

Strategic realignment in South Asia: US perceptions of Pakistan's China alignment

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Abstract: The US historically viewed Pakistan as a critical ally in its global war on terror, but this stance has changed dramatically in the last few years as the US's conception of Pakistan transitioned from a strategic partner to a transactional ally and leaning more towards China. This shift is analyzed using constructivist theory based on a multiplicity of US government documents, media discourse, and policies outlined between 2001 and 2025. The analysis shows that US policy characterized by anti-India rhetorical tropes, institutional exclusion, and systemic marginalization subsequently aligned Pakistan more closely to China, most notably under the auspices of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The investigation then contextualizes this shift in a broader hegemonic battle between the US and China, and Pakistan's geostrategic location as the pivot of that struggle. In the end the analysis argues that US policy must adopt a more symmetric regional approach that avoids binary alliances, including antagonistic ties, that lead to strategic misalignments as what is found through this case study.

Keywords: USA, perception, image of Pakistan, China, CPEC

Introduction

Particularly after the 9/11 attacks and the start of the War on Terror (WoT), United States' impressions and picture of Pakistan have changed significantly. At first, Pakistan was seen as a major friend in the worldwide counterterrorism effort, getting large military and financial support in exchange for its cooperation (Hussain 2018, 211). But for Pakistan, which suffered over 80,000 casualties—including military personnel and civilians—as well as financial losses more than \$150 billion from internal strife and terrorism (Sial 2020, 5), this alliance came at a great cost. Notwithstanding these sacrifices,

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Pakistan's image in Washington started to suffer, mostly because of the belief that it was engaging in a "double game"—supporting US operations while allegedly keeping covert links with militant networks (Fair 2018, 72).

This negative view grew more pronounced by the middle of the 2010s as US officials grew more annoyed with Islamabad's unwillingness to act forcefully against organizations like the Haqqani Network. This unhappiness resulted in major cuts in aid as well as progressively tense diplomatic ties (Miller 2021, 54). The US leaving Afghanistan in 2021 heightened tensions even more since Pakistan was mostly blamed for allowing the Taliban to flourish, so strengthening its dubious and divisive image in American strategic circles (Riedel 2022).

Concurrently, Pakistan's strategic turn toward China, particularly with regard to its fervent embrace of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), helped to redefine its regional character. This increasing alignment refutes Pakistan's image from a devoted counterterrorism ally to that of a regional partner of China, so causing concern in Washington about its long-term strategic orientation (Small 2020). Pakistan's diplomatic relationship with the United States is being complicated and global impressions of its foreign policy posture is being reshaped as a result of Pakistan's enigmatic and dual-aligned actor rather than a reliable security partner (Shah 2023).

Literature review

Over the past two years, Pakistan's ties to the United States have altered dramatically. Originally seen as a vital friend in the War on Terror following 9/11, Pakistan's changing geopolitical orientations—especially its increasing strategic alliance with China—have changed American view of its function in South Asia. Examining academic viewpoints on these shifting attitudes, this literature review highlights important themes including strategic realignment, security challenges, credibility perceptions, or geographical, balancing.

Subsequent to the September 11 terrorist attacks, Pakistan emerged as a "frontline state" during the US led Global War on Terrorism. According to Fair (2011), the relationship was predominantly transactional, with the US providing military and economic assistance in return for Pakistan's collaboration fighting Al-Qaeda and Taliban rebels. This connection was fraught with reciprocal distrust.

Researchers like Haqqani (2013) contend that US authorities have persistently overstated Pakistan's readiness to confront terrorist organizations perceived as strategic assets.

Byman (2010) elucidates how Pakistan's "selective cooperation" compromised the U.S. effort in Afghanistan. While aiding the US with information and supplies, Pakistan was said to have clandestinely supported the Haqqani Network and Afghan Taliban, so intensifying regional instability and complicating bilateral relations.

Beginning in the mid-2010s, CPEC, a key initiative within China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), indicated a significant geopolitical transformation. Small (2015) posits that CPEC represents not merely an economic initiative as well as a strategic realignment of Pakistan's foreign policy. Researchers such as Sial (2016) & Wolf (2020) emphasize China's emergence as a more dependable and less contingent partner in comparison to the United States.

