

PAKISTAN'S PARADIGM SHIFT FROM GEOPOLITICS TO GEO-ECONOMICS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Pakistan, historically characterised by its geopolitical orientation rooted in Cold War alliances, existential rivalries with India, and the exploitation of its strategic geography by external powers, has undergone a landmark paradigm shift toward geo-economics. Formalised through the National Security Policy (NSP) 2022–2026, this transition reframes economic security as the structural backbone of national sovereignty. Drawing on qualitative, documentary analysis of government policy documents, academic literature, and expert perspectives, this paper critically examines the historical drivers of Pakistan's geopolitical dominance, the domestic and international factors propelling its geo-economic pivot, and the future trajectory of its power dynamics in relation to its geo-economic ambitions by 2030. The study finds that while the shift is strategically sound and globally aligned—reflected in Pakistan's engagement with CPEC, BRI, and regional connectivity frameworks—persistent structural challenges including political instability, governance deficits, debt dependency, and unresolved regional security tensions with India and Afghanistan continue to constrain effective operationalisation. The paper concludes with evidence-based policy recommendations to bridge the gap between Pakistan's geo-economic aspirations and ground realities.

1. INTRODUCTION

The concepts of geopolitics and geo-economics represent two competing frameworks for understanding how states exercise power and advance national interests on the world stage. Geopolitics, derived from the Greek terms for "earth" and "politics," examines the influence of geographical factors—territory, topography, natural resources, and strategic location—on political power and international relations. Coined by Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén at the turn of the twentieth century, and subsequently developed through the seminal theories of Alfred Thayer Mahan (sea power), Halford Mackinder (heartland), Nicholas Spykman (rimland), and Karl Haushofer (pan-

region), geopolitics long dominated the strategic thinking of states and empires alike (Pfaltzgraff, 2025; Ankerl, 2000).

Geo-economics, by contrast, foregrounds the role of economic instruments—trade policy, investment, sanctions, financial leverage, and infrastructure development—as the primary tools of statecraft and power projection. Conceptualised by American strategist Edward Luttwak (1990) and French policy analyst Pascal Lorot, geo-economics argues that market power has supplanted military dominance as the decisive currency of global influence (Vihma, 2017; Crawford, 2024; Petsinger, 2020). The post-Cold War ascent of China, the global financial crisis of 2008, and the deepening interdependence of the world economy

have accelerated this transition, shifting the strategic priorities of states from hard power to soft power, from territorial control to economic connectivity (Dutta, 2024; Lee, 2024).

Pakistan presents one of the most instructive and complex cases of this global power transition. Since its independence in 1947, Pakistan has been defined by its geopolitical salience: a strategic crossroads bordering India, Afghanistan, China, and Iran, situated at the intersection of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Throughout the Cold War, the Soviet-Afghan War (1979), and the post-9/11 Global War on Terror, Pakistan's geography made it an indispensable partner—and frequent instrument—of great powers, particularly the United States (Cohen, as cited in Muhammad Jahanzib, 2024; Fani, 2005). Yet this geopolitical centrality came at enormous cost: a security-first orientation that marginalised economic development, entrenched civil-military imbalances, and left Pakistan ranked among the world's most economically fragile states (Ahmad, 2021).

The landmark National Security Policy (NSP) 2022–2026, released on 25 March 2022, represents Pakistan's most explicit institutional break from this pattern, declaring economic and financial security as the structural backbone of national sovereignty (Choi, 2021; Hussain, 2024). This shift did not emerge in isolation: it was preceded by Prime Minister Imran Khan's articulation of a geo-economics framework at the Pakistan-Hungary Dialogue in March 2021, Army Chief General Bajwa's public endorsement of economic security as a national priority, and the deployment of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) from 2015 onward (Salik, 2023; Mahmood, 2022).

