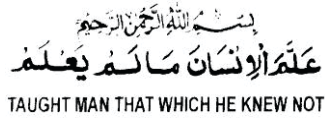




QUARTERLY

A Periodical of INSIGHTS



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Eg Quarterly is a periodical publication of the Institute for Strategic Studies, Research and Analysis (ISSRA), National Defence University, Islamabad, the premier security and strategic studies institution. It is a compilation of INSIGHTS occasionally written by the research community. These briefs explore new dimensions of subjects related to Pakistan's national security, focusing on practical and objective solutions to problems for the benefit of respective stakeholders. All INSIGHTS appearing in Eg Quarterly undergo a rigorous selection process and are meticulously edited by our esteemed senior faculty members, ensuring their quality and reliability.

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E9 QUARTERLY

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Editorial Note

The third issue of Volume 5, 2026, of E9 Quarterly is now in your hands. This edition features 12 INSIGHTS on contemporary strategic, political, governance, economic, security, and societal issues. Collectively, they combine policy analysis with practical recommendations.

The first Insight examines Pakistan's strategic dilemma amid intensifying US-China rivalry and argues for calibrated multi-alignment, export-led growth, and regional economic integration to strengthen strategic autonomy.

The second Insight on Pakistan's expanded strategic footprint examines the country's evolving military and diplomatic role amid the renewed importance of hard power, with particular attention to its regional security engagements and emerging defence partnerships.

This issue also assesses Pakistan-Russia relations in a changing world order. It highlights growing geopolitical convergence while identifying trade, energy, agriculture, connectivity, and stronger institutional mechanisms as areas where strategic understanding can be translated into substantive economic cooperation.

This issue also revisits Libya's Arab Spring by examining how foreign intervention and competing strategic and economic interests influenced regime change and contributed to the country's prolonged political and security instability.

One Insight explores the localisation of major social media networks in Pakistan, focusing on regulatory compliance, taxation, content moderation, data protection, and national security, while suggesting a gradual and incentive-based localisation framework.

Another Insight examines escalating instability in Myanmar amid US-China rivalry, highlighting how great-power competition, ethnic conflict, resource politics, and cross-border security concerns have intensified domestic instability and wider regional security challenges.

The issue also makes a case for formalising Pakistan's recycling industry. It argues that regulation, investment, infrastructure, public awareness, and integration of informal workers can turn recycling into a source of employment, economic growth, resource conservation, and environmental sustainability.

One Insight focuses on the empowerment of local governments in Pakistan, highlighting political, fiscal, and administrative constraints on meaningful devolution and the need for stronger local institutions for responsive and accountable governance.

Another Insight proposes the establishment of a National Counter Terrorism Force in Pakistan. Drawing on international models, it argues for a specialised national-level capability to address evolving terrorist threats and reduce excessive reliance on the armed forces for internal counter-terrorism duties.

Another Insight evaluates the prospects of a Pakistan-Afghanistan Free Trade Agreement, arguing that a comprehensive trade framework could formalise bilateral commerce, expand exports, strengthen economic interdependence, and unlock the considerable trade potential between the two neighbours.

One Insight examines Islamophobia as a structural challenge within Western societies, tracing its political, security, and media dimensions and calling for stronger institutional accountability, legal safeguards, and sustained policy responses.

The final Insight addresses the persistent backlog of cases in Pakistan's district judiciary. It identifies judicial vacancies, frequent transfers, inadequate infrastructure, and institutional weaknesses as major causes of delayed justice and stresses the need for sustained reforms.

We hope that this publication will provide readers with useful perspectives on diverse domestic, regional, and international issues and contribute to informed debate. We look forward to our readers' valuable feedback.

Pakistan's Strategic Dilemma Amid US-China Rivalry

Dr M. A. Gul

Abstract

This INSIGHT examines Pakistan's strategic environment is increasingly shaped by the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China, creating a complex dilemma for its foreign and economic policy. Historically embedded in Western financial institutions while simultaneously deepening strategic cooperation with China, Pakistan operates within a compressed strategic space that limits its maneuverability. Economic fragility—manifested in recurring balance-of-payments crises and export stagnation—reinforces dependence on Western-led financial systems even as China emerges as its principal defence partner. This insight argues that Pakistan's viable path lies not in choosing between competing blocs but in pursuing calibrated multi-alignment, export-led growth, and regional economic integration to expand its strategic autonomy.

Keywords: US-China Rivalry, Pakistan's Strategic Autonomy, Multi-Alignment, Economic Dependence, Regional Economic Integration.

Pakistan's geopolitical position in the post-Cold War order is structurally unusual. It is perhaps the only country in the world that was firmly embedded in the US-led Western security architecture during the Cold War, later shifted decisively toward China for its core defence needs, yet remained economically anchored in Western-dominated financial institutions. This dual alignment—strategic reliance on China combined with financial dependence on the West—has produced a compressed strategic space amid intensifying US-China rivalry.

Unlike India, Vietnam, or Indonesia, which translated post–Cold War realignments into sustained export growth and industrial upgrading, Pakistan has struggled to stabilise its economy and expand its export base. Recurrent balance-of-payments crises have reinforced dependence on Western-led financial institutions. The result is a paradox: Pakistan seeks strategic space, yet its macroeconomic fragility repeatedly pulls it back into the very system that constrains its manoeuvrability.

During the Cold War, Pakistan integrated deeply into US-led security structures, joining the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) and the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) and receiving substantial military and economic assistance from the US.¹ Security concerns vis-à-vis India and Soviet influence in Afghanistan drove this alignment.² The Soviet collapse transformed the strategic equation. Pakistan's utility declined sharply in Washington's hierarchy of priorities. The Pressler sanctions of the 1990s highlighted the alliance's fragility.³

Pakistan faces a structural reality: complete disengagement from Western economic systems is neither feasible nor historically validated as a development strategy. Yet continued dependence perpetuates vulnerability. Therefore, if rupture is impractical, resilience must be the objective.

Although cooperation revived somewhat after 9/11, US grand strategy gradually shifted toward balancing China rather than counterterrorism.⁴

This recalibration led Washington to actively court India. The 2008 US–India Civil Nuclear Agreement symbolised India's integration into the global nuclear and strategic order despite its non-signatory status to the NPT.⁵ It was widely interpreted as part of a broader effort by the US to empower India as a counterweight to China.⁶ Importantly, India in the 1990s had retained close ties with Russia and was associated with multipolar visions such as the Russia–India–China (RIC) framework advanced by Yevgeny Primakov (former Russian foreign minister).⁷ US outreach diluted the prospects of a cohesive Eurasian bloc.⁸

Vietnam followed a similar trajectory. Despite its history of war with the US, Vietnam's geography along China's southern flank made it strategically valuable in Washington's Indo-Pacific Strategy.⁹

In both cases, the US invested diplomatic and financial capital in drawing India and Vietnam closer. Pakistan's case was different. Already embedded in Western financial institutions, it was not treated as a swing state requiring inducement. Instead, it was assumed to have limited strategic exit options.

As US priorities shifted, Pakistan deepened its strategic partnership with China. The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), launched in 2015 under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), expanded cooperation beyond defence into infrastructure and connectivity.¹⁰ China became Pakistan's largest bilateral creditor and primary defence supplier.¹¹

However, this pivot did not yield structural economic transformation. Pakistan's exports remain narrow and heavily textile-based.¹² Despite multiple IMF programs, Pakistan has struggled to achieve durable macroeconomic stability. Fiscal deficits, low productivity, and recurring balance-of-payments crises persist. One structural constraint is the continued reliance on Western-led financial institutions for stabilisation.¹³ It is argued that this dependency is by design and functions as a form of geopolitical leverage, limiting Pakistan's strategic flexibility.¹⁴ Whether intentional or structural, the outcome is the same: economic fragility reinforces external influence.

At the same time, China's financial system, though expansive, does not yet provide a full alternative to dollar-denominated trade, global capital markets, or Western export destinations. Pakistan's trade remains concentrated in Western markets, particularly the US and Europe.¹⁵ This creates structural asymmetry: defence alignment with China alongside economic reliance on Western systems.

A critical question emerges: Is there a successful contemporary model of sustained economic growth by a middle power that remained economically detached from the US-led order?

The evidence is limited. Iran, despite its significant energy resources, has endured prolonged economic constraints due to sanctions.¹⁶ North Korea remains isolated. Libya and Syria experienced severe instability. These examples suggest that operating outside the Western-dominated financial system imposes high economic costs.

Even China's rise occurred through deep integration into global trade and financial systems after joining the World Trade Organisation in 2001.¹⁷ Beijing leveraged globalisation rather than rejecting it outright.

Thus, Pakistan faces a structural reality: complete disengagement from Western economic systems is neither feasible nor historically validated as a development strategy. Yet continued dependence perpetuates vulnerability. Therefore, if rupture is impractical, resilience must be the objective.

First, export-led growth must become a strategic priority. Industrial upgrading, technology transfer, and value-chain integration—particularly under CPEC's second phase—should focus on expanding manufacturing competitiveness. Without sustained export growth, macroeconomic sovereignty will remain elusive.¹⁸

Second, regional economic integration—especially westward—must become central. Given the political impasse with India, Pakistan's western corridor encompassing Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia offers the most viable pathway for diversification. Energy cooperation with Iran, trade facilitation with Afghanistan, and connectivity with Central Asian republics can gradually reduce overdependence on distant markets. Despite sanctions on Iran and instability in Afghanistan, disengagement would forfeit strategic opportunity. Proactive diplomacy, infrastructure development, and regulatory harmonisation are essential to unlock regional trade corridors.

Third, engagement with Western institutions must shift from reactive bailouts to negotiated structural reform. Reducing the frequency of IMF recourse through fiscal discipline and productivity enhancement can gradually expand policy space.

