



STRATEGIC AGENCY OR STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINT:  
CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS IN PAKISTAN'S FOREIGN POLICY (2010-2020)

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**Abstract**

*This research is a systematic review of the key factors shaping Pakistan's foreign policy during the critical decade from 2010 to 2020. It academically explores the traditional agency-structure argument in International Relations theory by questioning the degree to which Pakistan's external relations were characterised by sovereign strategic autonomy or by adaptation to domestic institutional constraints rooted in the system. The paper does not merely apply the traditional civil-military debate. Rather, it reveals a praetorian paradox in states with dominant security institutions. In such states, the military is a dual-faced reality: the primary agent as well as the primary domestic constraint, creating a unique, self-limiting form of agency. The study is a qualitative, within-case analysis that relies on a constructivist epistemology. It aims to employ the synthesis of the literature and the open-source official statements of the Indian, Pakistani and the US sources. The foreign policy of Pakistan can best be described as being characterised by constricted agency, a state in which tactical actions are made within the context of parameters of strong structural restraint. The findings reveal a dialectical process wherein strategic agency is continuously moderated and reconstructed by the structural forces that lie deep-rooted within it. This entails the institutional imbalance of the dominant Civil-Military Relations (CMR), chronic domestic political instability, acute economic vulnerabilities, its religiously constructed realities, and the dynamics of an intensely competitive regional and global geopolitical landscape. This has profound consequences for democratic consolidation, long-term strategic coherence, regional stability, and narratives of pure autonomy or of deterministic constraint.*

**Keywords:** Pakistan Foreign Policy, Civil-Military Relations, Strategic Autonomy, Structural Constraints, Agency-Structure Debate, Geopolitical Hedging, South Asian Security

**1. Framing the Analytical Dilemma**

The process of formulation and implementation of a foreign policy of a state is a complex interplay of deliberate decisions of the governing elite and insurmountable forces of its domestic and foreign environment. In the case of Pakistan, an Islamic Republic, the intersection of its systemic, domestic and institutional prompts the main, analytically productive question: To what extent did Pakistan's foreign policy during this period reflect calculated, sovereign strategic agency, and to what degree was it a reactive function of deep-rooted structural constraints? It is not just an academic probe. It is a serious question with broader implications to comprehend the motivators of state behaviour in the Global South and the actualities of middle-power manoeuvring in an increasingly multipolar, hierarchically structured global system. It explores how internal politics, particularly the civil-military power balance, interact with the external systemic pressures to influence the international posture of a nation (Bibi and Yousaf, 2020). Importantly, the paper does not merely apply



the traditional civil-military debate. Rather, it reveals a praetorian paradox in states with dominant security institutions. In such states, the military is a dual-faced reality: the primary agent as well as the primary domestic constraint, creating a unique, self-limiting form of agency. The study is a qualitative, within-case analysis that relies on a constructivist epistemology.

Pakistan's geographical location strategically situates it at a volatile crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East; this duality is particularly acute, especially post 9/11 (Ali. et al., 2019). The 2010-2020 decade, in particular, is critical and distinct in the history of Pakistan's foreign policy, with a sequence of epoch-altering events: the messy withdrawal termination of the US-led War on Terror in Pakistan's neighbouring Afghanistan, the strategic introduction and development of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the escalation of great power rivalry, and unending internal turmoil due to political frailty and economic stagnation (Khan et al, Hassan, and Raza, 2023). This era thus provides a good analytical insight into the eternal conflict between the will of a state and its structural constraints.

This analysis posits that Pakistan's foreign policy from 2010 to 2020 emerged from the interplay of systemic pressures and domestic determinants. The external influences entail the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, growing Indian global influence, foreign economic dependencies, and the rise of China. This raw policy output significantly gets filtered through the country's powerful domestic filters, the most pivotal one being its historic civil-military disparity (Haqqani, 2018; Jaffrelot, 2016) and a persistent strategic culture centred on India (Pande, 2011; Paul, 2014). The final output policy was not thoroughly structurally determined. Rather, it emerged from contentious interactions among various agents operating within these constraints, with the CMR interplay being predominant. To document this play, the discussion does not stay on the abstract theory but goes on to deal with the primary texts and scholarly-generated empirical accounts of the times. Listening to the various, occasionally conflicting, accounts of policy being made in the conjuncture of declaratory ambition and operational reality, the inquiry can trace how policy was constructed, and is constructed, between the diplomatic language of the ministry of foreign affairs (MoFA) and the strategic articulations of the inter-services public relations (ISPR), as well as the extrinsic evaluations of the US State Department statements and the Indian government statements (GoP MoFA, 2019; DG-ISPR, 2018; US Department of State, 2018). This approach brings about foreign policy as a lived, negotiated practice of constrained agency rather than as an autonomous decision.