This paper critically examines Pakistan's paradigm shift from geopolitics to geo-economics. It addresses three core research questions: (1) Why has Pakistan historically been dominated by geopolitical imperatives? (2) What are the key domestic and international drivers and stakeholders shaping its geo-economic pivot? (3) What is the likely future trajectory of Pakistan's power dynamics in relation to its stated geo-

economic ambitions by 2030? Drawing on qualitative documentary analysis, the paper synthesises government policy documents, academic scholarship, think-tank research, and expert perspectives to offer a structured critical assessment.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Geopolitics: Theoretical Foundations and Evolution

The theoretical architecture of geopolitics was constructed over roughly a century of strategic thought. Mahan's sea power theory (1890s) asserted naval supremacy as the key to controlling world trade; Mackinder's heartland theory (1904) argued that dominance over the Eurasian landmass conferred global hegemony; and Spykman's rimland theory (1940s) repositioned the coastal periphery of Europe and Asia as the decisive zone of world power (Pfaltzgraff, 2025; Ankerl, 2000). These frameworks underpinned great-power competition through the Cold War, during which geopolitics remained, as Ferguson (2023) notes, the organising logic of US foreign policy—most explicitly in George Kennan's containment strategy against Soviet expansionism. Post-World War II, geopolitical theory lost some prestige owing to its association with Nazi Germany and imperial Japan; however, the Cold War's ideological and territorial rivalries kept its core logic operative. The American "grand strategy of primacy"—the doctrine that US global dominance benefits the liberal international order—remained the bipartisan consensus across administrations (Richard, 2011). Pakistan's history was shaped decisively by this geopolitical world order, as successive US administrations leveraged Pakistani territory, intelligence infrastructure, and military cooperation to advance their strategic objectives in South and Central Asia (Kak, 1998; Arshad, 2016).

2.2 Geo-economics: Conceptual Frameworks and Global Trends

Luttwak's 1990 thesis that political conflicts are now conducted by economic means rather than military ones laid the intellectual foundation for geo-economics as a discipline (Vihma, 2017).

Subsequent scholars, including Blackwill and Harris (2016) in *War by Other Means*, formalised geo-economics as the use of economic instruments—trade, investment, sanctions, aid, and digital infrastructure—to achieve geopolitical objectives. The distribution of capabilities in the international system has shifted dramatically: China’s emergence as the world’s largest supplier of goods to over 130 countries (Soilen, n.d.), its establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2013, and the BRI’s \$1 trillion connectivity programme represent the most consequential geo-economic challenge to US hegemony since the Cold War (Dutta, 2024; Lee, 2024).

Waltz’s (1979) systemic theory, Organski’s (1958) power transition theory, and Wallerstein’s (1974) world systems theory each offer complementary lenses through which to understand this transition. Organski’s argument that power transitions occur when rising states challenge dominant ones is particularly salient for the US-China rivalry that now frames Pakistan’s geo-economic choices (Wittkopf, 2000). Petsinger (2020) identifies geo-economics as a “reversible concept,” wherein economic variables are deployed to achieve geopolitical goals and vice versa, making clear that the two frameworks are interdependent rather than mutually exclusive.

2.3 Pakistan's Geopolitical History: Scholarship Review

A rich body of literature documents Pakistan’s geopolitical trajectory. Kak (1998) provides a foundational geopolitical appraisal, identifying Pakistan as a middle power constrained by domestic ethnic, sectarian, and civil-military tensions. Afzal (2025) characterises Pakistan’s geography as simultaneously a blessing and a curse—enabling connectivity and strategic leverage while inviting exploitation by external powers. Kumar (2021) and Muhammad Faisal (2020–2021) further document how Pakistan’s role during the Afghan jihad and the War on Terror entrenched a security-first foreign policy at the expense of economic development.

Mahmood (2023) traces Pakistan’s geo-economic pivot to the convergence of domestic economic

crises and international realignments, identifying CPEC, the BRI, and the NSP 2022–2026 as the institutional pillars of the transition. Choi (2021) analyses the NSP’s significance in redefining national security to encompass economic and human dimensions, while Hussain (2024) examines the strategic implications of CPEC for Pakistan’s positioning as a regional transit and trade hub. Ahmad (2021) and Bhatti (2023) both identify the gap between aspiration and operationalisation as the central challenge of Pakistan’s geo-economic transition, noting that security concerns with India and Afghanistan, governance deficits, and debt dependency remain structural obstacles. Salik (2023) and Imtiaz (2023) provide the most recent institutionally grounded analyses, emphasising the NSP’s operational imperatives and the conditions necessary for sustainable geo-economic progress.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design, employing documentary analysis as its primary method of data collection and interpretation. The research is situated within an interpretivist epistemological framework, recognising that Pakistan’s strategic transition is a complex, historically embedded social and political phenomenon that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative metrics alone.