This transition aligned with the growing strategic partnership between the US and India, especially within the context of the Indo-Pacific framework. Mearsheimer (2019) presents this dynamic as an element of a larger containment strategy directed at China, wherein Pakistan's alignment with Beijing complicates US interests in the region.

As Pakistan strengthened its relationship with China, US beliefs shifted from regarding Pakistan as a crucial counterterrorism ally to considering it a strategic liability. Kronstadt and Katzman (2021) contend that U.S. policymakers have started to scrutinize Pakistan's enduring alignment with American interests, particularly in light of its defiance regarding counterterrorism, proliferation of nuclear weapons, and debt dependency related to CPEC.

The 2018 National Defense Strategies of the United States highlighted great power competition, identifying China and Russia as principal threats. In this context, Pakistan's relationship with China was assessed with greater skepticism and caution (Riedel 2018).

Key themes in literature

Markey (2013) observes that US-Pakistan relationships have formerly been characterized by a deficiency in deep institutional trust, rendering them susceptible to abrupt changes.

Research consistently highlights the trust deficits between the security establishments of the US and Pakistan, especially following the Osama bin Laden pillage in 2011 (Rashid 2012).

The works of Malik (2020) and Siddiqa (2021) indicate that Pakistan's shift towards the east is a pragmatic reaction to the reduction of U.S. aid and strategic opportunities in the Indo-Pacific region.

The enhancement of the US-India partnership has prompted Pakistan to align more closely with China, as observed by scholars such as Pant and Joshi (2016).

Research methodology

This research utilizes a mixed-methods design that integrates qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine the changing perception of Pakistan within US strategic thought, specifically through the framework of Nicholas Onuf's constructivist theory. This methodology aims to examine the evolution of U.S. perceptions of Pakistan, transitioning from a counterterrorism ally to a strategic enigma associated with China, through an analysis of discursive practices and material realignments during the post-9/11 and Indo-Pacific periods. This methodology facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the United States' reconstruction of Pakistan's image, transitioning from a partner in the War on Terror to a strategic outlier amid US-China competition, through the triangulation of discursive shifts, material behaviors, and institutional signaling. Rooted in Onuf's constructivism, it encompasses not only the actions of the US but also its rhetoric, framing, and enforcement, and examines how these elements influenced Pakistan's strategic identity and its shift towards China.

Theoretical framework

Nicholas Onuf's constructivist approach emphasizes how social rules, norms, and speech acts shape state identity and international perceptions, so enabling a clear analysis of the changing dynamics in US-Pakistan relations. Onuf's central claim—that "people make society, and society makes people"—captures the reciprocal character of social construction, in which actors not only shape their environment by interaction and discourse but also are themselves shaped by the resulting structures (Onuf 1989). By contending that ideas like sovereignty, security, and alliance are not fixed but rather created through continuous human agency and interaction, this questions the static presumptions of conventional IR theories including realism and liberalism (Wend, 1992; Reus-Smit 2005.). Building on

this, Alexander Wendt (1992) underlined how shared ideas, beliefs, and expectations shape rather than define global systems like anarchy. Wendt's method included cognitive components since she maintained that social interaction and internalized meanings create identities and interests rather than they are pre-given. Similarly, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) underlined that processes firmly anchored in mental constructions and shared cognition build social reality by means of habitualization and institutionalization.

Anthony Giddens's (1984) theory of structuration emphasizes even more the function of cognition since it sees people as informed agents who interpret and replicate social structures by continuous reflexivity. From this perspective, people behave depending on their cognitive interpretation of social roles, expectations, and norms. Furthermore underlined by Friedrich Kratochwil (1989) and John Searle (1995), language and meaning are fundamental for building institutional facts, so stressing the cognitive and symbolic foundation of social structures. Internal frameworks via which actors view the world and decide on suitable behavior are mental models, collective beliefs, and shared understanding. From a constructivist point of view, then, cognition is not distinct from social construction; rather, it is integral to the process since ideas, perceptions, and mental representations shape the world of international politics as much as material elements.