This paper contributes to the field of knowledge in three ways. First, it offers a primary-source-based application of the agency-structure debate to one of the most critical non-Western cases, thus shifting the theoretical discourse into the area of documented state practice. Second, it adopts a methodological strategy of triangulation to unfold the competing discourse of the Pakistani state, within the state and with the outside world. Third, it obtains policy-relevant lessons that are directly pegged to the identified condition of constrained agency and provide means not to eradicate constraints, but to navigate them more skilfully. The analysis goes ahead to develop a theoretical framework that would synthesise the agency-structure debate with mid-level theories of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA). This framework forms the basis of the study to analyse the empirical data using the two overlapping, complementary prisms of domestic civil-military politics and systemic geopolitical pressures. It concludes with a critical evaluation of implications and recommendations.

## 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Moving from the abstract agency-structure debate to a systematic analysis of Pakistan, this review is structured into three critical and interconnected sub-themes. First, it studies literature on *Civil-Military Relations* (CMR) (Janjua, 2020), which makes the Core Domestic Structure in Pakistan's foreign policy, given that no analysis of Pakistani statecraft can sidestep the military's fundamental institutional and influential roles: both enabling and constraining ones. Second, the review surveys work on geopolitical *Hedging and Alignment* (Azhar, 2025), which is a dominant behavioural pattern necessitated by Pakistan's risky regional, ideational, and global positioning. Third, it reviews the country's *Economic Vulnerability* (World Bank Group, 2025) as another pivotal Constraint, a persistent theme that directly restrains its strategic autonomy. These sub-themes together represent the most salient domestic and systemic filters through which foreign policy agency is propagated. These are not discrete themes but intersecting vectors of constraint and enablement. Significantly, the CMR and economic literature largely underscore the *domestic structural* filters, while the



hedging literature exposes the impact of the *systemic structural* environment. Nevertheless, as the ensuing review will show, existing scholarship often treats these themes in isolation. The literature normally fails to model their *interactive* effect on policy formulation. This gap necessitates an integrated, dialectical framework proposed in Section 2.2. The successive theoretical synthesis employs this three-faceted scholarship to make an integrated analytical lens.

### **2.1 The Foundational Agency-Structure Dichotomy in IR Theory**

The discussion is linked to the traditional and arguably fundamental agent-structure problem in the theory of International Relations (Wendt, 1987, pp. 335-370). This theoretical argument assumes the primary form of inquiry in ontology: are the actions and outcomes of world politics largely the result of the properties, relations and decisions of the conscious acting agents, i.e. states, leaders, and/or organisations? Or, are these actions and outcomes consequences of the overriding construction of the social system, its norms, the distribution of power, and/or the institutional formations? As Archer (1995, p. 65) upholds, there is no static relationship in structure and agency in the long run; structures provide a situation in which action can emerge, and actions can in turn reproduce or transform structures. This dialectic is essential in transcending the deterministic or voluntarist accounts of state behaviour.

Traditional realist theories, and in particular neorealism, tend to give structure much of the credit in the explanation of state behaviour, assuming that the anarchic character of the international system (Rose, 1998) and the dispensation of capabilities within it are the most important factors in explaining state behaviour, with little leeway given to agent choice (Waltz, 1979). In contrast, Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) and classical realism scholarship emphasise the agent level, exploring the role that domestic politics, bureaucratic politics, leadership psychology, and national role conceptions play in policy (Hudson, 2005, pp. 1-30). An example of these models is by Graham Allison (and Philip Zelikow) (1999), who breaks down the state into governmental organisations and bureaucratic actors, whose inner processes and politics affect the results. Constructivist scholarship, although it does not ignore structure, stresses the fact that such structures are not materially given but are socially constructed through intersubjective understandings, identities, and practices, and thus agential interpretation and interaction are given great significance (Wendt, 1999). To examine a state such as Pakistan, where the decision-making process is said not always to be centralised and fully controlled by civilians, a synthesised approach that is aware of this duality is necessary (Khan et al., 2023).

### **2.2 Operationalising the Framework in the Pakistani Context**

To translate this theoretical debate into an operational analytical tool for the Pakistani case, this paper defines its core concepts as follows:

**2.2.1 Foreign Policy Agency.** Foreign policy analysis (FPA) examines how domestic political and decision-making determinants influence actors' choices, decision-making and policies (Kaarbo, 2019). The illustrated ability of the Pakistani decision-making elite, which is both comprised of civilian political leadership and the military-security establishment (Waqar & Uzzaman, 2025), to develop, launch, and implement foreign policy initiatives that are seen to pursue articulated national interests. This authority is embodied in the strategic projects, alliance decision-making, rhetoric of diplomacy, and response to crisis.

#### **2.2.2 Domestic Structural Constraint (CMR).**

The domestic institutional, political, and economic context which limits the foreign policy scope. The key element here is the civil-military power equation, which is a traditional arrangement in which the military exercises formal and informal veto power, agenda-setting capabilities, and the existence of parallel policymaking in areas of core strategy (Fair, 2014; Siddiq, 2017). This has frequently resulted in a condition of Praetorianism, whereby military dominance extends beyond defence and into the political and economic spheres (Siddiq, 2007). Chronic political turmoil, ineffective democratic institutions, economic vulnerability (fiscal deficits, foreign debt) and strong socioreligious ideology are all secondary factors. Amjad & Shehzad (2024) convincingly argue that these factors are not incidental, yet they are deeply embedded features of Pakistan's political system. Moreover, the domestic security issues intensified by terrorism and insurgency have always prioritised internal stability over active regional interaction, as another structural restraint to foreign policy (Sullivan, 2016).