Fourth, Pakistan must avoid binary framing. Strategic autonomy in a multipolar order does not require rejecting Western institutions but leveraging them while simultaneously diversifying partnerships. The goal is calibrated multi-alignment grounded in economic strength.

Pakistan's predicament is structurally distinctive. It combines legacy Western financial integration, deepening strategic reliance on China, export stagnation, and exposure to intensifying great-power rivalry.

Unlike India and Vietnam, Pakistan did not benefit from proactive US strategic inducement that translated into export-led growth. Unlike Iran, it cannot afford isolation. There is no contemporary example of a middle power achieving sustained prosperity while remaining detached from global financial systems.

Therefore, Pakistan's path forward lies not in abrupt disengagement but in internal transformation and proactive regional integration—particularly toward its western neighbourhood. Without export expansion and regional connectivity, geopolitical balancing will remain constrained by financial dependency. With them, Pakistan can gradually convert structural compression into calibrated strategic flexibility.

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About Insight and Author

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Pakistan's Expanded Strategic Footprint

Ms Nasim Zehra

Abstract

The INSIGHT titled "Pakistan's Expanded Strategic Footprint" explores the shifting dynamics of global and regional security, highlighting Pakistan's growing role as a military and diplomatic power. As global hard power resurges, Pakistan's enhanced military capabilities and strategic alliances, particularly with China, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, position it as a central player in Middle Eastern and South Asian security. The signing of the Pakistan-Saudi Mutual Defence Agreement underscores Islamabad's strategic importance, signaling a return to its influential role in regional security architecture. This document underscores Pakistan's evolving security-first approach, balancing military sophistication with bold diplomacy to address ongoing regional crises.

Keywords: Pakistan, Strategic Footprint, Regional Security, Hard Power, Defence Diplomacy, Strategic Partnerships.

From Asia to the Americas, and from Europe to Africa, the world is witnessing a reconfiguration of global politics built not on norms or law but on the raw application of force. Hard power—military might, financial muscle, and the will to deploy them—has become the decisive factor shaping the State's behaviour. The rule of law, whether flowing from domestic constitutions or United Nations resolutions, is increasingly trumped by those who possess both capability and the audacity to act. This erosion of international propriety is starkly evident. Israel's genocide of Palestinians continues unabated, sustained by billions of dollars in US support, lethal weapon supplies, and repeated Security Council vetoes.

Israel, despite being the aggressor against multiple Muslim states in the region, enjoys virtually full Western cover, with the honourable exception of a few. Washington continues to speak with a forked tongue, feigning friendship even while abdicating responsibility. Most evident is its recent failure not to warn Qatar, although according to public statements by Israeli officials, the Trump administration had prior knowledge of the Israeli attacks on Qatar, its ostensible ally and a “billion-dollar dealmaker friend”.

Meanwhile, the Ukraine war drags on, while Europe and the US remain divided over how to deal with Russia and how to secure Europe against a perceived Russian threat. Western societies themselves face growing internal fractures. Countries that once prided themselves on being melting pots of cultures are now boiling cauldrons, with violent rhetoric and action directed against yesterday’s immigrants, today’s citizens.

With the signing of the Pakistan-Saudi MDA, Pakistan is likely to become a central security partner in West Asia, pivoting indeed into South Asia and the Muslim world.

Across the UK, France, Germany, and beyond, the social contract is fraying, and politics has become increasingly cantankerous and potentially combustible. It is against these developments across which the Middle East and South Asia ought to be assessed. Muslim majority states opposing the occupation and genocide of Palestinian lives and land potentially face the threat of Israel, a rogue state that has repeatedly, and virtually unhindered, demonstrated its willingness to strike. Israel’s closest ally after the US and a professed counterweight to China, India, has long sought hegemonic authority in South Asia and the Pacific.

Most recently, in May, the Modi-Doval doctrine of force projection suffered a self-inflicted blow. India’s May 7 reckless attack on Pakistan following the April 22 terrorist attack in Pahalgam backfired. It gave Islamabad the opportunity to expose New Delhi’s vulnerabilities while demonstrating Pakistan’s integrated, multi-domain defence strategy. Pakistan showcased strategic foresight, a comprehensive operational plan, and unrivalled air superiority.

For the first time, Islamabad also revealed its indigenous cyber and electronic warfare capabilities—signalling not only resilience but also technological sophistication.

The following month, during Israel's 12-day war against Iran, Pakistan again distinguished itself. Islamabad extended bold, confident, and unqualified diplomatic and political support to Tehran. This stance, widely noted across the Muslim world, elevated Pakistan's credibility as a state willing to stand by principles and allies even in the face of pressure.

Equally significant was the engagement with Pakistan of US President Donald Trump, a major adversary of Iran. He invited the Pakistan Army Chief for an informed discussion on Iran, clearly acknowledging Pakistan as the most engaged and knowledgeable on Iran. Significantly, Pakistan, a country that Iran also trusted, as was evident by the Iranian parliament, led by the Iranian President himself, to chant "thank you Pakistan, thank you Pakistan"! Hence, the twin crises of May and June thus underscored two realities: first, the growing centrality of hard power in shaping global and regional affairs; second, Pakistan's ability to establish itself as both a formidable military actor and a credible diplomatic partner. Much of this has been prompted by the tectonic changes in the global security environment. Pakistan's post-2022 military doctrine has recalibrated Pakistan's regional security approach, particularly towards India, but also with implications for Afghanistan and beyond.

The new doctrine's thrust has been twofold: to ensure rigorous training for Pakistan's armed forces against both conventional and sub-conventional threats, and to signal Pakistan's willingness to use force not only defensively but also to advance the settlement of historic disputes—most notably Kashmir. Importantly, Pakistan remains positioned as a vocal supporter of the Palestinian cause, advocating for the implementation of UN Security Council resolutions as an independent state with pre-1967 borders and Jerusalem as its capital. The Pakistan Army's top command has simultaneously strengthened professional ties with historic partners such as China, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, Egypt, and Oman. Relations with the US—once severely strained—are being recalibrated, while relatively newer partnerships with Russia and Azerbaijan are being further strengthened.

Through bilateral and multilateral security dialogues, professional bilateral training exchanges, multilateral joint exercises, peacekeeping and UN operations, counterterrorism and counterinsurgency cooperation, maritime security cooperation, defence production partnerships and arms exports, Pakistan's security footprint is expanding regionally and globally.^[1] Pakistan's security-first approach has historically preceded its economic and diplomatic engagements. The most consequential bilateral relationships—with China, Saudi Arabia, and the US—were all initiated through security cooperation.

Among all this turmoil, Beijing continues to remain the lynchpin of Pakistan's comprehensive strategic security paradigm. However, Islamabad has also maintained an unbroken, if fluctuating, presence in the Middle East—embedding Pakistan in the region's security architecture.^[1] This historic trajectory was dramatically reaffirmed on September 19, with the signing of the Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Mutual Defence Agreement (MDA). The agreement's unambiguous clause—that “an attack against one will be considered an attack against both”—signals the return of Pakistan as a central player in Middle Eastern security.^[1] For Pakistan, the advantages are clear. It cements Islamabad's stature as a reliable security guarantor in the region. Already, countries such as Qatar, Egypt, and Turkey are signalling interest in entering into similar agreements with Islamabad. At the UN General Assembly, Pakistan's Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar was a special invitee at a Qatar-chaired meeting on regional security—an elevation from the past when Arab states often advised Pakistan to stay quiet on Israel's crimes in Gaza. For KSA, the Strategic MDA with Pakistan diversifies its security partnerships. Unlike its other security partnerships, for Riyadh, a nuclear Pakistan is time-tested and a partner that has only recently demonstrated its military skill, strategy, and technological capability. The significance of the Pakistan-Saudi MDA cannot be overstated.

It evokes memories of Pakistan's high-profile role in Middle Eastern security during the 1970s and early 1980s. But it also raises critical questions:

- Does this mean Pakistan will extend a nuclear umbrella to Saudi Arabia? Given Israel's repeated military aggression in the region, the extension of such a deterrent cannot be ruled out.
- Does the MDA replace US-Saudi defence ties? No, but it adds a new dimension. The US relationship will continue, but Pakistan's involvement diversifies Saudi Arabia's options and strengthens its autonomy.
- Could this evolve into a broader regional alliance with Pakistan at its core? Possibly! Pakistan's past security engagements in the region and the current regional threat environment make such an evolution likely.
- Was Washington informed? Yes, both Riyadh and Islamabad kept Washington, Tehran, and Beijing in the loop. Saudi Defence Minister Khalid bin Salman met with CENTCOM's chief, while Pakistan quietly ensured all key stakeholders were briefed.

China's role in this evolving security framework is also significant. While not a direct signatory, Beijing's strategic alignment with both Pakistan and KSA positions it as a future stakeholder in this emerging security architecture. Clearly, hard power has returned to the global stage with vengeance. It is within this current turbulent context that Pakistan has sought to confront aggression and disorder. Militarily, it has demonstrated sophistication and resilience; diplomatically, it has shown boldness and principle. With the signing of the Pakistan-Saudi MDA, Pakistan is likely to reclaim a role it first carved out in the 1970s: a central security partner in the Middle East, pivoting indeed into South Asia and the Muslim world.

About Insight and Author

This INSIGHT was first published and uploaded on the ISSRA website on 2 October 2025. It can be accessed at issra.pk/insight/2025/pakistans-expanded-strategic-footprint/insight.html. The writer is a National Security Expert, Author of 'From Kargil to the Coup', Visiting Faculty at Quaid-i-Azam University, Associate at Harvard University Asia Centre and Diplomatic & Strategic Affairs Editor at Channel 24 and can be reached at nasimzehra@gmail.com.