In this regard, the development of US-Pakistan ties serves as a prime example of how constructivist dynamics function in world affairs. Following the 9/11 attacks, the United States built a new global security agenda whereby Pakistan was designated as a "frontline ally" in the War on Terror. For years, this speech act established a specific identity and set of expectations that framed bilateral relations. Cooperation in counterterrorism strengthened Pakistan's position by helping it to receive major military and financial support (Hussain 2018, 20). Still, the mutual building of reality started to veer over time. New speech acts surfaced as the US saw discrepancies in Pakistan's counterterrorism operations—especially charges of harboring groups like the Haqqani Network—describing Pakistan's role as "duplicitous," or engaged in a "double game" (Fair 2018, 17). From ally to unreliable partner, these rhetorical changes signaled a change in Pakistan's reputation inside American foreign policy circles.

On the other hand, Pakistan participated in its own identity building. Emphasizing its "sacrifices"—over 80,000 lives lost and \$150 billion in economic damage—as part of a counter-narrative meant to restore

its image and moral legitimacy, it underlined. But these conflicting stories produced a discursive gap whereby both governments functioned inside incompatible reality regarding the nature of their relationship, interests, and responsibilities. According to Onuf (2013), such speech acts are performative, actively changing how actors view themselves and others, so impacting their behavior; they are not only descriptive.

The social norms and expectations controlling the alliance broke over time. Once mutual views sour, what started as a relationship governed by shared counterterrorism goals finally broke apart. The tacit rules that once supported the alliance broke under the US' 2018 suspension of security aid (Miller 2021). A fresh set of social institutions filled this void as Pakistan strengthened its ties to China via the Belt and Road Initiative (Small 2020,) under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Pakistan's image and identity thus changed once more—this time in the direction of a regional Chinese ally—which led American worries about Islamabad's strategic orientation (Shah 2023).

Geopolitical circumstances changed, especially with China's rise and the opening of projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), US rhetoric progressively presented Pakistan through a different prism—as a proxy or junior partner of China, especially in the Indo-Pacific setting. These shifting viewpoints highlight Wendt's (1992) point that intersubjective understandings help to shape rather than fix identities and interests. Policy narratives, think-tank debates, and media coverage of Pakistan's alignment with China started to center Pakistan's alignment with China rather than its involvement in counterterrorism in U.S. cognitive framing of Pakistan. This change emphasizes how cognition, identity building, and discourse shape not only how states view others but also how those views affect policy decisions. Therefore, the United States built a different Pakistan based on fresh cognitive and strategic narratives, so underlining the constructivist claim that states act toward others based on the meanings those others have for them—rather than reacting to a “different” Pakistan (Wendt 1992, 119).

Onuf's approach clarifies this metamorphosis as a reconstruction of identity and reinterpretation of views as much as a change in policy. Pakistan moved from being seen as a necessary ally in a unipolar American-led order to be seen as an uncertain player caught between Washington and Beijing by means of repeated speech acts, norms, and

institutional changes. Recent events including the Indo-Pak conflicts and China's diplomatic support of Pakistan in venues like the UN Security Council, which have further confirmed Pakistan's view in US discourse as part of a China-led regional axis, clearly show this identity building (Fatima & Ashraf 2022).

Onuf's constructivism ultimately shows how state identities are always negotiated and changed by language, social conventions, and interaction—never fixed. Once based on cooperation, the picture of Pakistan in American foreign policy is today mostly shaped by mistrust and strategic difference. This changing view is a result of deeper social construction of identities within the global order conditioned by “discursive practices”, normative changes, and the interaction between agency and structure, not only of policy misalignment (Reus-Smit 2005, 44).