Data were gathered from four categories of sources: (1) primary policy documents, including Pakistan’s National Security Policy (2022–2026), the Economic Survey of Pakistan, Vision 2025, and official statements by Pakistani heads of state and military leadership; (2) academic sources accessed through Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ResearchGate; (3) institutional reports from the World Bank, IMF, ADB, CPEC Authority, ISSI, PIDE, and CSIS; and (4) quality journalism and expert commentary from Dawn, The Diplomat, Foreign Policy, and Modern Diplomacy. Documents were analysed using critical discourse analysis (CDA), attending to the language, conceptual framing, power dynamics, and ideological assumptions embedded in official and scholarly texts.

The study is delimited to Pakistan's geo-strategic transition from independence (1947) to the present, with forward projections to 2030. Limitations include the rapidly evolving regional security environment—particularly the India-Pakistan standoff of April–May 2025—which may render some near-term projections subject to revision.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

4.1 Historical Drivers of Pakistan's Geopolitical Dominance

4.1.1 The Inheritance of Partition and the Kashmir Imperative

Pakistan's geopolitical orientation was determined at birth. The unresolved Kashmir dispute with India, which sparked three full-scale wars (1947–48, 1965, and 1971) and the Kargil conflict of 1999, institutionalised a security-first foreign policy that has persisted across seven decades (Muhammad Jahanzib, 2024). Defence expenditure has consistently consumed 3–4% of GDP, crowding out investment in education, health, and infrastructure. The separation of East Pakistan into Bangladesh in 1971, facilitated by Indian military support, further cemented the conviction within Pakistan's establishment that geopolitical vigilance was existential (Chaudhary, 2014).

4.1.2 Cold War Alliances and the US-Pakistan Strategic Partnership

Pakistan's early alliance with the United States, cemented through SEATO and CENTO membership, transformed it into a frontline state against Soviet expansionism. American military and economic assistance, conditioned on Pakistan's strategic cooperation, deepened its security orientation while fostering dependency rather than self-sufficient economic development (Farooq, 2023). The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979) dramatically amplified this dynamic: Pakistan became the conduit for CIA-coordinated support to the Afghan mujahideen, receiving approximately \$3 billion in financial assistance while hosting millions of Afghan refugees and embedding jihadist networks that

would destabilise its own society for decades (Arshad, 2016; Sidra Rehman, 2017).

4.1.3 Nuclear Deterrence and Strategic Signalling

Pakistan's nuclear tests of 1998 represented the culmination of its geopolitical logic: deterrence of Indian conventional military superiority through credible second-strike capability. While the tests enhanced Pakistan's bargaining power and regional credibility, they also provoked international sanctions and reinforced the primacy of security over economic priorities in national policymaking (Khalid, 2021). Pakistan's post-9/11 alliance with the United States in the Global War on Terror replicated the Cold War pattern: strategic geography exchanged for financial and military assistance, at significant cost to sovereignty and domestic stability (Fani, 2005).

4.1.4 Structural Domestic Drivers of Geopolitical Lock-in

Beyond external pressures, internal structures perpetuated Pakistan's geopolitical orientation. Civil-military imbalances, with the army functioning as a parallel governance authority, ensured that security concerns consistently dominated national policy. The concentration of power among feudal elites, military establishments, and religious networks marginalised civilian economic planning (Kak, 1998). The fostering of radical networks—Al-Qaeda in 1988, the Taliban's reorganisation during the 1990s, and the sheltering of various militant organisations—reflected the logic of geopolitical instrumentalism, wherein strategic assets were maintained for potential use in Afghanistan and against India, regardless of their domestic social costs.

4.2 The Geo-economic Pivot: Drivers and Architecture

4.2.1 Domestic Economic Imperatives

Pakistan's geo-economic transition was catalysed above all by the unsustainability of its economic trajectory. Chronic structural imbalances—consumption comprising over 90% of GDP, investment below 2% of GDP, recurring balance-

of-payments crises, mounting external debt, and over-reliance on IMF bailouts—created conditions in which geopolitical positioning could no longer compensate for economic fragility (Asghar, 2025; Ahmad M., 2025). Foreign exchange reserves, periodically falling to critically low levels, left Pakistan vulnerable to external financial shocks and limited its capacity for autonomous foreign policy. The recognition that security without economic sovereignty is unsustainable provided the intellectual foundation for the NSP's geo-economic reorientation (Imtiaz, 2023).