**2.2.3 Systemic Structural Constraint.** The external geopolitical and economic environment that



brings about both opportunity and restraint. This consists of the regional security complex (the antagonistic competition based on India, the chronically unstable situation in Afghanistan), the great power competition (the main rivalry of the US-China), the dependence relations with the international financial institutions (IMF, World Bank), and the global normative order (Parameswaran, 2024). These weaknesses were further revealed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which broke out at the end of the decade, increasing doubts in the economy and geopolitics and imposing reactive policies during great power rivalries (Baldino, 2020).

The central argument is that Pakistani foreign policy is produced at the nexus of these three forces. Agency is exercised, but its form and direction are profoundly shaped by the interaction between domestic and systemic structures. This framework moves beyond a simplistic "either/or" debate to a more nuanced investigation of "how and under what conditions" agency is enacted within a field of constraints. Additionally, as per Ikaheimo (2024), agency in international relations is also an *attributed status*, and it depends upon its recognition by other significant powers. Pakistan's foreign policy manoeuvres thus occur within a dual constraint: internal structural filters and the external, which often withholds its desired strategic role.

### 2.3 Reviewing the Specifics: CMR, Hedging, and Economic Dependency

The relevance of the interplay of CMR, hedging and economic dependency is largely confirmed by existing literature on the foreign policy of Pakistan. The literature professes that the military in Pakistan is a political actor, an institution with corporate ventures and a strategic planner of Pakistan's policies. The military functions in terms of comparative theory as a 'praetorian' actor with veto authority over the state institutions (Pion-Berlin, 1992; Siddiq, 2007). Such a central role has also been described as 'guardianship' (Abbasi, 2020, pp. 65-77), which renders Pakistan's military as its dominant structural component. Research into definite matters, Afghanistan policy, Indian relations, nuclear posture, and CPEC, constantly emphasises the directive or veto-powerful role of the military, assuming that foreign policy-making is not commonly the preserve of civilians (Khan et al., 2023; Ul Hassan, 2020; & Tariq, 2019). The military as a *constitutive domestic structure* creates a determined 'praetorian filter'. This filter fundamentally scrutinises the complete strategic agency of the state, which reviews, reshapes or redirects all military and non-military initiatives. This literature thus offers the typical model of a domestic structural constraint as well as an active agent. It is this duality which is central to the framework of this study.

At the same time, the external balancing literature on Pakistan can be characterised by a unique hedging strategy. This includes maintaining workable, albeit strained, relations with the United States to be able to gain residual security and economic advantages, developing deep, all-weather relations with China, and involving other powers, such as Russia (Adil et al, 2024; Basit, 2018). Studying Pakistan's multi-alignment approach accurately recognises it as a reaction to structural limitations in the system, which include great-power rivalries and regional instability. Nevertheless, by often depicting hedging as a conscious 'strategy,' this body of work may exaggerate the consistency of individual choices. As Small (2015) suggests, a strong alignment with China could render hedging with other nations a structural requirement rather than a matter of choice. This underscores the need to analyse how systemic pressures are understood and impacted by the domestic structural filter of CMR, a crucial connection our framework clarifies. It represents a risk-reducing multi-alignment, or 'hedging' behaviour, which the literature defines as avoiding explicit alignment to lessen the risks associated with reliance on any single great power (Kuik, 2016). For Pakistan, this is less a free strategic choice and more a structural necessity inspired by the competitive environment of great powers. Small (2015) contends that it is beyond hedging. The assertion read that it is a core alignment. Pakistan hedges *with other* states (the US, Russia) precisely because its partnership with China is profoundly deep, broad and potentially constraining.

Moreover, one of the recurring themes is the limiting nature of economic vulnerability. Research indicates that external conditions significantly influence policy choices, reinforcing the fundamental international relations principle that reliance on financial support largely limits political independence (Kirshner, 1997). This relationship connects strategic decision-making to economic health, fostering cycles in which the pursuit of IMF bailouts and assistance from Gulf allies (Rizwan et al., 2022; Van der Eng, 2024) drives foreign policy into a reactive, short-term crisis management approach, gradually undermining a long-term strategic vision. Studies on economic cycles and dependency highlight a domestic-systemic feedback



loop. Domestic financial vulnerabilities necessitate turning to international financial institutions and partnered countries (systemic actors), whose stipulations then further restrict both domestic and foreign policy independence. This body of literature aptly explains how structural limitations can dictate agendas, compelling foreign policy into a constant reactive stance. It provides the most compelling evidence that structure can overpower agency, a dynamic our framework is intended to illuminate.