Pakistan as a constructed ally in the War on Terror from 2001–2016

Following the 9/11 attacks, Pakistan was quickly positioned in U.S. strategic discourse as an indispensable War on Terror (WoT) ally. Constructed as a critical counterterrorism partner, the Bush administration's immediate rhetorical framing of Pakistan as a “Major Non-NATO Ally” (2004) and a “Frontline State” (Bush 2001, 1) shapes its identity. Significant material commitments—between 2001 and 2016, Pakistan received over \$33 billion in U.S. assistance, including \$14 billion in Coalition Support Funds (CSF) for military operations and \$8 billion in economic aid—supported this performative designation. Though US officials publicly praised Pakistan's cooperation, internal assessments and leaked papers—such as the 2012 Pentagon report—increasingly characterized its efforts as “selective and unreliable” (Fair 2018). This alliance was thus rife with contradictions.

A discursive change is shown by a longitudinal study of US media and diplomatic communications. From 2001 to 2008, 75% of major American newspapers—including *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*—framed Pakistan as a “bulwark against al-Qaeda,” so presenting a positive picture of Pakistan. Following the Osama bin Laden raid (conducted without Pakistan's knowledge), the tone became adversarial post-2011; 62% of congressional hearings (2011–2016) mentioned Pakistan's “duplicitous” (Congressional Record 2016, 17); terms like “safe havens” and “double game” proliferated in policy

circles. This linguistic turn-about reflected declining aid flows—CSF reimbursements dropped by 40% between 2011 and 2016—reflecting lost confidence (SIGAR 2017, 12).

The duality in American views—between Pakistan’s strategic need for geographic access to Afghanistan and dependability issues—underscores Onuf’s constructivist claim that alliances are linguistically and physically co-constituted (Onuf 2013, 41). Pakistan’s identity as a “necessary but problematic ally” was not natural but created by institutionalized rules (e.g., conditioning CSF on counterterrorism “performance”) and iterative speech acts (e.g., aid negotiations paired with public rebukes). By 2016, the social contract of the alliance had unravelled: US discourse increasingly positioned Pakistan as a “transactional actor”, setting the stage for its later reframing as a Chinese “client state” in the Trump era (Khan 2022, 6).

Triangular view: Insecurities of India, the United States, and Pakistan

The US-Pakistan counterterrorism alliance (2001–2016) was fundamentally shaped by Washington’s simultaneous strategic embrace of India, which exacerbated Pakistan’s historical insecurities about abandonment. While Pakistan received \$33 billion in US aid during this period, American military and economic cooperation with India grew exponentially—US-India defense trade jumped from near zero in 2001 to over \$20 billion by 2016 (CRS, 2021, p. 10), including major arms deals like the \$3.5 billion purchase of C-17 and P-8 aircraft. The 2008 US-India nuclear deal, which effectively recognized India as a nuclear power without demanding nonproliferation commitments (Pant 2016), was particularly jarring for Pakistani policymakers who saw it as evidence of differential treatment (DIA 2018, 21).

This growing US-India partnership had measurable psychological impacts on Pakistan’s strategic calculus. From 2010 to 2015, declassified Pakistani national security records show that 78% of high-level meetings cited US-India cooperation as an “existential threat multiplier” (ISPR Archives 2017, 6). With US-India joint military exercises rising by 300% between 2005 and 2015, compared to a 40% drop in US-Pakistan drills during the same period, the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia” (2011) further institutionalized India as America’s preferred regional partner. Pakistani media covered these events in great detail; content analysis reveals that references to “US

betrayal” in Pakistani English newspapers jumped by 62% following important U.S.-India agreements (PIPS Media Monitor 2018, 11).

US aid dropped by 91% between 1990 and 2001 caused Pakistan’s historical memory of post-Cold War abandonment to be triggered by the material and discursive construction of India as America’s “natural ally” (Burns 2016, 12). World Bank data, this impression was strengthened when the US kept accusing Pakistan of harbouring militants while giving India Major Defense Partner status in 2016—a title Pakistan never received even with WoT sacrifices. “The writing is on the wall...we’re being set up for another 1990s style exit,” then Defense Minister Khawaja Asif said in 2015 (Dawn 2015, 1).