4.2.2 The National Security Policy 2022–2026: A Landmark Reframing

The NSP 2022–2026 represents the most significant institutional expression of Pakistan's geo-economic pivot. By explicitly foregrounding economic security as the structural pillar of national security, the policy shifts the definitional locus of sovereignty from territorial defence to economic resilience. Its citizen-centric approach prioritises poverty alleviation, employment, and inclusive growth as components of national security, acknowledging that internal socioeconomic instability constitutes a security threat equivalent to external military challenges (Yonus, 2024). The policy's emphasis on regional connectivity—particularly CPEC as a transit and trade hub—and its call for a shift from aid-based to trade-and-investment-based international partnerships signal a coherent geo-economic vision, even if implementation has lagged ambition (Salik, 2023).

4.2.3 CPEC and the BRI: Infrastructure as Geo-economics

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), operationalised from 2015, constitutes Pakistan's most concrete geo-economic initiative. With Chinese investment exceeding \$62 billion in energy, transportation, and industrial infrastructure, CPEC has addressed critical gaps in Pakistan's energy supply—adding thousands of megawatts to the national grid—while establishing Gwadar Port as a deep-water hub connecting Chinese western provinces to the Arabian Sea (Hussain, 2024; Fazal, 2023). The development of

Special Economic Zones (SEZs), including the Rashakai SEZ in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa projected to generate 200,000 jobs, reflects the corridor's ambition to catalyse industrial transformation (Khan, 2024). CPEC situates Pakistan as a critical node in China's BRI, the largest connectivity initiative in modern history, transforming its geography from a geopolitical liability into a geo-economic asset (Mamchii, 2023).

4.2.4 Energy Security and Regional Connectivity Frameworks

Pakistan's geo-economic strategy is further expressed through its pursuit of energy corridor projects: the Iran-Pakistan (IP) gas pipeline and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, both of which would position Pakistan as a transit economy collecting revenue from the movement of Central Asian energy to South Asian markets (DR, 2017). The Central Asia-South Asia electricity transmission project (CASA-1000) and the Torkham Expressway represent additional dimensions of Pakistan's connectivity ambitions. However, these projects remain significantly constrained by the security environment in Afghanistan and the unresolved Indo-Pakistan rivalry, underscoring the structural tension between geo-economic aspiration and geopolitical reality (Mahmood, 2023).

4.3 Key Stakeholders in Pakistan's Power Transition

4.3.1 Domestic Stakeholders

The government and military have been the primary architects of Pakistan's geo-economic pivot. The military's endorsement—most prominently General Bajwa's public repositioning of national security around economic and connectivity objectives—was decisive, as no geo-economic transition in Pakistan can succeed without institutional support from the armed forces. The business community, particularly sectors engaged with CPEC (energy, construction, logistics), has advocated actively for policy reforms enabling trade and investment. Academia and think tanks—including PIDE, CSCR, and ISSI—have provided the intellectual scaffolding, publishing research that frames geo-economics as

a strategic imperative and offering evidence-based policy recommendations (Salik, 2023; Imtiaz, 2023).

4.3.2 International Stakeholders

China is Pakistan's most consequential international stakeholder, providing not only the capital and infrastructure of CPEC but also diplomatic cover in multilateral forums, including the UN Security Council. The United States, historically Pakistan's primary security patron, has recalibrated its South Asian strategy toward India, diminishing Pakistan's geopolitical leverage and incentivising its geo-economic pivot. Washington's Build Back Better World (B3W) programme offers Pakistan an alternative investment stream if governance conditions improve. Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan—are potential beneficiaries and co-investors in Pakistan's connectivity vision, leveraging Gwadar as their maritime gateway. Multilateral institutions including the World Bank, ADB, and SCO provide both financing and technical assistance, while the IMF's structural adjustment programmes impose fiscal discipline that constrains but also stabilises Pakistan's economic environment (Idris, 2024).