Nevertheless, a different line of research offers an opposing opinion, arguing against the perception of the military as an exclusively restrictive force and Pakistan as a passive subject of organisation. This school of thought claims that the leading role of the military can be considered a strategic resource that allows decisive and stable policymaking in the unstable area and that the skill of Pakistan in balancing the key powers demonstrates calculated agency and advanced exploitation of geopolitical conflicts (Donnelly, 2005; Mearsheimer, 2001). Although this perspective is effective in adding emphasis to instances of active initiative and tactical purpose, this discussion argues that it tends to undervalue the structural costs of militarised decision-making over time, including the rot of democracy and institutional disintegration, and misunderstands reactive hedging as the strategy of proactivity. It is an ironic paradox that, at the same time, the perceived power of decisive agency may in fact affirm the structural constraints that constrain wider strategic choices, which is the core of this exploration.

Though the existing scholarship pertinently identifies the key actors and constraints, a distinct research gap prevails. The CMR, hedging, and economic vulnerability literatures treat these themes in isolation. The literature rarely integrates how the *domestic* structure of military dominance filters and customises responses to *systemic* economic and geopolitical pressures as it wills. Subsequently, a few studies methodically employ an integrated agency-structure framework. Additionally, a disconnect prevails between theoretical discussions of agency and the empirical analysis of policy formulation and narration found in the literature. This study seeks to plug this gap. To achieve so, it applies a synthesised agency-structure framework for the period 2010-2020. Employing triangulation of data sources to trace how the theoretical interplay between choice and constraint demonstrates itself in the empirical discourse and policy decisions of the state.

In summary, the paper is a synthesis of these literature streams in which the agency-structure framework is used not to disapprove agency but to offer a more comprehensive and theoretically consistent description of the foreign policy behaviour of Pakistan in the various themes. It explains both times when the country was assertive and when it was constrained. To analyse Pakistan, a morphogenetic (Archer, 1995) approach has been adopted. Domestic and systemic structures have been treated as conditioning, not determining. It is used to examine how agential actions of the military replace, steer, and occasionally reconfigure these structures in the period between 2010 and 2020. The CMR school details the *principal domestic agent/structure*, the hedging school outlines the *systemic imperatives*, and the economic scholarship details a *critical transmission belt* between them. What is absent is a dynamic model that can explain the interacting elements of a single dialectical process. The following methodology operationalises precisely this synthesis to trace how the agency identified in one stream of literature is constrained or enabled by the structures emphasised in other themes.

### 3. Methodology: A Qualitative Case Study of Constrained Agency

A qualitative research design based on a longitudinal, specific single case study (Yin, 2018) has been chosen to break down a complex relationship between agency and structure in the foreign policy of Pakistan. The case study approach is especially suitable because it enables a detailed, holistic, and context-sensitive analysis of a complex modern-day phenomenon in the context of a real-life environment and the causal mechanisms and processes exploring which could perhaps be hidden in a quantitative approach. Such a strategy would be consistent with a constructivist epistemological approach in which foreign policy is informed by socially constructed conceptions of national identity, threat perceptions, and strategic culture amongst key actors within the confines of recognised structures (Hopf, 1998, pp. 171-200).

To understand the process of foreign policy decision-making, it is necessary to address the primary texts that are made by the state itself. Although secondary literature is a priceless interpretative resource, the official record is a crude, contemporary narration of the way actors defined their decisions and limitations. Thus, this discussion will combine the most important primary sources to base the agency-structure discussion



on actual evidence and opposing histories.

The 2010-2020 period is chosen as a critical case due to a number of reasons. It signifies a specific stage in the wake of the high-militarisation of the War on Terror period, and it coincides with a period of relative but unstable consecutive civilian rule (PPP 2008-2013, PML-N 2013-2018, PTI 2018-2022). This enables an analysis of the extent to which the civilian democratic transitions changed the structural impact of the military on foreign policy. The era is also framed by major systemic changes: the US shift to Asia and the subsequent withdrawal of Afghanistan (Parameswaran, 2024), as well as the full-scale implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with CPEC as its marquee project. It therefore reflects how Pakistan navigated a significant change of power in the world and its results.

### 3.1 Data Collection and Sources

The study employs *triangulation* using multiple data sources to enhance validity and richness, capturing the multi-vocality of foreign policy:

**Primary Sources:** Official communique from the Pakistani government, Inter-Services Public Relations (DG-ISPR); and governments of other countries, including the US and India.

**Secondary Sources:** Peer-reviewed academic literature across political science, international relations, and security studies; expert analyses from reputable international and regional think tanks; and credible, high-quality journalistic accounts of key diplomatic and security events.

### 3.2 Analytical Framework and Process

The thematic analysis process was done in two stages of data analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, pp. 77-101). To begin with, there was a deductive coding which was founded on the main conceptual categories of agency, domestic structure (CMR, politics, economy), and systemic structure (geopolitics, great power relations) (Janjua, 2020; Azhar, 2025). Second, an inductive coding provided a possibility of emergent themes within these categories (e.g., military as an actor of diplomacy, economic crisis as the main driver of policy, hedging as the default strategy, narrative discord between institutions). Such themes were then incorporated into the logical analytical story, which forms the second section.

### 3.3 Limitations and Reflexivity

The main weakness is that it depends on open-source information, which does not provide details about classified internal discussions, as well as the entire informal processes of backchannel decision-making. The positionality of the researcher as an analyst who is not part of the Pakistani state machine is recognised. To reduce interpretive bias, the analysis is explicitly designed to balance by highlighting both the evidence of agential act and structural constraint across multiple sources and intentionally taking into account counter-narratives when they are possible.