Pakistan-Russia Relations in Changing World Order

Dr. Muhammad Shabbir

Abstract

This INSIGHT explores the global order realigns, Pakistan and Russia are redefining their historically adversarial relationship through shared geopolitical and economic interests. While strategic cooperation in defense and regional stability has deepened, bilateral trade remains underdeveloped—just 1.2% of Pakistan's and 0.23% of Russia's total trade. The Insight highlights energy, agriculture, and connectivity as key areas for future collaboration, emphasizing frameworks like EAEU and ECO to institutionalize ties. The paper concludes that without structural reforms and resilient financial mechanisms, the partnership will remain symbolic rather than transformative.

Keywords: Pakistan–Russia Relations, Changing World Order, Economic Cooperation, Regional Connectivity, Energy Security.

The shifting contours of the international system have brought new opportunities and challenges for states once locked in historical rivalry. Pakistan and Russia spent the better part of the Cold War on opposing sides, now find themselves moving closer in a rapidly transforming world order.¹ Their relations are no longer framed by divergences; rather shaped by convergences in geopolitics, security, and regional stability.

While defence, diplomacy, culture, and people-to-people contact including academic exchanges and limited tourism form important elements of the relationship between Pakistan and Russia; but given the centrality of trade and connectivity in interstate relations, this Insight focuses on the economic dimension of the relations between two countries.

The synergies and untapped economic potential between Pakistan and Russia are significant. Pakistan's consumer market of over 240 million is projected to be the world's sixth largest by 2030 (PPP terms).² On the other hand, Russia as a \$2.02 trillion economy with reserves above \$580bn—offers Pakistan a sizeable market, alongside a diversified industrial base, civilian nuclear knowledge and vocational expertise.³ Moreover, a study by Pakistan Business Council estimated Pakistan's unrealised export potential in Russia at about \$2.8bn.⁴

Amid shifting global power rivalries, Pakistan and Russia share strategic and geopolitical interests which can be translated in economic gains.

Pakistan's energy demand grows by over 8% annually, aligning well with Russia's strengths as the second-largest natural gas exporter and third-largest oil producer.⁵ Pakistan also imports over \$1.5 billion of wheat and edible oils annually, where Russia holds about 20% and 14% of global market share.⁶ For both sides, cooperation in these domains is important for diversification: Pakistan secures alternate sources for energy and food supplies, while Russia broadens its export markets beyond traditional buyers.

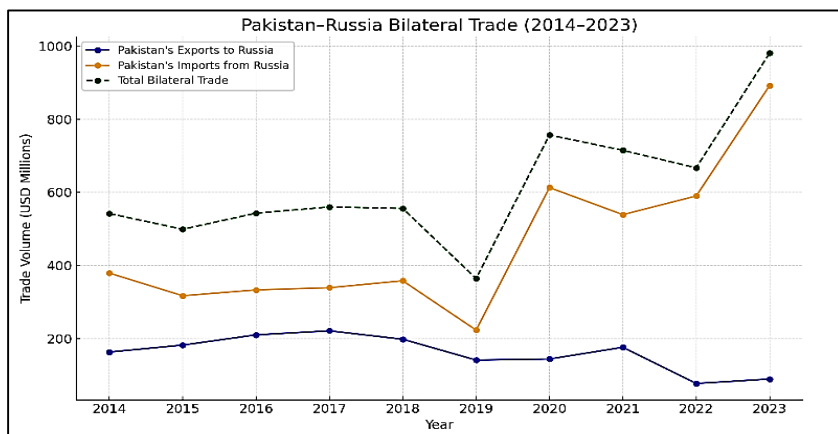
Geography adds another layer of synergy. Pakistan's strategic location offers Russia overland access to the Indian Ocean via Gwadar and Karachi Ports, and can connect Moscow to the world. In return, Russia, via its Caspian-Volga-Don links and Black Sea/Baltic gateways, offers Pakistan a structured access to European markets avoiding conflict ridden chokepoints in sea.

In the geopolitical domain, Afghanistan, once a source of discord, now forms the bedrock of their converging interests. Russia remains deeply concerned about terrorism and drugs spilling into Central Asia and onwards.⁷ In a pragmatic yet strategic move, Russia became the first country to formally recognise the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, signaling motivations for "regional stability, economic gains, and the desire to reshape the international order".⁸ On the other hand, Pakistan seeks a stable western neighbor to manage its own internal security challenges, while also aiming to unlock transit corridors like CASA-1000 and TAPI.⁹

These overlapping interests have facilitated cautious intelligence exchanges, diplomatic consultations, and modest defense cooperation—including the annual Druzhba military exercises since 2016,¹⁰ and joint naval drills such as Arabian Monsoon.¹¹

What sets Pakistan-Russia relations apart in today's world order is the absence of divergences. Unlike Pakistan's ties with the US, faced by periodic strains, Islamabad's convergence with Moscow is free of conflicting interests.

However, the bilateral trade data (presented in the graph) between Pakistan and Russia between 2014-2023 proves that trade between the two has underperformed relative to the strategic rhetoric surrounding the relationship. Though it almost doubled from \$542 million in 2014 to \$1.04 billion in 2023, growth has been modest, and the current figures fall well short of the relationship's potential.



Source: State Bank of Pakistan (SBP): Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS): Trade Development Authority of Pakistan (TDAP): UN Comtrade Database; Russian Federal Customs Service (FCS): World Bank and IMF Trade Summaries.

In 2023, the bilateral trade made up just 1.2% of Pakistan's and 0.23% of Russia's total trade.¹² This means that in trade terms, Pakistan is a marginal partner for Russia, while Russia, though more important to Pakistan than before, still lags behind major partners like China, the US, and the EU.

For Pakistan, present trade is import-driven with the balance favoring Russia. Pakistan mainly exports textiles, sports goods, medical instruments, and fruits to Russia, while it imports grains, crude oil, coal, and pulses.¹³

The limited economic gains reflect structural inadequacies rather than intent on both sides. Pakistan remains tied to Western-linked finance—20+ IMF arrangements since 1958,¹⁴ with multilaterals holding about one-third of external public debt.¹⁵ So, maintaining IMF access, rollovers and USD clearing is critical. Moreover, the Western countries account for over 50% of Pakistan's export market,¹⁶ reinforcing this dependence. Deepening economic relations with a sanctioned Russia therefore risks this relationship. On Moscow's side, trade with China (\$240bn),¹⁷ and India (\$65bn),¹⁸ dwarfs the \$1bn with Pakistan, so Islamabad does not yet register as a priority market.

Where economic ties have struggled, regional diplomacy shows more promise. Both countries converge on integrating Pakistan into Eurasian connectivity projects.



Source:<https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/the-eurasian-economic-union-ambitions/>

Russia has expressed interest in linking Pakistan with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU),¹⁹ while Islamabad views access to Central Asia through Russian-backed frameworks as a way to diversify markets.

Along with EAEU, the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) with its focus on economic integration could provide the missing commercial depth to the relationship. For Pakistan, ECO provides a platform to connect its markets with Central Asia and beyond; for Russia, it offers an avenue to engage with Pakistan and other ECO countries.



Source:<https://eco.int/member-states/>

To unlock the potential of this relationship, both sides must address structural barriers. First, institutionalize economic cooperation by embedding bilateral trade into regional frameworks. This means actively pursuing formal trade agreements that connect EAEU with ECO, positioning Pakistan as a bridge between South Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia.

Second, prioritize establishing direct banking channels between Pakistani and Russian banks. In this context, to reduce exposure to SWIFT (Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication) related sanctions risk and preserving continuity of settlements, Russia's SPFS (System for Transfer of Financial Messages) can be used as the primary channel for trade-payment messaging in RUB/PKR (and RUB/CNY where relevant); while China's CIPS (Cross-Border Interbank Payment System) can serve as a contingency path when SPFS connectivity is unavailable.

Third, advancing energy cooperation is critical. In this context, finalizing the Pakistan Stream Gas Pipeline,²⁰ in an earlier timeframe is essential to establish confidence in future projects.

Lastly, Pakistan needs to embrace its western neighborhood—not just politically, but economically—by facilitating trade with West Asia, Central Asia, and Russia. This includes investment in transit infrastructure, customs modernization, and a banking framework resilient to sanctions. In essence, convergence with Russia on strategic issues is valuable, but without a robust, diversified, and institutionalized economic relationship grounded in transit trade, the partnership will remain symbolic rather than transformative.

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Libya's Arab Spring: Assessing the Role of Foreign Actors

Zoya Khan

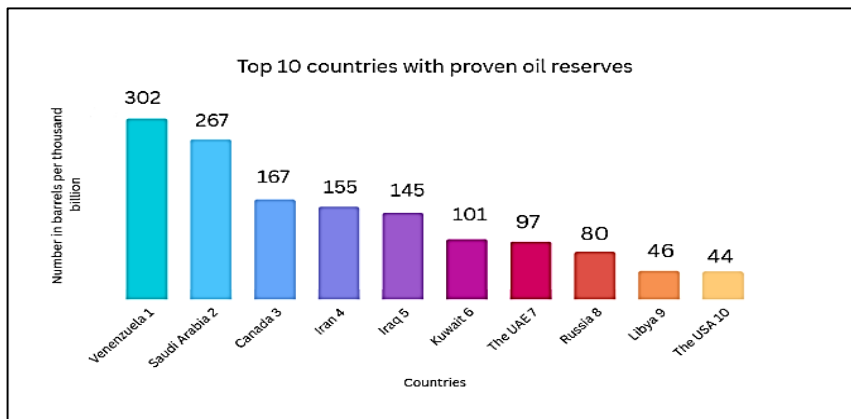
Abstract

The INSIGHT examines the foreign involvement in Libya's Arab Spring, focusing on how external actors influenced the transition from peaceful protests to violent conflict. The paper argues that foreign interference, particularly by NATO and regional powers, played a pivotal role in the downfall of Colonel Gaddafi's regime, contributing to the ongoing political and economic instability in the country. Libya's oil wealth, Gaddafi's alignment with China, and Western concerns over regional power shifts are explored as key factors that catalyzed foreign intervention and prolonged the nation's turmoil.