Pakistan’s hedging policy was directly shaped by this uncertainty. Pakistan hastened nuclear modernization (adding 20 warheads annually after 2011) and strengthened ties with China—CPEC negotiations intensified precisely as US-India defense agreements peaked in 2013–15 (Small 2020, 2), while publicly maintaining the alliance. The created fear of abandonment thus became a self-fulfilling prophecy: US privileging of India validated Pakistani suspicions, so encouraging actions that further eroded Washington’s trust (US Institute of Peace 2011, 6).

From a WoT ally to a state convinced of its approaching abandonment, this complex interaction shows how material aid flows and discursive privilege of India jointly rebuilt Pakistan’s strategic identity—from a WoT ally to a state driven to pivot to China. The evidence shows that Pakistani hedging was more of a reaction to America’s India-centric regional architecture than a philosophical decision (Staniland 2011, 141).

Changing identity: Pakistan’s growing bonds with China and building a new strategic vision

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the flagship project of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has fundamentally changed Pakistan’s geopolitical identity from a US-aligned counterterrorism partner to China’s premier regional ally. With infrastructure projects like the Gwadar Port (\$1.62 billion) and energy plants (\$10.8 billion), CPEC has channeled \$25.4 billion in direct Chinese investments into Pakistan as of 2023 (SAFE 2023, 10). Originally launched in 2015, the trade volumes between the two countries jumped from \$4 billion in 2010 to \$20 billion in 2022 (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics 2023), while military exchanges—including joint exercises like “Sea Guardians”

and arms transfers like J-10CE fighter jets (\$800 million deal in 2022)—solidified a complete strategic partnership (SIPRI 2023, 3).

US language responded sharply to this reorientation. While Pentagon assessments noted a 400% increase in Chinese military-related activities in Pakistan since 2018 (DOD, 2023, p.09), Congress Research Service reports (2023) labelled CPEC a “debt-trap diplomacy” vehicle. Citing the 54% share of Pakistan’s overall external debt owing to China, the 2023 US-China Economic and Security Review Commission report clearly positioned Pakistan as “China’s client state in South Asia”. Media narratives highlighted this change: 78% of U.S. think tank publications (2018–2023) called CPEC a “strategic threat” to American interests (CSIS Database 2023, 11).

From a constructivist perspective, these material interactions are direct guidelines for rebuilding Pakistan’s international identity. China’s “all-weather friendship” rhetoric—repeated in 92% of joint statements (2015–2023)—operationalizes this construction, as does Pakistan’s acceptance of China’s Digital Silk Road (e.g., 5G infrastructure built by Huawei). Declaring “economic security through BRI alignment” as its top priority, Pakistan’s 2022 National Security Policy formally instituted this change (MoFA 2022, 17). While US cooperation policies required counterterrorism compliance, China’s rules reward geopolitical alignment—best shown by Pakistan’s consistent support of China on Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and South China Sea issues (UN Voting Records 2023, 16).

Now self-reinforcing: 67% of Pakistani elite polls (PILDAT, 2023, p.19) say China is their “most reliable partner,” while just 9% of respondents for the United States CPEC’s material-discursive nexus has thus generated a new social fact: Pakistan as China’s “iron brother,” a change accomplished not by coercion but rather by rules-based re-socialization into China’s conception of Eurasian connectivity (Lalwani 2020, 17).

Instrumental change in American strategic behavior: Calculating the pivot to perceived marginalization of Pakistan

Nicholas Onuf’s constructivist framework helps one to understand the significant change in the strategic narrative of the United States about Pakistan between 2017 and 2023 as a redefining of state identity via changing “instructive rules.” This change was not isolated; it was part of a larger US offshore balancing plan meant to contain China by increasing India’s influence in South Asia, so transforming Pakistan

from an ally to a peripheral actor. The United States signed defense and trade deals with India totaling about \$54 billion between 2015 and 2022. Among these were the 2016 Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), which enabled mutual access to military facilities vital for Indo-Pacific logistics; the 2018 Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), which approved \$3.5 billion in secure communications tech (DSCA 2018, 23); and the 2020 Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA), so improving real-time geospatial intelligence sharing worth \$1.8 billion (CRS 2021, 4). Major weapon sales supporting these agreements included \$3.5 billion for Apache helicopters, \$2.6 billion for P-8I Poseidon aircraft, and \$1.9 billion for MK-45 naval guns (SIPRI 2022, 11). US rhetoric supported this change: Pakistan increasingly disappeared from strategic discourse while India was rebranded as a “net security provider” (Carter 2016) and the “lynchpin of the Indo-Pacific strategy” (Trump 2017, 1).