## 4. Analysis: The Nexus of Agency and Structure in Key Arenas

The empirical experience of the decade has shown how the theory of constrained agency has become operationalised in practice, and primary documents have become the major landmarks. The dissonance of sources reveals the bifurcated strategic culture in Pakistan in stark contrast. The MoFA generally generates the official diplomatic account of the state, expressing an idea of economic cooperation and regional security, which is manifested in documents advancing trade relations (GoP MoFA, 2019). Conversely, communications by the DG-ISPR are usually asymmetric towards the operational priorities of the security establishment and their understanding of threats. These statements tend to emphasise border integrity and neutralising non-state actors, which tends to place the security paradigm through which diplomacy functions (DG-ISPR, 2018). This deviation is not only bureaucratic but reflects the tension of deeper structural form in the foreign policy apparatus. Moreover, the outside structural pressures are listed in reports such as the US State Department reports on terrorism and Indian Ministry of External Affairs statements after crises, which define the demands and criticisms that the policymakers of Pakistan had to constantly negotiate (US Department of State, 2018; GoI MEA, 2016). In addition, the US Congressional Research Service (2020) explains the US as a key external "structural filter." It is the collated US policy stance that Pakistani agencies constantly navigate: a tangible schematic influence of demands and criticisms. The inclusion of these voices makes it possible to have a fine-tuned, evidence-based implementation of the agency-structure framework in a way that it is no longer a theoretical postulate but a documented interplay.



#### ***4.1 The Afghan Endgame: Military-Led Agency within a Regional Straitjacket***

A good example of the limited agency is the Pakistan policy towards Afghanistan since 2010, especially on the US withdrawal and peace negotiations with the Taliban (Bashir, 2023). The military, set up by its historic connection and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), took decisive agency in developing leverage over the Taliban and influencing the negotiating process. This was informed by a strategic agential objective of having the government of Afghanistan be friendly and non-hostile to secure the western border of Pakistan and deny India strategic depth (Khan et al., 2023, pp. 521-522). Such an agency was expressed through the specific diplomatic positioning of Pakistan in the Doha negotiations.

But this agency was implemented in such harsh structural constraints, which were multi-layered. Pakistan was put in a systemic dilemma of conflicting interests: the US insists on delivering the Taliban to the table, China has interests in the stability of the region as a part of the BRI security system, and Russia has interests in the outcome of the conflict (Ahmed et al, 2023). Domestically, the military often formulated and implemented the policy with little substantive involvement of the civilian foreign ministry due to the long-term structural situation of the CMR in which the security policy is a closed area (Butt, 2025). The ultimate success, that the Taliban came back to power in 2021, was a strategic win by the military agency. This agency was exercised under the persistent scrutiny and pressure documented in official US assessments. It routinely highlighted Pakistan's 'dual role' in Afghanistan and voiced acute concern over the strategic implications of CPEC for regional balance (US CRS, 2020). Thus, this external audit continually framed Pakistani manoeuvrability. Nevertheless, it has plunged Pakistan into a new array of structural constraints: how to manage a pariah regime, to deal with a new wave of TTP threat on Afghan soil, international isolation, and a complex humanitarian and refugee crisis. Therefore, an effective agential manoeuvre reconfigured, yet failed to abandon, the structural landscape, throwing new constraints upon the policy choices of the future.

This case validates the theoretical idea that agency and structure are cyclical; the military's agential success in influencing the Afghan outcome (a point emphasised in the CMR literature). It simultaneously constructed a new set of structural constraints for Pakistani policymakers and precisely illustrated the dialectic highlighted by Archer (1995).

#### ***4.2 CPEC & Great Power Hedging: Calculated Agency Amidst Systemic Polarisation***

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), proclaimed in 2015, can be termed as the one of the greatest agency foreign policy moves of the decade, a strategic, sovereign gamble of joining an emerging China to prompt economic change (Batool, 2024). The agency was significant: organising long-term structure, prioritisation of projects, and mobilisation of domestic political support within provinces.

The idea of CPEC, as well as its development, cannot be viewed outside of structural forces. In India, it was one of the few areas where the civilian government and the military agreed, albeit due to opposite reasons: the former was motivated by economic development and energy security, the latter strategic depth, infrastructure that ensured mobilisation of forces, and the creation of an alliance against Indian influence (Ul Hassan, 2020, pp. 140-145). This consensus by itself is a structurality of Pakistani politics in the core issues of national security. At a systemic level, CPEC is Pakistan's main means of getting through the US-China rivalry. It is a very obvious strategic decision, yet it has occasioned some structural backlash: the heightened US diplomatic pressure, the issue of debt-trap diplomacy, Indian resistance based on sovereignty, and the resultant necessity of Pakistan hedging with other powers such as Russia and the Gulf region in order to prevent over-dependence. Therefore, the provocative agential action to welcome CPEC, at the same time, further embedded Pakistan in the structural paradox between Washington and Beijing, forming a new dependency as it attempted to end an old one. As Small (2015) methodically documents, the China-Pakistan axis signifies a decades-deep strategic alignment born from shared security and strategic concerns; otherwise, nothing is common between the two states - religion, culture, governance models, or ideologies. CPEC, being an agential 'bet' on this partnership, also sealed Pakistan more firmly into a structural dependency. It amplified what Small identifies as the central dilemma. This dilemma sits in China-Pakistan bromance in leveraging Beijing's support while managing the geopolitical and economic vulnerabilities.