Keywords: Libya, Arab Spring, Foreign Intervention, NATO, Regime Change, Geopolitical Rivalry.

In 2010, a series of protests began across Egypt and Tunisia, known as the Arab Spring uprisings, leading to significant political changes throughout the Middle East and North Africa. The protests in Libya began in February 2011, resulting in the violent overthrow of Colonel Gaddafi's regime. This insight argues that the transition from peaceful demonstrations to violent civil war in Libya had more to do with the role of external actors rather than internal factors.

Libya, the fourth-largest country in Africa and the 16th largest in the world, is known for its vast desert terrain.¹ It holds the largest oil reserves in Africa, ranking 9th globally with approximately 46.4 billion barrels, accounting for around 3% of the world's proven oil reserves (Graph 1).

Graph 1: Country Analysis Brief: Libya²

Libya gained its independence from Italy in 1951, with King Idris I as its first ruler. Colonel Muammar Gaddafi overthrew the monarchy in 1969 and established a socialist model of governance known as 'Jamhoriya' or 'rule of the masses'.³ Colonel Gaddafi rejected Western-style democracy, adopting a political ideology that mixed socialism with nationalism. This approach allowed Libya to utilise its oil wealth for social welfare, infrastructure development, and enhanced living standards.

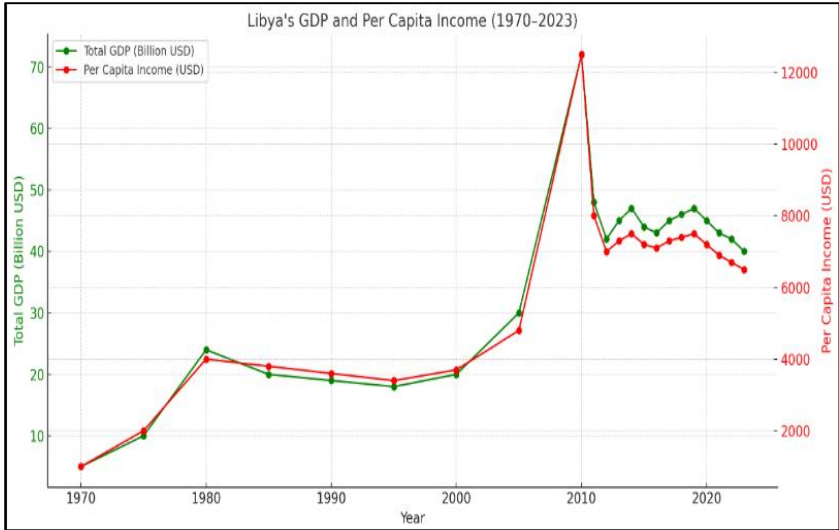


Source: Britannica⁴

During Colonel Gaddafi's four-decade rule, Libya underwent significant development, marked by increases in GDP and per capita income from the 1970s until 2000. Following 2000, a notable economic boom occurred, coinciding with China's initiation of investments in Libya. By 2010, Libya's GDP had grown to approximately \$70 billion, with a per capita income of around \$11,000⁵ (Graph 2). Therefore, the economic indicators imply that the uprisings against Colonel Gaddafi were not primarily caused by economic dissatisfaction, as living conditions and per capita income improved.

The foreign-engineered regime change operation in Libya ousted Colonel Gaddafi's government, plunging Libya into persistent turmoil.

Graph 2: Country focus report Libya 2024⁶



Source: (Self-Compiled)

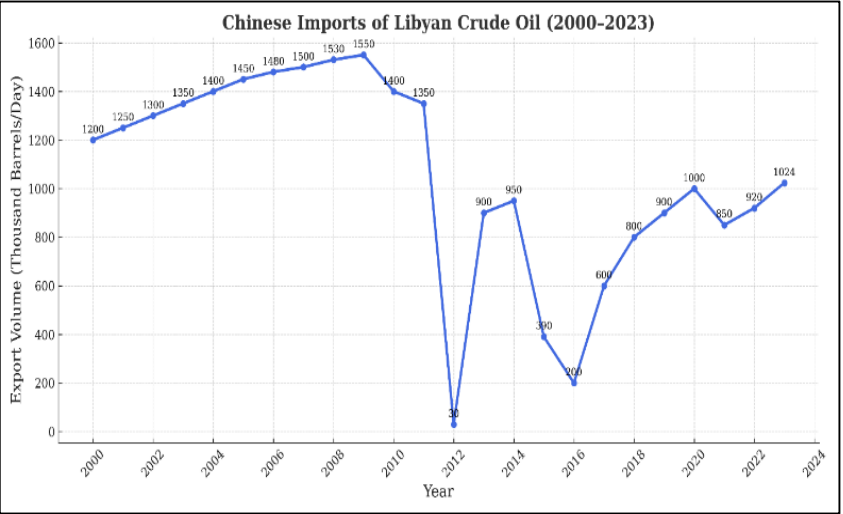
As Libya's economy improved, Colonel Gaddafi leveraged that wealth to extend his influence in Africa through pan-African and pan-Arab nationalism. As a major financier and chairperson of the African Union in 2009/2010, he utilised economic aid to promote African unity and advocated for a "United States of Africa" to diminish Western influence.⁷

The West grew concerned over Colonel Gaddafi's efforts to establish an African central bank with a gold-backed currency, which threatened to reduce Africa's reliance on the US dollar, the IMF, and the African-French Franc, thereby challenging Western dominance.⁸

Traditionally, Western nations were the primary importers of Libyan oil, with the country exporting around 1.6 million barrels per day (bpd) to Europe. Italy and France were particularly dependent, as Libyan crude accounted for more than 20% of Italy's total oil imports.⁹ However, under Colonel Gaddafi, Libya gradually deepened its ties with China. This expanding partnership with China, together with Colonel Gaddafi's policy of resource nationalism, tightened contract conditions for Western nations to reduce their influence in Libya. These two factors jointly alarmed the West, which ultimately viewed this as a direct threat to its long-standing economic and strategic interests in Libya.

By 2010, China was importing approximately 150,000 (bpd) from Libya and had secured more than US\$18 billion in infrastructure and oil projects (Graph 3). This deepening alignment with Beijing threatened the established position of Western states as major oil importers.

Graph 3: Trading Economics¹⁰

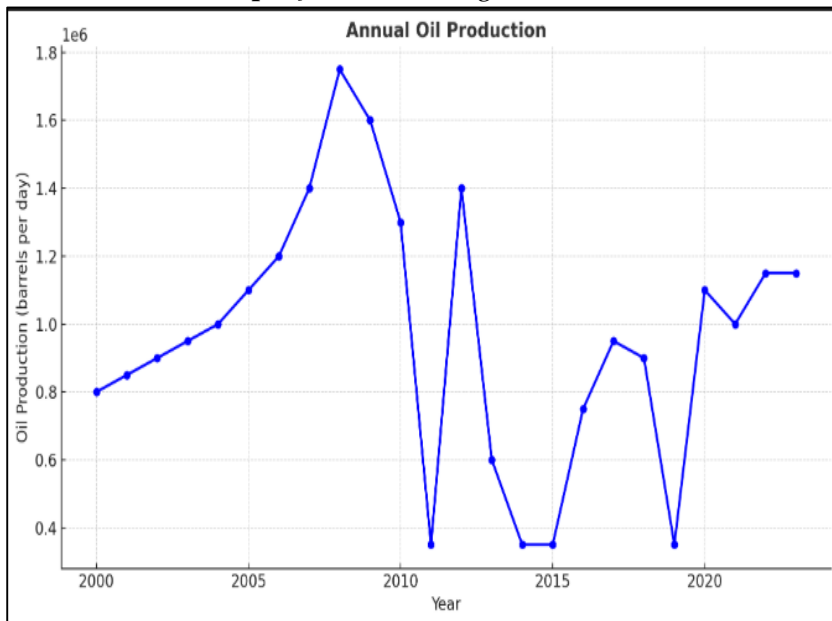


Source: (Self-Compiled)

Given these Western concerns over Gaddafi's growing independence and ties with China, the eruption of Arab Spring protests in 2010–2011 provided an opportunity for foreign actors to pursue regime change in Libya. Inspired by the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, Libyan demonstrations initially began as a small and largely leaderless movement calling for greater political representation. However, external involvement quickly altered the trajectory of protests.¹¹ Support from the US, UK, France, Italy, Qatar, and Kuwait encouraged army defections, transforming protests into an organised rebellion under the National Transitional Council (NTC).¹² This council soon became the political face of the opposition, backed by substantial foreign aid: the US allocated \$25 million, Italy pledged \$586 million, France \$420 million, Kuwait \$180 million, while Qatar delivered more than 20,000 tons of weapons.¹³