These changes showed up in behavior: US-India joint military operations jumped from 4 annually in 2014 to 28 in 2022 (Pentagon 2023), while bilateral exercises with Pakistan stopped entirely after 2018. Concurrently, U.S. arms exports to Pakistan dropped by 98% following the imposition of security-related sanctions (SIPRI 2023, 11), while defense trade with India grew by 1,100% since 2008, reaching \$25 billion by 2022. Mirroring these trends, diplomatic patterns reflected 43 U.S. Comparatively to just 2 to Pakistan, cabinet-level visits to India between 2017 and 2022 will total Islamabad read this as strategic desertion. The 2020 U.S.-India Joint Statement linking Pakistan to cross-border terrorism set off a 317% increase in Pakistani media representations of U.S. “hostility.” This view was strengthened when Pakistan was left out of the 2021 U.S. India was invited to the Democracy Summit, where the 2022 National Defense Strategy mentioned Pakistan just in the framework of terrorism risks while calling India a “priority partner” (DOD 2022, 8).

These changes reflect a deliberate reordering of instructive rules in Onuf’s constructivist sense. Under U.S. direction, India was socialized into a new normative role anchored in technological-sharing and strategic cooperation against China; Pakistan was subjected to exclusionary norms. India received rule exemptions, including a CAATSA waiver for its purchase of Russia’s S-400 missile system, unlike Pakistan, whose military assistance came with tight counterterrorism restrictions. Further building Pakistan as a strategic

outlier, the 2022 US-India Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (ICET), which gave India access to advanced AI, quantum, and defense technologies. This asymmetry grew even more when the Taliban seized Afghanistan in 2021. Pakistan saw the Taliban's return as a geopolitical opportunity and strengthened ties with China and Russia, including endorsement of China's Global Security Initiative and participation in Shanghai Cooperation Organization military operations, while the U.S. saw the Taliban as a security threat (MoFA 2022, 7).

Deep mistrust notwithstanding, aspects of pragmatic cooperation endured. The Biden government's 2023 approval of a \$450 million sustainment package for Pakistan's F-16s demonstrated Pakistan's continuing value in counterterrorism operations (NYT, 2023, p. 02). Not enough, though, to undo the structural redefining of roles. America Pentagon records, State Department designations, and media coverage all progressively present Pakistan as a threat or challenge rather than as a friend. Material reconfigurations in support, trade, and diplomacy matched these discursive changes to propel Pakistan into the China-Russia orbit. The fall in U.S.-Pakistan strategic intimacy thus reflects not only a policy change but also a social reclassification of Pakistan's identity. This case shows how changing normative frameworks and symbolic acts of inclusion and exclusion influence not only capabilities but also international alignments by themselves. Through different rules and favor-based socializing, the United States actively destroyed the Pakistan alliance, so changing the geopolitical order of South Asia by means of intentional identity reconstruction and strategic alienation, not only refocusing on India (Munawar et al. 2024, 25).

US Dynamics in Indo-Pak conflict

The Indo-Pakistani crisis of 2025 marks a turning point in US views of Pakistan as well as in regional security dynamics. From India's unparalleled Operation Sindoor strikes deep into Punjab to Pakistan's retaliatory air operations, the escalation ladder climbed during this confrontation shows how New Delhi's lack of deterrence has ironically strengthened Pakistan's proxy warfare approach (Shah 2025, 15).

Understanding Islamabad's strategic behavior through the prism of Thomas Schelling's concept of compliablence will help future US policy decisions about Pakistan to be informed. This will help to explain how conflicts develop even during times of official peace. Compellence is the use of limited force or credible threats to force an

opponent into stopping unwelcome activities (Schelling, 1966, p. 110). Both India and Pakistan have used commellent policies in the South Asian setting: India to discourage what it regards as Pakistan's meddling in its internal affairs, and Pakistan to pressure India into caving in on Kashmir (Kapur 2005, 222).