Therefore, CPEC represents the literature on hedging not as a simple policy choice but as a complex, structural necessity. The enterprise echoes calculated agency, yet its execution and consequences confirm



informed cautions about Pakistan's new dependencies. It squarely situates the project within the enduring tension between strategic ambition and systemic limitation.

#### **4.3 The Persistent India-Pakistan Rivalry: Structure Overwhelming Agency**

The most structural and restrictive element of the foreign policy of Pakistan is the relationship with India. The structural bottlenecks are all-consuming and complementary: an existential territorial conflict (Kashmir), a strong and increasing power imbalance, an existent of mutual nuclear deterrence that increases the stakes of any conflict, strongly institutionalised hostile identities in the bureaucracies of both states and their civil societies, and the increasing global stature of India. All of these actively marginalise the diplomatic endeavours of Pakistan (and India) in international forums (Council of Foreign Relations, 2020).

In this strict order, any act of agential initiative seems brief and most times is overturned. As an example, the outreach of Prime Minister Sharif to Prime Minister Modi in the aftermath of the 2014 election in India was an agential gesture towards normalisation (Thompson & White, 2014). Nevertheless, the structural forces were quickly undermined: a militant strike on an Indian airbase in Pathankot in January 2016, by Jaish-e-Mohammad (alleged by India to be from Pakistan), provoked hardline rhetoric on the part of the Pakistani military establishment and opposite diplomatic provocations on the part of India (Pardesi, 2020, pp. 35-40). This showed a domestic structural problem of critical weakness of the state to exert or have limited control over all the violent non-state actors on its land, which other hostile powers can take advantage. The Balakot crisis of 2019 also exemplifies the constraint of the scripted cycles of action-reactivity and the risk of the vertical escalation of the rivalry (Ahmed & Ashraf, 2019), on which the responses of both states are limited to a small set of responses, with not much room for creative or de-escalatory agency. The competition is an effective structural constraint, which consumes the diplomatic, military, and psychological resources, takes over security planning, and leaves Pakistan with very little bandwidth to do anything constructive in other regions.

The rivalry, thus, is not simply a quantifiable power asymmetry. It is also a scuffle for recognition (Ikaheimo, 2024). India's insistent denial of diplomatic parity and its efforts to globally isolate Pakistan establish a direct battering on Pakistan's recognised agency, making substantive initiatives from Islamabad difficult to sustain. The reciprocal efforts also exist from Pakistan to lessen Indian agency.

#### **4.4 Economic Statecraft: When Structural Vulnerability Dictates the Agenda**

The frequent economic crises of Pakistan in the decade, which culminated in IMF-funding programs in 2013 and 2019 (and onwards till-to-date (2026)), are a stark example of how the foreign policy agenda can be usurped by structural economic vulnerability. During such times, the foreign policy establishment has its agency largely shifted away from long-term strategic planning into immediate crisis management to secure urgent funding by Gulf traditional allies, negotiate conditionalities that are painful with the IMF (Bhowmick, 2025), and engage in diplomatic campaigns to lure stop-gap investment.

This economic necessity often compels diplomatic concessions that give way to other strategic considerations. Indicatively, the emergency of the Saudi financial support has, at some key moments (Khan, 2024) required the need to side with the regional policies of Riyadh, like the hesitancy to join the Saudi-led Islamic Military Alliance or the muffled reactions to the Qatar blockade, despite such acts contradicting the stated Pakistani foreign policy of a nonpartisan stance or confusing ties with Iran (First Post, 2026). The fiscal viability balance and prevention of balance-of-payments crisis structural imperative thus becomes the most crucial determinant, which is actively restricting the range and aims of the foreign policy agency. Foreign policy is no longer concerned with a long-term strategic perspective but with the short-term economic survival of the state, which is a vivid example of the structure seriously restricting agency.

This repeated subordination of diplomatic stance to immediate financial needs harshly explains the literature identifying Pakistan's economic vulnerability as its primary structural constraint. Such a constraint effectively shifts foreign policy from a tool of long-term strategy to a mere instrument of short-term crisis management.

### **5. Discussion: Implications of Constrained Agency**

The discussion confirms the fact that the foreign policy of Pakistan is typified by a continuous, unstable crisis in which the strategic intent is constantly arbitrated and often watered down by structural constraints.



This state of limited agency is not a transient anomaly, but a structural trapping of the Pakistani state, with several deep and intersecting implications.