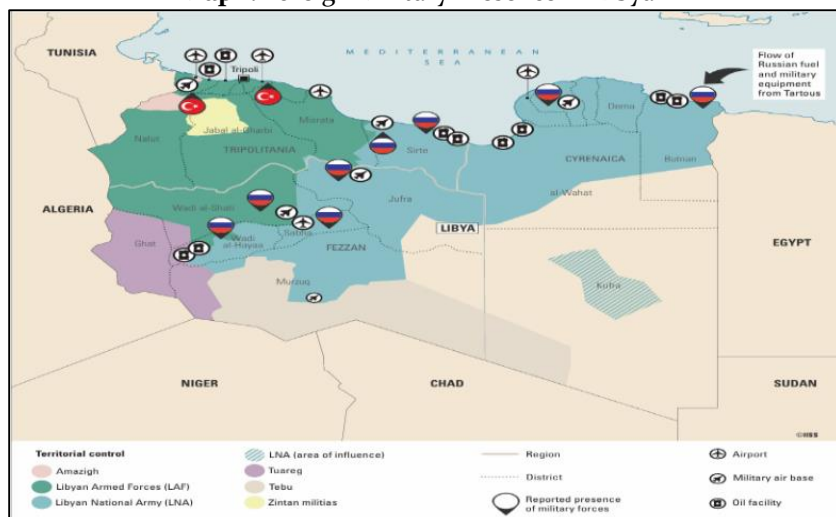
The US, UK, and France called for UN involvement, resulting in the adoption of Resolutions 1970 and 1973, which authorised NATO to enforce a no-fly zone and protect civilians, while China and Russia abstained to uphold the principle of non-interference.¹⁴ From March to October 2011, NATO conducted approximately 26,500 sorties and 7,000 airstrikes, significantly damaging military infrastructure and allowing the rebels to advance.¹⁵ Tripoli fell to the rebels, led by Mustafa Abdul Jalil of the NTC, and in October 2011, Colonel Gaddafi was killed. The conflict resulted in around 15,000 deaths and 45,000 injuries, and chaos continues in Libya to this day.¹⁶

Colonel Gaddafi's regime change by foreign involvement has both political and economic repercussions. Economically, the situation in Libya deteriorated after the fall of Colonel Gaddafi's regime. By 2010, Libya's annual oil production was steadily increasing, reaching above 1.3 million bpd. However, following the regime change in 2011, oil production sharply decreased to just 350,000 bpd and has never returned to the steady growth levels experienced during Colonel Gaddafi's rule (Graph 4).¹⁷

Graph 4: An IISS Strategic Dossier¹⁸

Source: (Self-Compiled)

The political implications of Libya's regime change have been severe, leaving the country fractured with transitional governments and parallel administrations claiming legitimacy. Following the fall of Colonel Gaddafi in 2011, the NTC established a temporary government. In 2012, elections were held, and two parties claimed victory: the General National Congress (GNC) and the House of Representatives (HoR), resulting in a split of Libya. There are currently two governments in Libya. The Government of National Unity (GNU), based in Tripoli and led by Abdul Hamid Dbeibah, is a UN-recognised entity and is supported by Western states, Qatar, Turkey, and the Libyan Armed Forces (LAF). The Government of National Stability (GNS), led by Osama Hammad in Sirte, is backed by General Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA). GNS is supported by Egypt, the UAE, and Russia¹⁹ (Map 1). Thus, Libya is fragmented, with various regimes controlling different areas, and there is no nationwide government.

Map 1: Foreign Military Presence in Libya²⁰

Source: (IISS Strategic Dossier)

The so-called Arab Spring uprisings in Libya were significantly shaped by foreign actors, extending beyond purely domestic grievances. Similar dynamics unfolded in other Middle Eastern and North African states such as Tunisia, Egypt, and Sudan, where internal challenges were intensified by external interference, resulting in prolonged instability. This pattern of foreign involvement reflects broader great-power rivalries playing out across the region.

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Localizing Social Media Networks in Pakistan

Umair Ahmad

Abstract

This INSIGHT explores Pakistan's paradox of being a top global digital market with over 71 million social media users, yet lacking local offices of major platforms. It highlights how remote operations undermine regulatory compliance, tax collection, and effective content moderation, while creating national security risks. Drawing on global models from Brazil, Nigeria, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, the paper suggests a hybrid strategy of strong data protection laws, incentives, and phased localisation mandates to strengthen Pakistan's digital sovereignty.

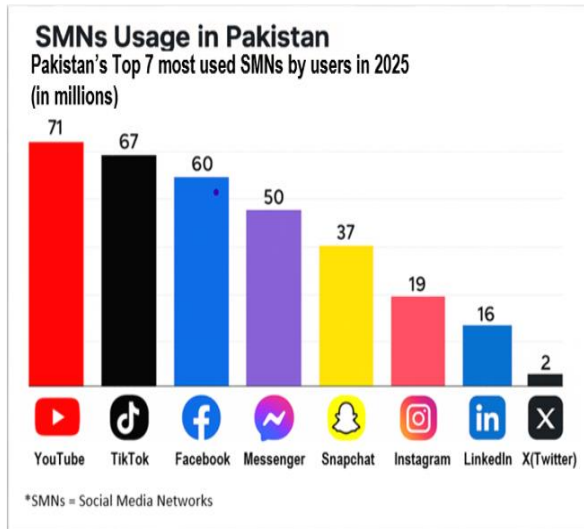
Keywords: Social Media Localisation, Digital Sovereignty, Data Protection, Content Moderation, Cybersecurity, Digital Governance.

Pakistan, one of the largest and fastest-growing digital markets with about 116 million internet users (the 10th largest in the world), includes 71 million who actively engage with major social media networks (SMNs)¹. Despite an extensive digital footprint and huge potential, none of these SMNs maintains a local physical presence in terms of offices. This paradox of high user engagement and limited corporate presence raises key questions about digital sovereignty, regulatory effectiveness, and national security. This insight examines why global SMNs avoid physical presence, explores successful localisation strategies from comparable markets, and suggests practical ways for Pakistan to encourage these companies to establish local offices.

Pakistan's digital landscape is rapidly expanding with widespread use of major global SMNs, which underscores its status as a vibrant consumer market, as illustrated in Graph 1.² This strengthens the case for global tech giants to establish local offices in Pakistan.

Currently, global SMNs such as YouTube, Twitter (X), Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook (Meta) serve millions of Pakistani users without any physical office or registered legal entity. They operate remotely in Pakistan through regional hubs in Singapore, Dubai, or India, managing Pakistani content, advertisements, and regulatory matters from abroad.

Graph 1



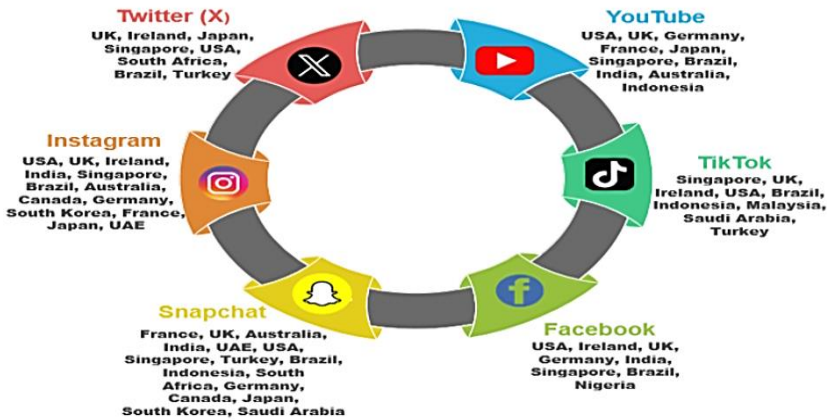
Source: Compiled by Author³

Instead of direct local engagement, they rely on online support systems, digital tools, liaison representatives, or third-party partners to interact with Pakistani authorities, creators, and advertisers. Regulatory correspondence, such as requests for content removal or legal notices, is processed through online portals or regional legal teams, resulting in delays or incomplete responses.

Overall, these SMNs generated approximately PKR 7 billion (~USD 25 million) in revenues from Pakistani users, with only PKR 785 million collected as tax revenue in 2024⁴. A local office could integrate these earnings into Pakistan's economy (through corporate taxes, local salaries, and services). Chart 1 illustrates the global locations of Central SMN's Offices.

Chart 1

Global Presence of Social Media Platforms



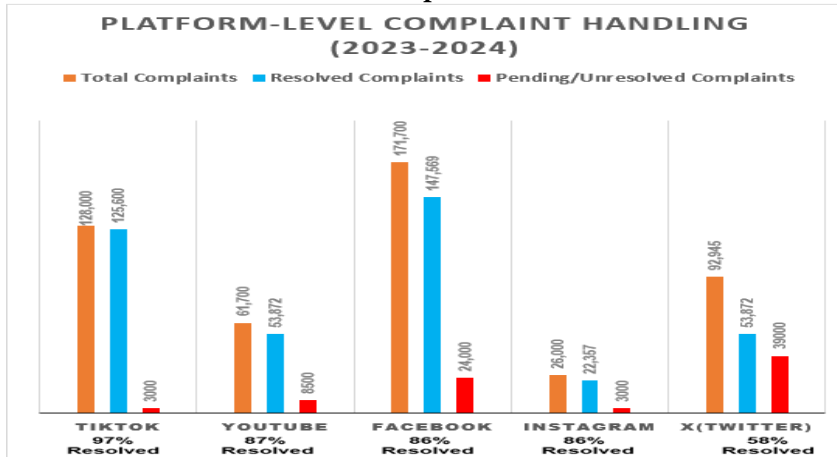
Source: Illustrated by Author

The lack of local offices results in poor content moderation, as remote teams often lack cultural awareness—consequently, Pakistan resorts to disruptive measures like nationwide bans, which negatively impact millions of users. Graph 2 shows the status of complaints processed by these major SMNs. As of 2024, TikTok had the highest content removal rate (98% resolved), while X (Twitter) was the worst performer (only 58% of complaints resolved⁵.

Pakistan can strengthen regulatory compliance, content moderation, and digital governance by pursuing a hybrid strategy combining diplomatic engagement and alignment with international norms with gradual localization measures, including physical or representative offices of Social Media Networks.

SMNs are hesitant to localise themselves in Pakistan due to several key reasons, including regulatory uncertainties, operational risks, modest economic incentives, political volatility, uncertain government policies, lack of data protection laws, and security threats against local representatives. All of these concerns encourage SMNs to continue remote operations⁶.

