Mahbubani invokes the historical concept of the "Thucydides Trap"—the tendency for rising powers to clash with established ones—and argues that both countries have a choice: either fall into this trap or find a new model of coexistence. He is cautiously optimistic that war is not inevitable but warns that both sides must avoid the miscalculations that have historically led to conflicts between great powers.

Mahbubani stresses that the US must rethink its strategy. Instead of trying to contain or confront China, he advocates for a more realistic and flexible approach that recognises China's legitimate interests and works toward mutual accommodation. He suggests that the US should focus on strengthening its domestic institutions and economy rather than trying to outcompete China through military or ideological means.

While Mahbubani's analysis is insightful and grounded in realpolitik, some readers may find his tone too accommodating toward China. Critics have pointed out that Mahbubani tends to downplay China's human rights abuses, authoritarian governance, and increasingly assertive foreign policy, particularly in the South China Sea. His portrayal of the US as overly idealistic and moralistic could be an oversimplification, given that pragmatic, realist considerations have often driven American foreign policy.

Mahbubani's suggestion that the US adopt a more flexible, accommodationist stance toward China may not sit well with those who believe that China's rise represents a genuine threat to global democracy and human rights. His argument that developing countries prefer China's pragmatic approach to the US's ideological stance may also be viewed as an overstatement, as many countries continue to value the rule of law, human rights, and democratic governance.

*Has China Won?* is a well-researched and thought-provoking book that challenges conventional Western thinking about the US-China rivalry. Kishore Mahbubani offers a nuanced and often critical view of American foreign policy while presenting China's rise as a natural, perhaps inevitable, consequence of global shifts in power. While some may take issue with his accommodationist tone toward China, Mahbubani's call for reassessing the US strategy is timely and necessary. Rather than focusing on confrontation, Mahbubani argues that the US and China must find a way to coexist in a multipolar world, and his book offers valuable insights into how that might be possible.

### About Insight and Author

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