4.4 Critical Challenges and Structural Barriers

4.4.1 The India-Pakistan Security Paradox

The most structurally significant constraint on Pakistan's geo-economic transition is its unresolved rivalry with India. The Kashmir dispute, which has generated three wars and decades of sub-conventional conflict, institutionalises a zero-sum security calculus that renders regional economic integration structurally difficult. The 2025 India-Pakistan standoff, triggered by a militant attack in Indian-administered Kashmir in April 2025, vividly illustrated this constraint: India suspended the Indus Waters Treaty, terminated SAARC visa arrangements, expelled Pakistani diplomats, and halted bilateral trade (Rhea Mogul, 2025; Farooq G., 2025). The economic consequences were immediate—disruption of \$1.2 billion in annual bilateral trade, pharmaceutical supply chains, and

informal trade estimated at \$2–3 billion annually through third countries—while the World Bank and IMF revised Pakistan's growth projections downward to approximately 2.6–2.7% for the fiscal year (Farooq G., 2025).

This cyclical pattern—economic confidence-building measures repeatedly erased by security incidents—represents what this paper terms the security-economic paradox: Pakistan's geo-economic vision remains hostage to a militarised strategic culture that has not yet been institutionally superseded. With Pakistan's debt-to-GDP ratio at 78% (2024) and defence expenditures crowding out developmental investment, the financial cost of this paradox is compounding (Farooq G., 2025).

4.4.2 Afghanistan and Regional Instability

Afghanistan's persistent instability constitutes the second major structural barrier. Decades of conflict have generated cross-border terrorism (particularly by the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, TTP), disrupted regional connectivity projects, and channelled illegal arms and narcotics into Pakistan's domestic economy. The security vacuum in Afghanistan has delayed TAPI and CASA-1000, constrained CPEC's extension into Central Asia, and diverted Pakistani security resources away from economic development priorities (Mustafa, 2025; Akbar, 2013). Pakistan's complex historical relationship with Afghan factions—simultaneously cultivating strategic assets and suffering from blowback—continues to complicate its positioning as a responsible regional connectivity hub.

4.4.3 Debt Dependency and Economic Fragility

Pakistan's geo-economic pivot is structurally undermined by its debt profile. External debt levels have reached unmanageable proportions, with debt servicing consuming a substantial share of fiscal revenue and leaving inadequate space for developmental investment (Hayat, 2025). CPEC, while transformative, carries its own debt burden—raising questions about sovereignty, economic dependency on China, and the sustainability of repayment obligations. The IMF's recurring bail-outs, while providing stabilisation, impose

austerity conditions that constrain growth-oriented spending and perpetuate the cycle of fragility that the geo-economic pivot is designed to break (Altaf, 2025).

4.4.4 Governance Deficits and Political Instability

Effective geo-economics requires institutional capacity that Pakistan's governance environment has yet to consistently deliver. Frequent government changes, policy reversals, regulatory unpredictability, and bureaucratic capture by entrenched interests have discouraged foreign direct investment—which fell 14% in early 2025 amid geopolitical risks and credit rating downgrades (Farooq G., 2025). The structural dominance of security elites in strategic decision-making continues to crowd out civilian long-term economic planning, and the lack of policy continuity across administrations undermines investor confidence in CPEC and SEZ projects (Akhtar, 2021).

5. FUTURE TRAJECTORY: PAKISTAN'S GEO-ECONOMIC AMBITIONS BY 2030

5.1 Scenario Analysis

Three scenarios frame Pakistan's geo-economic trajectory to 2030, shaped by the interaction of domestic governance, fiscal management, and regional security.

In the positive scenario—comprehensive reform and stability—political reconciliation, sustained institutional reform, and successful operationalisation of CPEC phase II generate a virtuous cycle of investment, industrial growth, and export diversification. Pakistan achieves its ambition of becoming a regional transit economy, attracting Central Asian trade through Gwadar, and positioning itself among the top twenty economies by 2030. This scenario requires détente with India, stabilisation of Afghanistan, and the delivery of governance reforms that consistently attract and retain foreign investment.

In the negative scenario—continuous instability and economic regression—political fragmentation, failure of fiscal consolidation, and escalating regional security tensions compound one another. Pakistan remains trapped in the IMF dependency

cycle, CPEC projects stall due to security and debt sustainability concerns, and the NSP's geo-economic vision becomes aspirational rather than operational. This scenario risks Pakistan's further marginalisation from regional economic integration frameworks.

The most probable scenario is one of cautious, uneven progress: political stabilisation achieved through elite accommodation rather than institutional reform; partial operationalisation of CPEC producing modest growth in trade connectivity and energy security; incremental improvements in economic indicators offset by persistent governance deficits and episodic security crises (Alam, 2024; Jahanzaib, 2024). Pakistan's capacity to capitalise on its demographic dividend—a young, growing labour force—and its digital economy potential will be the decisive variables distinguishing this scenario from regression.