The nuclearization of the area has changed the strategic calculus by restricting India's conventional military edge and so empowering Pakistan's strategic posture (Narang 2014). By means of this nuclear shield, Pakistan has been able to adopt aggressive strategies without resorting to full-scale war. Moreover, thanks to Chinese technical support, Pakistan's aerial capacity has been much improved. Pakistan's capacity to challenge Indian Rafale aircraft during the most recent aerial standoff (Abbas 2025, 21; Panda 2021, 25) apparently depended critically on the deployment of Chinese J-10C fighter planes and PL-15 long-range air-to-air missiles. This development not only highlights Pakistan's increasing operational capacity but also begs serious doubts regarding the supposed technological superiority of Western systems in South Asia (Roblin 2025, 3).

For the United States, which has always gave India top priority in its Indo-Pacific approach, these changes create a strategic conundrum. Ignoring Pakistan's growing capabilities and strategic alignment with China, though, could compromise long-term US interests in the area (Tellis 2020, 21). Washington now has to take a more sophisticated approach that balances relations with India and Pakistan and recognizes the intricate deterrence dynamics. A new policy should try to solve Pakistan's threat impressions, stop more Chinese influence, and promote regional stability (Fair 2014, 20).

Findings

US reframing of Pakistan's identity constructed ally to strategic liability

- a) Backed by \$33 billion in aid, the United States built Pakistan as a "frontline ally" in the War on Terror following 9/11.
- b) Through its counterterrorism cooperation, Pakistan suffered over 80,000 military and civilian casualties as well as financial losses topping \$150 billion.
- c) Notwithstanding these costs, American narratives changed over the 2010s to show Pakistan as "duplicitous," particularly following the 2011 bin Laden raid and claims of covert links to militant networks.

d) This discursive reframing captures Onuf's constructivist insight that state identities are co-constituted through speech acts and material interactions—alliances can be built up and destroyed by changing attitudes and rhetoric.

Strategic trust undermined by conflicting US priority for India

a) From \$0 in 2001 to over \$54 billion by 2022, US defense and trade agreements with India surged dramatically.

b) Important agreements including LEMOA (2016), COMCASA (2018), and BECA (2020) positioned India as the main US partner in the Indo-Pacific.

c) Concurrent with this, US military operations with Pakistan dropped by 100% post-2018, leading Pakistan to believe in strategic marginalisation and abandonment, so reflecting the post-Cold War experience.

Perceived abandonment drove Pakistan's pivot to China

a) US preference for India combined with charges against Pakistan created a psychological story of betrayal. Pakistani officials said this was a "1990s style exit".

b) Pakistan responded by strengthening strategic ties with China: CPEC attracted \$25.4 billion in Chinese investment, and Pakistan acquired advanced military systems including J-10CE fighter planes.

c) Discursive ones matched these material ties; terms like "iron brother" cropped up in 92% of China-Pakistan joint statements.

US Constructivist exclusion reinforced Pakistan's China alignment

a) While Pakistan faced conditional military aid and sanctions, India received CAATSA waivers and tech transfers while the United States applied varied "instructive rules."

b) Emphasized by the United States, this symbolic exclusion Democracy Summit turned aside strategic dialogues excluding Pakistan, socially reclassified Pakistan as a peripheral actor rather than a peer partner.

c) Pakistan's strategic re-socializing into a China-centric framework is reflected in its growing participation with China's Global Security Initiative and SCO military operations.

Chinese technical support undermines American view of Indian superiority

a) New air power parity was shown by Pakistan's operational use of Chinese J-10C jets and PL-15 missiles against India's French Rafale aircraft in 2025 aerial conflicts, so subverting US presumptions about regional military balances.

b) This technological revolution changed Americans' impressions of Pakistan's strategic capacity and cast questions on ongoing reliance on India as the regional counterbalance to China.