### ***5.1 Democratic Governance and Institutional Development***

The militarisation of the decision-making process in foreign policy regarding basic strategic matters is a fundamental and long-term form of democratic deficiency. The very fact that the critical decisions affecting war, peace, and alliances are made in the military headquarters (GHQ) in Rawalpindi instead of the Prime Minister's office or the Parliament in Islamabad is a serious violation of the principles of civilian supremacy and the accountability of the people (Hussain et al, 2021). This becomes a vicious circle: continuously underdeveloped civilian institutions do not acquire the skills, power, and bureaucratic potential to manage complex foreign policy problems, and the military is then offered as the justification to continue to have the military as a stewardship need. As analysed by Amjad & Shehzad (2024), the insistent feebleness of parliamentary oversight, party institutionalisation, and civilian bureaucratic capacity generates a structural void in Pakistan's foreign policy formulation (Janjua, 2020). This space, an inheritance of periodic and regular military rule, is routinely filled by the more unified military establishment. It does not strengthen, but rather reinforces the very institutional deficit that constrains Pakistan's civilian agency. This retards the process of development of a strong, democratically accountable foreign policy machine and creates a condition of continuous policy discontinuity, manifested in the changing tones and priorities of various civilian administrations, which makes it difficult to build a long-term national policy based on a wide social and political consensus.

### ***5.2 Strategic Effectiveness and Regional Role***

A constrained agency-based foreign policy is doomed to remain a tactic and a reactionary force as opposed to being a strategy and a visionary one. Pakistan has already proven its ability to deal with crisis management and tactical hedging, dealing with the instantaneous demands of the US, appeasing the Chinese and handling the relationships in the Gulf (Waqar & Uzzaman, 2025). Nevertheless, it always has a problem expressing and working towards a positive, transformative regional vision. Its international strategy is frequently characterised negatively (it is against Indian hegemony) or it is characterised by its dependence (the Chinese alliance), as opposed to what is positive. This reactive stance reduces its capacity to influence the regional agenda, create long-term, issue-based coalitions, and maximise its geo-economic potential as a natural connector point between regions. This aspirational agency was perhaps most concisely captured by then-Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa's advocacy for a 'geo-economic' paradigm, aligning Pakistan as a connectivity hub (Bajwa, 2021). However, this declarative shift towards economic diplomacy consistently collided with the enduring structural primacy of traditional security quandaries, particularly with India. The priority stays largely the traditional, zero-sum security (balancing, deterrence) at the cost of the long-term, resource-supported emphasis on geo-economics, trade policy, and soft power, which actually happen to be the spheres that would help to increase the influence in the long run and remove structural vulnerabilities.

### ***5.3 Theoretical Understanding of Middle Powers in Transitional Orders***

The Pakistani example provides some interesting, paradoxical lessons to the IR theory, especially when it comes to the middle powers' behaviour during a period of great power change and system complexities. It shows that the concept of hedging is not just a brilliant, optional strategy option, but a default position that is often required by the structural maladjustment and conflicting, inescapable dependencies. It questions any easy dichotomies of alignment and non-alignment, demonstrating how a state can be institutionally and severely aligned in one direction (security with China), and at the same time be critically, although strained and transactional, on other dimensions (economic support of the West, energy imports and worker remittances of the Gulf). The case of Pakistan highlights that to most states in the Global South, foreign policy has not been so much one of maximising influence in a positive sense but rather of dealing with various vulnerabilities in an extremely complex and frequently hostile world. It is an illustration of how agency is most often seen in the art of manoeuvring constraints, rather than their overcoming.

### ***5.4 Future Trajectories: Pathways Beyond Constraint***

The identified structural barriers: the civil-military imbalance, economic instability, and adversarial regional environment, are engraved and cannot be dissolved with a quick fix. Still, there are sources of



increasing the space of agency in steps, but they are both politically difficult and expensive and demand long-term investment. In a domestic manner, the long-term process of democratic consolidation and major economic reform is the most important one. The only country that will be able to create the domestic resources, policy coherence, as well as the strategic confidence to exercise more autonomy is a stable, economically resilient Pakistan that possesses strong, confident civilian institutions. Political instability is known to have economic consequences, including repeatedly low foreign investments and unsustainable debt, which have a direct constraining effect on the resources and credibility used to pursue foreign policy initiatives (Van der Eng, 2024).

Outwardly, by actively diversifying economic and security relationships beyond the existing key donors, and by actively investing in viable regional economic integration (e.g. by re-exploiting regional cooperation platforms, such as SAARC, ASEAN and SCO, and making it easier to connect with Central Asia), there can be other sources of leverage, and it can be less vulnerable to pressure at any given quarter. It is less the dramatic breakthroughs in the future of Pakistan's foreign policy that will determine it, and more its success or failure in the long-term incremental process of transforming these domestic and regional constructions to permit a more expansive and efficient strategic agency.

## **6. Recommendations: Navigating the Structure-Agency Interplay**

Considering that inflexible institutional structures and informal influences are not straightforwardly dismantled, the following recommendations are not 'solutions' but 'interventions' within the existing morphogenetic cycle. The ensuing recommendations can offer increasing space for an effective agency by shifting the functional contours of the agent-structure interface.