5.2 Structural Conditions for Success

Achieving Pakistan's geo-economic ambitions by 2030 requires the fulfilment of several structural conditions. First, political reconciliation must deliver policy continuity across administrations, insulating developmental programmes from electoral cycles. Second, fiscal consolidation must be growth-compatible—reducing debt dependency and expanding domestic resource mobilisation without imposing austerity that suppresses investment. Third, regional détente, particularly with India, must create the security environment in which trade and connectivity can flourish; the revival of the Joint Economic Commission (defunct since 2012) and regulated trade in non-sensitive sectors represent minimal confidence-building steps (Farooq G., 2025). Fourth, governance reform must credibly improve the investment climate, reduce regulatory unpredictability, and deliver institutional capacity to plan and execute infrastructure projects. Fifth, CPEC's completion and extension into Central Asia must be managed in ways that ensure economic sovereignty rather than debt dependency.

6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Resolving Financial Vulnerabilities

Pakistan should undertake comprehensive economic reforms targeting trade liberalisation, investment facilitation, and privatisation of loss-making state-owned enterprises. Domestic resource mobilisation—broadening the tax base, tackling the informal economy, and rationalising energy subsidies—must reduce dependence on foreign borrowing. Debt sustainability analysis should guide the pace of CPEC borrowing, with renegotiation of terms where necessary to safeguard economic sovereignty.

6.2 Deepening Regional Connectivity

Pakistan must leverage its geographic position more systematically as a connectivity hub between South, Central, and West Asia. This requires prioritising completion of CPEC infrastructure, accelerating SEZ development, resolving regulatory bottlenecks for cross-border trade, and pursuing diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan and India to unlock delayed connectivity projects including TAPI and CASA-1000.

6.3 Diversifying International Partnerships

A multi-aligned foreign policy—engaging China, the United States, Gulf states, Central Asia, and multilateral institutions—will reduce Pakistan's strategic dependency on any single partner and expand its geo-economic options. Investment and trade partnerships should progressively replace aid-based relationships. Pakistan's participation in the SCO, ECO, and emerging regional frameworks should be strategically maximised.

6.4 Strengthening Domestic Governance

Sustainable geo-economics requires governance reform that delivers institutional credibility. Priority investments in human capital—education, vocational training, and digital skills—will enable Pakistan to capitalise on its demographic dividend. Independent economic regulatory institutions, judicial enforcement of contracts, and anti-corruption measures are prerequisites for restoring investor confidence.

6.5 Incorporating Sustainability

Pakistan's geo-economic strategy must embed environmental sustainability. As a frontline climate-vulnerable state, Pakistan should develop green energy corridors, incorporate climate resilience into infrastructure design, and align its connectivity agenda with international sustainability standards to attract green financing from multilateral institutions.

7. CONCLUSION

Pakistan's paradigm shift from geopolitics to geo-economics is both strategically sound and historically overdue. For seven decades, the imperatives of existential security—rooted in the Kashmir dispute, Cold War alignments, the Soviet-Afghan War, and the Global War on Terror—entrenched a security-first orientation that marginalised economic development and rendered Pakistan's extraordinary geographic assets as instruments of others' interests rather than its own prosperity. The NSP 2022–2026, CPEC, and the growing elite consensus around geo-economic priorities represent a genuine, if incomplete, departure from this pattern.

Yet the shift from aspiration to operationalisation remains the central challenge. The 2025 India-Pakistan standoff demonstrated with stark clarity that geo-economic ambitions remain vulnerable to geopolitical shocks that erase years of economic confidence-building in days. Afghanistan's instability, debt dependency, governance deficits, and the structural dominance of security establishments over civilian economic planning constitute systemic barriers that policy declarations alone cannot dissolve.

Pakistan's geo-economic future depends ultimately on its capacity to resolve a fundamental contradiction: a state seeking to build economic connectivity in a region defined by unresolved territorial conflicts, porous borders, and competing great-power interests. Resolving this contradiction requires not merely policy innovation but institutional transformation—a durable reorientation of incentives, capacities, and power relations within Pakistan's domestic political economy. The NSP's vision is correct; the pathway to its realisation remains contingent on

choices that Pakistan's leadership, institutions, and society must make together.

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