Graph 2



Source: Compiled by Author⁷

SMNs harvest vast Pakistani user data, including location, behaviour, communications, political views, and biometrics, creating national-security risks (manipulation, surveillance, hybrid warfare, democratic erosion). Many states mandate or pressure data localisation: Russia⁸ and China enforce strict local storage, while Vietnam and Indonesia require local servers/registration. Turkey, Nigeria, and Saudi Arabia apply conditional controls. Currently, no fully enforced, comprehensive law mandating data localisation in Pakistan for these SMNs. Without local offices or data-protection laws, Pakistan lacks oversight. Pakistan should enact a robust Personal Data Protection law, requiring sectoral localisation for sensitive/state-critical data, mandating security assessments for cross-border transfers, and incentivising the development of local data centres.

Local offices would improve regulatory compliance by enabling the direct enforcement of local laws, such as the PECA Act 2016 and the Citizen Protection Rules 2020, enhancing content moderation, and reducing nationwide disruptive bans. Furthermore, local offices would boost the country's economy through increased corporate tax revenue and the creation of high-skilled jobs, providing more employment opportunities as these SMNs would fall under the oversight of agencies such as the SECP and FBR.

Content moderation would become more effective through direct coordination with regulators, such as the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency (NCCIA) and the PTA, ensuring culturally sensitive and timely responses to harmful content, thereby improving the user experience and reducing societal tensions. In summary, the localisation of SMNs would strengthen Pakistan's digital sovereignty, allowing for better governance and management of its data within its borders.

Countries like Brazil and Nigeria have adopted a stricter approach towards localisation. For instance, in 2024, Brazil's Supreme Court upheld the ban on X (Twitter) and fined \$1 billion because the platform refused to provide local representation and content moderation⁹. Similarly, Nigeria banned X in 2021 for seven months due to non-compliance with regulations¹⁰. In these cases, the ban was only lifted once the platform agreed to establish local offices, and this enforcement motivated other major social media networks to comply and localise as well. This illustrates how strict or conditional regulations and market access requirements can drive localisation.

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia achieved localisation through a collaborative approach toward SMNs, emphasising partnerships and financially incentivising localisation¹¹. In contrast, Turkey adopted an incremental pressure tactic, requiring SMNs to localise or face increasingly strict penalties, such as advertising bans and bandwidth throttling. Though initially hesitant, most SMNs complied by establishing local representation¹². These two countries demonstrated the successful implementation of more moderate and cautious approaches to localisation.

Pakistan actively seeks to localise SMNs through regulatory and diplomatic initiatives. Prominent efforts, such as the Citizen Protection (Against Online Harm) Rules 2020, required these SMNs to establish local offices, appoint representatives, and implement data localisation¹³. However, fallout from international and domestic digital groups led the government to soften its approach in subsequent revisions. By 2023, authorities allowed virtual offices and online representation without a mandatory physical setup and localised data.

Additionally, the removal of the unlawful Online Content Rules 2023 streamlined content regulation by categorising prohibited material and setting compliance timelines¹⁴. Pakistan also engaged with SMNs diplomatically through consultations, such as those in the Asia Internet Coalition¹⁵.

Despite many efforts and significant digital potential, Pakistan has not succeeded in bringing these SMNs home and faces major setbacks due to their remote operations. Pakistan must strategically enhance its regulatory framework, implement strong data protection laws, incentivise SMNs to localise by offering tax rebates, simplified registration, and access to subsidised tech zones, while encouraging partnerships with local firms and talent. Gradual localisation mandates, coupled with government advertising commitments and high-level diplomatic engagement, can make establishing local offices both financially attractive and strategically beneficial.

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Escalating Instability in Myanmar amidst Great Power Rivalry

Nida Naseem

Abstract

This INSIGHT explores Myanmar's geostrategic position at the crossroads of South and Southeast Asia has made it a frontline of U.S.-China rivalry, intensifying domestic instability and regional tensions. China, through the Belt and Road Initiative and the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, secures vital trade and energy routes, while the U.S. counters with sanctions, aid, and support for democratic opposition. Ethnic conflicts, rare earth resources, and humanitarian crises such as the Rohingya issue intersect with external strategic interests, deepening instability. Regional spillovers, including India's cross-border strikes and migration pressures on Thailand and Bangladesh, underscore the global implications. Myanmar thus exemplifies how great power competition exacerbates internal fractures and reshapes regional security dynamics.

Keywords: Myanmar, US-China Rivalry, Great Power Competition, Geostrategic Competition, Regional Security, Internal Conflict.

With a 1,930 km coastline on the Bay of Bengal and borders with China, India, Laos, and Thailand, Myanmar lies at the crossroads of South and Southeast Asia. This geographic location gives it substantial value for trade, energy, and regional security, drawing the attention of major powers such as the United States (US) and China.¹ This insight examines how Myanmar's geostrategic position at the heart of the US-China rivalry has turned it into a contested zone, contributing to domestic tensions and regional instability

Figure 1



Source: Reach Myanmar.com

The US and China have opposing approaches towards Myanmar. Beijing, upholding its non-interference principle, has maintained stable diplomatic ties regardless of government changes.² Between 2021 and 2025, China held over 70 high-level meetings with Myanmar's leadership and blocked three United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions targeting the military government.³

Economically, China is Myanmar's most significant partner. This partnership was strengthened after the signing of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) in 2018, a pivotal element of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In 2025, more than 40% of Myanmar's total foreign investment is concentrated in projects linked to the CMEC. As demonstrated in (point 1, figure 2), the corridor's flagship projects include the \$2.5 billion Sino-Myanmar oil and gas pipelines, which reduce China's dependence on the vulnerable Strait of Malacca.⁴

Myanmar's geostrategic position has put it at the centre of US-China rivalry, turning the state into a contested zone where competing interests have deepened instability.

Kyaukphyu deep-sea port and Special Economic Zone (SEZ) offers China a maritime gateway for trade and energy transit, with a 70% Chinese stake in the port's first phase valued at \$1.3 billion.⁵

On the other hand, the US has always claimed to support democracy in Myanmar, particularly by providing political backing to Aung San Suu Kyi's leadership while opposing military rule.⁶ After the military coup in 2021, Washington froze approximately \$1 billion in Myanmar's assets held in the US Federal Reserve and imposed targeted sanctions on military leaders and state-owned enterprises.⁷ Between 2021 and 2024, the US redirected \$317 million in humanitarian aid to multilateral agencies and non-governmental organisations.⁸

In 2022, the Burma Act, a law supporting democracy and humanitarian aid following the 2021 government transition, was passed by the US Congress as part of the National Defence Authorisation Act. It authorised up to \$50 million annually for programs supporting democracy, human rights, and humanitarian assistance in Myanmar, further enhancing international accountability mechanisms concerning alleged military abuses.⁹ As of 2025, US investment in Myanmar remains limited, with total foreign direct investment under \$300 million, concentrated mainly in non-strategic sectors such as services and light manufacturing.¹⁰

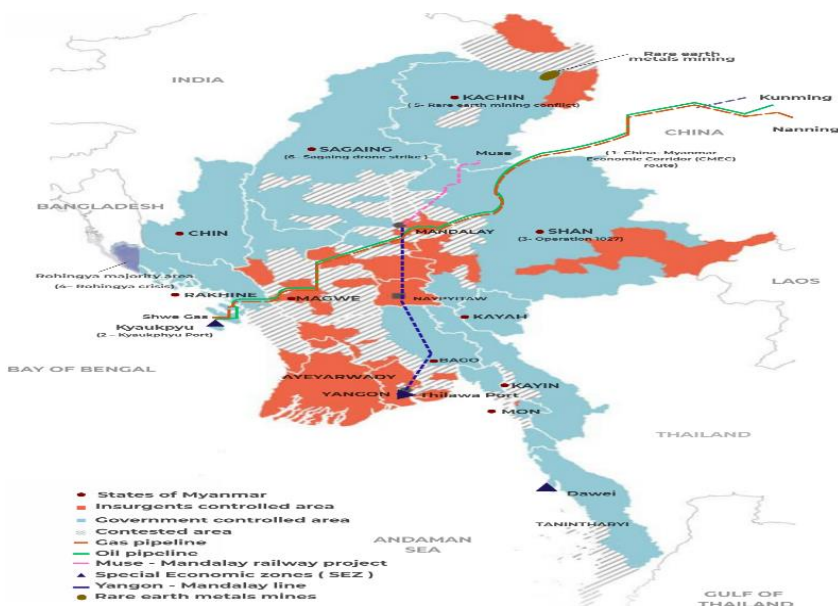
This overview indicates that China and the US pursue distinct models of engagement in Myanmar. China emphasises state-level infrastructure, non-interference and economic integration, while the US engages through aid and support for opposition networks. The US aims to curb China's regional influence. According to the 2023 Indo-Pacific Strategy Report by the US Department of Defence, Myanmar's location near China's Yunnan province is key to limiting China's unimpeded access to the Indian Ocean and preserving a "free and open Indo-Pacific."¹¹

Figure 2 depicts Myanmar's areas of control, major troubled spots, and strategic economic routes, including the CMEC. Ethnic conflict in Myanmar increasingly intersects with external strategic interests. Armed clashes between the Arakan Army and government forces intensified in late 2024, displacing over 300,000 civilians in Rakhine State.

This region hosts China's strategic Kyaukphyu Port and Shwe gas pipeline (point 2, figure 2), making it a critical zone for Beijing's energy security. China has urged de-escalation to protect infrastructure and supply lines, while the US has increased engagement with groups advocating regime change.¹²

In late 2023, the Three Brotherhood Alliance, a coalition of Myanmar's ethnic armed groups consisting of the Arakan Army, Ta'ang National Liberation Army, and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, launched Operation 1027 (point 3, figure 2), seizing over 150 military posts across Shan and Rakhine States near the China-Myanmar border.¹³ The offensive disrupted segments of the CMEC, resulting in a 30% decline in bilateral trade in the first quarter of 2024.¹⁴ China pursued parallel diplomacy with the military and ethnic groups to secure transit zones, while the US welcomed military setbacks and backed an 'ethnic federal democracy.'¹⁵

Figure 2



Source: Adapted from a map published in the New York Times

The Rohingya crisis (point 4, figure 2) has evolved into a geopolitical flashpoint, with nearly one million refugees in Bangladesh as of 2025.¹⁶ Major powers frame the situation differently: the U.S. emphasises the humanitarian crisis, advocating for international accountability, while China resists external intervention, instead supporting Myanmar's domestic conflict resolution efforts.