Consequences for American policies

a) The US has to rethink its binary strategic rationale in South Asia. Marginalizing Pakistan runs the danger of alienating a nuclear-armed state buried in China's strategic framework even more.

b) Avoiding escalation and guaranteeing regional stability depend on a more balanced US regional policy based on recognition of Pakistan's threat perceptions, hedging behavior, and desire for geopolitical relevance.

Policy recommendations for the United States: Changing views and restoring strategic image of Pakistan

I. The US has to go past a binary view of Pakistan as a liability and India as a strategic ally. The oversimplified picture has added to instability. Correcting distorted views and maintaining balance in the region depends on a dual-track approach that keeps strategic alignment with India while actively involving Pakistan.

II. Washington should bring back discussion on shared security issues in order to change negative impressions and rebuild Pakistan's damaged image in circles of American policy. Conditional incentives—such as energy assistance, limited military cooperation, and financial support—can help Pakistan to build confidence and lessen its reliance on China.

III. The Indo-Pak crisis of 2025 exposed how reactionary rhetoric and misperceptions might spur on escalation. To minimize misjudgments and stop perception-driven conflict spirals between nuclear-armed rivals, the United States should support permanent crisis communication channels and joint de-escalation mechanisms.

IV. Symbolic exclusions like not inviting Pakistan to the United States Democracy Summit has strengthened its view of abandonment and degraded its global image. By means of multilateral forums, Pakistan can help to normalize its diplomatic identity and redefine its position as a regional stakeholder.

V. The US has to change the public conversation, which usually presents Pakistan in a constantly negative light. Acknowledging Pakistan's War on Terror sacrifices and lessening the frequency of "double game" narratives will help to strengthen Pakistan's reputation and foster mutual trust.

VI. US policy should support inclusive regional connectivity—such as infrastructure and energy cooperation—that helps Pakistan to diversify partnerships outside China, so transcending a view of encirclement. This would help Pakistan’s reputation as a cooperative actor in the region to grow.

VII. Pakistan’s turn to China is motivated by ideas of betrayal and exclusion, not only by geography. As a complicated but necessary regional actor, the United States should create a long-term engagement strategy that respects Pakistan’s strategic insecurities and rewrites its image inside American policymaking.

Conclusion

From close counterterrorism cooperation post-9/11 to strategic estrangement in the Indo-Pacific era, the path of US-Pakistan relations emphasizes the central importance of changing attitudes, identity building, and geopolitical realignment. This study has shown using Nicholas Onuf’s constructivist framework that changing norms, speech acts, and social rules have equally shaped Pakistan’s image in American strategic discourse as by material interests and military behavior. From a “frontline ally” to a “transactional actor”, then to a “Chinese client state,” the change shows how alliances are not fixed but rather socially constructed—and deconstructed—through discursive and structural means. Empirical data highlights this change: although Pakistan made great sacrifices during the War on Terror—including over 80,000 lives lost and \$150 billion in economic damage—it was finally shown as dishonest and unreliable. At the same time the US exempted New Delhi from arms restrictions, invested over \$54 billion in defense cooperation with India, and positioned it as the regional “lynchpin” against China. Rooted in Cold War-era fears, this strategic privilege of India heightened Pakistan’s sense of abandonment and propelled its fast turn to China through CPEC and military integration. Pakistan’s hedging was thus more of a calculated reaction to exclusive American behavior than of an ideological realignment.

Further erasing the regional balance is the 2025 Indo-Pakistani crisis brought on by Chinese technological support and nuclear brinkmanship. The area is likely to become more unstable as India claims a more forceful counterterrorism policy and Pakistan improves its deterrent power with Chinese support. The United States now find a pivotal turning point: its binary strategic logic—privileging India while

marginalizing Pakistan—risks strengthening Pakistan’s alignment with China and compromising long-term regional stability. US policy has to be dual-track going forward: keep strategic alignment with India while re-engaging Pakistan with calibrated diplomacy, crisis management tools, and economic incentives. Ignoring Pakistan’s changing threat perceptions and strategic insecurities will only help to widen mistrust and raise reliance on China. Based on constructivist awareness of identity dynamics and material reality, a balanced framework provides the best means to bring South Asia back into equilibrium and maintain US influence in a fast changing regional order.

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