### **6.1 Formalise Civil-Military Competition to Collaboration**

Legally sanction the National Security Committee (NSC) as the supreme forum, a recorded and transparently documented platform for all major foreign and security policy decisions. Its expanded mandate may include long-term economic and geopolitical strategy, with summarised records shared with a confidential parliamentary oversight body. This transforms civil-military relations from a cloudy contest into a structured collaboration, making it an accountable process.

### **6.2 Leverage Hedging as a Negotiable Asset**

Develop and internally ratify a formal Tiered Partnership Framework for the country. This parent document should explicitly categorise key relationships (e.g., strategic partnership with China, essential Partnership with the US, ideological bondage with the Islamic states). The framework should define the state's core interests, benefits, and limits for each tier of the foreign partnership. Not only will it clarify Pakistan's own strategic calculus, but it will also enable more productive and pragmatic foreign dealings.

### **6.3 Prioritise Economy as Central Policy Objective**

Establish a powerful, legislatively mandated forum of the inter-ministerial committee on economic security, co-chaired by the Foreign and Finance Ministers, which should report to the NSC. Its singular mandate should be to align all diplomatic engagements with the prioritised national goal of attracting productive, non-debt-creating foreign investment, making economic resilience the core principle of foreign policy.

### **6.4 Pursue De-escalation with India**

The least attractive yet the most plausible act by Pakistan can be to initiate a sustained, gradual de-escalatory process to secure a formal, verifiable renewal of the diplomatic channels. The explicit goal is a *Modus Vivendi for Tactical Stability* to craft a predictable, low-cost security environment. Its success would free vital resources and political space currently consumed in the rivalry-centred policies.

## **7. Conclusion**

This systematic analysis of Pakistan's foreign policy since 2010-2020 clearly illustrates that the analytical division of strategic influence/structural constraint is a hoax. The two exist in a dialectical, co-constituting relationship. The policy outcomes of Pakistan were not pre-set through an overbearing structure, but the menu of viable, sustainable options was strictly constrained by visibly dominant structural forces: the institutional primacy of the military in the state, long-term political and economic vulnerability and a highly competitive and hierarchical international system which leaves minimal free moves to a financially dependent



middle power.

The empirical enquiry across key foreign relations streams of Pakistan-the Afghan endgame, CPEC, relations with India, and economic statecraft-constantly exposed the dynamic of constrained agency. In each case, in the military's managed diplomacy with the Taliban, or the civilian grip of Chinese investment, the interacting pressures of domestic institutional structures and systemic geopolitical forces consistently shaped the decisive initiatives and constrained the outcomes.

The military-security establishment is the most powerful domestic agent, which allows it to take decisive and fast courses in particular areas of security and at the same time serves as a structural limitation to the complete realisation of an integrated, proactive, and civilian-led grand strategy. A foreign policy that is nearly defensive, tactical and risk-averse requires systemic pressures, particularly those generated by the US-China strategic rivalry and the inexorable demands of economic solvency, which is preoccupied with responding to crises in the moment and not planning long-term futures.

This study acknowledges the inherent limitation of relying on open-source material, which may (in all likelihood) not capture the through nuance of closed-door negotiations and bargains. Future research can profit from elite interviews or declassified archival data (if so, made available) to further illuminate the internal decision-making processes. Besides, comparative work with other middle powers in the Global South which combat similar agency-structure problems can also help test the wider applicability of this framework.

Consequently, the international stance of Pakistan in this decade is best described and utilised as a *Constrained Agency*. It is an agency of navigation, adaptation and survival to a specific and frequently inexcusable structural passage, as opposed to an agency of transformational leadership or agenda-setting. Even its most ambitious projects, such as CPEC, themselves spawn new structural dependencies and geopolitical trade-offs. To transform its unquestioned geostrategic value into long-term and productive strategic impact, Pakistan needs to initiate the long-term and inward-looking project of remaking its domestic forms, first and foremost, through the reinforcement of democratic governance, the creation of true economic resilience, and the professionalisation of its foreign policy organs. The given recommendations also present a realistic direction for this incremental work. Unless such a recalibration happens, Pakistan ought to have its foreign policy continue to give witness to the undying burden of constraint, though continuing forward, and with some considerable success at times, to find occasions of decisive action in them.

In conclusion, this paper argues that the condition of constrained agency defines the form and features of Pakistan's foreign policy. By applying an integrated agency-structure framework and empirically validating it, the study moves beyond descriptive accounts. It provides a theoretically and empirically aligned explanation for the persistent gap between strategic intent, influences, constraints, and policy outcomes. The recommendations made are not merely prescriptive in nature; they are logical and practical way-ahead of this diagnosis. The study proposes structural and pragmatic course corrections to widen the corridor for effective foreign policy statecraft. The recommendations promise potential for Pakistan's journey towards a more autonomous and influential foreign policy. Notwithstanding, this autonomous path remains dependent upon its success in the gradual, voluminous domestic spadework of reshaping the very domestic structures that continue to constrain it, in one form or the other.

#### **Contribution of Authors**

All the authors participated in the ideation, development, and final approval of the manuscript, making significant contributions to the work reported.

#### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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#### **Informed Consent**

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#### **Ethical Approval**

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical



standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

#### Data Availability

The datasets generated during and analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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