Myanmar's rare earth sector has emerged as another bone of contention between the US and China. Since 2021, China has become the largest importer of Myanmar's rare earth elements, accounting for resources worth approximately \$3.6 billion annually.¹⁷ In late 2024, the Kachin Independence Army seized key mining areas, halting exports and disrupting Chinese supply chains (point 5, Figure 2). India has expanded exploration in Myanmar, aligning with the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (2022), which seeks to diversify resources away from China.¹⁸

Myanmar's internal conflict has generated significant cross-border repercussions. In July 2025, India conducted a drone strike in Myanmar's Sagaing Region (point 6, figure 2), targeting camps of the United Liberation Front of Assam–Independent, People's Liberation Army of Manipur, and National Socialist Council of Nagaland–Khaplang.¹⁹ Thailand continues to face migration pressure, with over 90,000 Myanmar nationals migrating since the 2021 coup.²⁰ Bangladesh, equipped with US-supplied patrol vessels, MRAPs, and drones, has strengthened border security.²¹ Though framed as counter-terrorism tools, analysts note they enhance Dhaka's capacity to monitor Rakhine insurgencies, enabling Washington to pressure Myanmar and intensify the Rohingya crisis indirectly.²²

In sum, Myanmar's geostrategic position has made it a frontline of US-China rivalry, where competing economic, political, and security interests have deepened internal fractures and amplified regional instability. Pakistan and Myanmar share several strategic similarities, which highlight their importance in regional and global geopolitics. Both possess critical geostrategic locations, lie close to major energy routes, and maintain warm-water ports that connect to the Indian Ocean. They are central to China's BRI and are treated as strategic focal points in the US Indo-Pacific strategy.

At the same time, both face political instability, security challenges, strong military influence, and deep ethnic divisions. In the future, their trajectory will be a critical test case for how strategically located states navigate great power rivalry while striving for stability and sovereignty.

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A Case for Formalising Pakistan's Recycling Industry

Naveen Khan

Abstract

This INSIGHT argues for the urgent formalisation of Pakistan's recycling industry, which currently operates informally despite its vast economic potential. Evidence shows that recycling can generate billions in revenue, create employment, and reduce dependence on raw material imports while mitigating environmental hazards. Global best practices highlight how structured investment, regulation, and citizen awareness transform waste into a driver of growth. For Pakistan, systemic reforms—laws, infrastructure, and integration of informal workers—are essential to unlock this untapped sector's role in sustainable development.

Keywords: Recycling Industry, Waste Management, Circular Economy, Sustainable Development, Green Jobs, Environmental Sustainability.

Pakistan's Hazardous Waste Management Policy defines recycling as the "reclamation and processing of waste in an environmentally sound manner for the originally intended or other purpose(s)."¹ Despite growing interest in recycling and its benefits, the industry remains underutilised in Pakistan. This Insight suggests that, considering the significant economic benefits from the recycling industry, Pakistan's government must formalise the presently informal, underinvested sector through systemic reforms.

Minimising waste through the recycling process is an essential component of the waste management phenomenon. Having a robust recycling industry is crucial because it diverts trash from environmentally hazardous landfills and ensures materials' reintegration into a circular production chain. Moreover, by generating new economic activities and reducing costs, it stimulates GDP growth.

The viability of recycling lies in creating sustainability-oriented jobs, saving energy costs of extracting raw materials, reducing imports, and preventing expenditure on tackling pollution by not allowing it to occur. The global recycling industry annually conserves ~850 million metric tons of raw materials by utilising existing waste to manufacture valuable products, besides employing 56 million+ people worldwide.²

Waste Sorting in Pakistan



Source: Heinrich Böll Foundation³

Data from recent years on the jobs and annual revenues approximately accrued from recycling industries across four continents illustrates how measurable economic benefits can be reaped when the sector operates formally:

Table 1: Global Macro-Level Economic Contributions by Recycling Industries

Country (Continent)	Persons Employed	Revenue Generated (USD Billion)
USA (North America)	681,000 ⁴	\$168.63 ⁵
Germany (Europe)	310,000 ⁶	\$123 ⁷

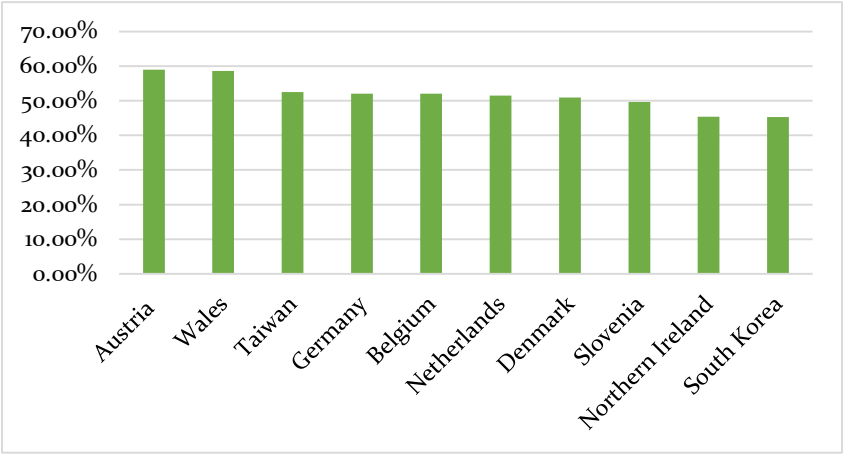
Country (Continent)	Persons Employed	Revenue Generated (USD Billion)
China (Asia)	13,000,000 ⁸	\$27.2 ⁹
Australia (Australia)	106,500 ¹⁰	\$50 ¹¹

Source: Multiple

Figures in Table 1 demonstrate how Pakistan can similarly boost its economic growth if it patronises its recycling industry. This can annually generate 337.8 billion PKR (\$1.2 billion) in revenue from plastic waste alone,¹² besides creating millions of jobs (exact projection not available).¹³

Looking at the big picture, recent global trends in recycling are depicted in Graph 1, based on a Welsh Government-funded report.¹⁴ Predictably, Western and Central European states dominate the world’s top 10 recycling list:

Graph 1: Top Municipal Recycling Rates Globally (Published 2024)



Source: Author’s Compilation¹⁵

Austria ranks as the world leader in terms of the tons of waste recycled, owing to investments in recycling infrastructure and environmental education. Wales also boasts a heightened recycling profile since its 2010 fixing of recycling targets and financial penalties for non-compliance.

The only Asian nations with high recycling rates, owing to the tons of recycled waste, are Taiwan and South Korea.¹⁶ As for China, it ranks 30th on the list of the top recycling countries.¹⁷ Since 2021, it has banned the import of solid waste for environmental and public health reasons, and to boost its local industry.¹⁸

For Pakistan, the Global Recycling League Table report labels the quality of municipal data as “very poor.”¹⁹ In another report by Yale University, Pakistan is ranked 113 out of 180 countries for recycling in 2022, following which specific rankings are unavailable.²⁰

Despite the poor ranking and scarcity of data, recycling as a practice remains widespread in Pakistan. Autonomous waste pickers and junk-shop dealers, better addressed as “sustainopreneurs,”²¹ form the backbone of the country’s shadow industry that processes plastic, glass, paper, and metals. The less than 390,000 tons,²² out of 3.9 million tons, of plastic waste that gets converted into pellets and subsequently supplied to industries, is collected and sorted by these workers.

Pakistan’s government must intervene and establish the recycling industry formally if the promising economic dividends are to be reaped.

Pakistan’s only recycling-related federal-level statute is the Hazardous Waste Management Policy (2022).²³ According to it, the government has to collaborate with private sector stakeholders on identifying recyclable waste and offer incentives for establishing recycling programs.

Though existing recycling efforts cannot match Pakistan’s annual waste production—estimated at 50 million tons—there is sufficient evidence of the lucrativeness of recycling for the government to formalise the industry.²⁴ Data from Lahore alone illustrates that household solid waste recycling generates 271 million PKR (\$0.962 million) annually, even though only 21.2% of recyclable waste in the city is recycled.²⁵

Moreover, according to the Sustainable Development Policy Institute-based researcher, Zainab Naeem, providing microfinancing, technical training, and licensing to ~200 recycling SMEs could yield 1.1 billion PKR (\$3.88 million) annually.²⁶ The SMEs' existing performance substantiates this projection: their limited and formally unsupported recycling has already achieved an impressive 84% plastic recovery.²⁷

The details depicting the economic viability and cost-effectiveness of such operations, if scaled, are depicted in Table 2:

Table 2: Cost-Benefit Analysis for 200 Recycling SMEs in Pakistan

Metric	Value in PKR (Million USD)
Total Annual Revenue	1.1 billion (\$3.88)
Total Annual Cost	270 million (\$0.959)
Net Annual Benefit	830 million (\$2.947)
Benefit-Cost Ratio	4.07

Source: From Waste to Wealth²⁸

Table 2's projections depict Pakistan's 830 million PKR (\$2.947 million) profits even if only 200 recycling SMEs are patronised. Overall, the industry, besides promoting cleanliness, resource conservation and civic attitudes, would catalyse macro-economic growth whose impact trickles down to the grassroots. However, it confronts challenges that can only be overcome by government action.

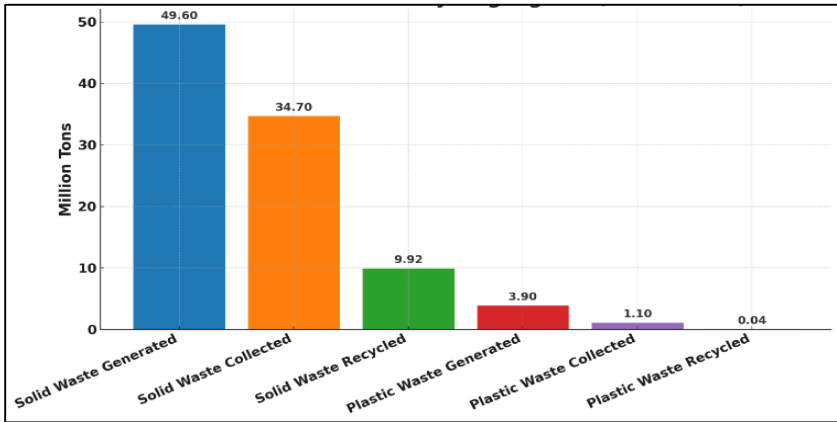
While Pakistan is the world's fifth populous state and its solid waste is growing annually at 2.4%+,²⁹ the country lacks formal recycling and composting infrastructure. Such governmental negligence leaves waste picking to the 200,000 to 333,334 untrained workers,³⁰ resulting in only 13% recyclable recovery from municipal solid waste.³¹ Contrarily, formally establishing the recycling industry could save the government up to 65 million PKR (\$0.229 million) annually.³²

Another challenge is low awareness of waste management, which is linked to recycling. Unlike Europe, where recycling originates from awareness imparted through education, Pakistan's system does not empower citizens to play their part.

Furthermore, manufacturers are not legally bound to produce recyclable items and take them back post-consumer use. This shifts the financial burden of reprocessing to recyclers, hampering business scalability.

Statistics in Graph 2 show how the annual amounts of solid and plastic wastes recycled are tellingly lower than those generated and collected:

Graph 2: Pakistan’s Current Recycling Figures (Million Tons)



Source: Multiple³³

Merely 9.92 and 0.04 million tons of waste recycled illustrate successive governments’ underinvestment in the sector—perpetuating its informal nature and subpar performance.³⁴ As described earlier, this translates into the country’s annual failure in seizing economic gains.

The government must now build the industry covering all recyclables, recognising its economic potential. Modern infrastructure should be invested in the country, whose capacity matches the daily waste generated. Leveraging informal workers’ experience, the existing industry also needs regulation and integration into this new recycling setup.

Moreover, federal and provincial administrations must prioritise awareness-raising from childhood education. Further, as scholar Zainab Naeem suggested, actively choosing products manufactured from recycled materials to reduce the consumption’s environmental impact,

the government must sensitise people accordingly to boost the recycling industry.³⁵

Lastly, Pakistan needs to promulgate overarching laws mandating the recycling of all materials. As described earlier, Pakistan has a law relating to recycling; however, that is confined to the hazardous waste category.

If the above steps are initiated, Pakistan's recycling industry would be empowered to catalyse national economic growth from the macro to micro levels.

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About Insight and Author

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Effective Governance through Empowerment of Local Governments

Tanweer Ahmad

Abstract

This INSIGHT examines Pakistan's persistent failure to institutionalize empowered local governments despite their proven role in delivering responsive and accountable governance. While decentralization promises improved service delivery, citizen participation, and progress toward Sustainable Development Goals, Pakistan's governance trajectory reflects half-hearted attempts, political resistance, and bureaucratic inertia. The analysis traces historical reforms, provincial variations, and systemic obstacles, highlighting how entrenched interests undermine devolution. It concludes that genuine empowerment of local governments—political, fiscal, and administrative—is indispensable for fostering inclusivity, accountability, and sustainable development.

Keywords: Local Government, Decentralization, Political Empowerment, Fiscal Devolution, Good Governance, Sustainable Development.

Global experience bears witness that local governments (LG) have been instrumental in responsive, responsible, and accountable governance for the effective delivery of public services. Paradoxically, Pakistan's attempts to create space for LGs in its governance structure can best be described as halfhearted.

Thus, it can be conveniently argued that Pakistan's failure to implement effective LG systems has denied it vital gains in the domains of public service and national harmony. This insight delves into important factors inhibiting the adoption of a dividend-rich LG system, while giving a historical account of its evolution in Pakistan.

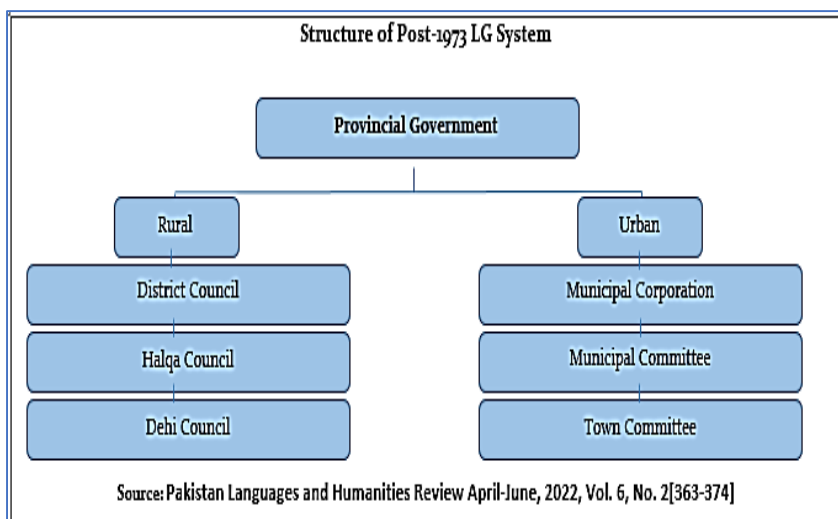
LG is premised on the concept of “a governance of a politically delineated¹ specific or local area to include a city, district, town, county, etc”. Sufficient empirical evidence attests to the rationale for decentralised decision-making² involving political, administrative, and fiscal devolution of powers (in some cases, legislative powers also) for LGs.

The concept was championed by the UN itself at the UN-Habitat Guidelines on “Decentralisation and the Strengthening of Local Authorities” in April 2007, followed by its Agenda 21 slogan: “think globally, act locally.” It stressed that local actions hold the key to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

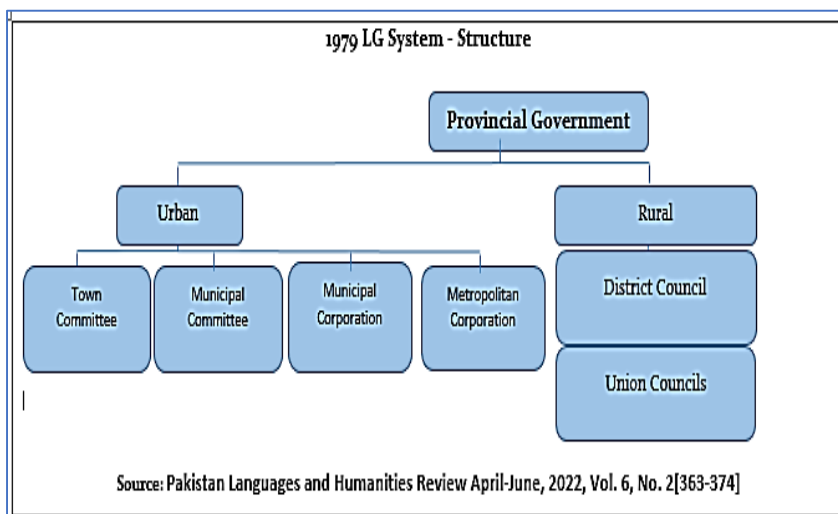
The quality of local governance has taken strides with the incorporation of technological tools (including websites, the Internet of Things (IoT), social media, geographical information systems (GIS), and geospatial data) which promote citizens’ engagement in decision-making and facilitate the management. Nevertheless, Pakistan stands at 93 out of 162 countries in local governance as per V-Dem 2025 (108 out of 167 in national democracy by Economist Intelligence Unit).

Effective devolution, rooted in the principle of subsidiarity, strengthened by active citizen participation, and enhanced through smart use of technology, is essential for delivering high-quality public services.

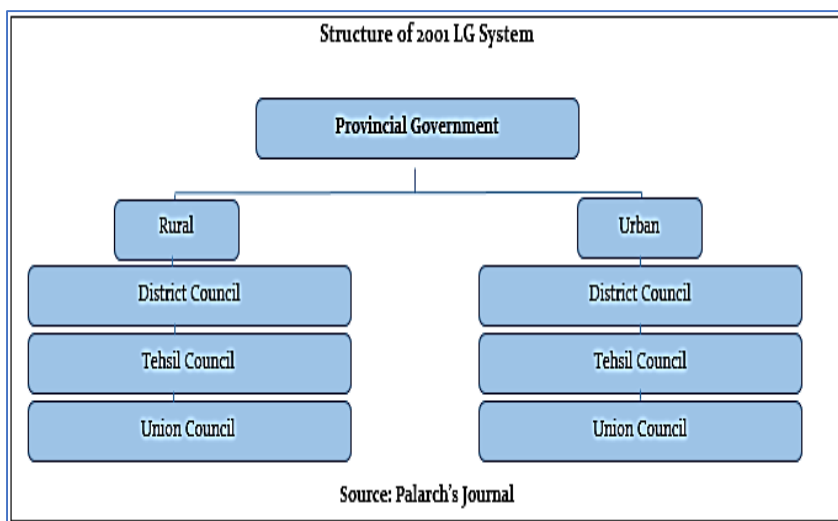
The promulgation of the Basic Democracy Ordinance in 1959,³ in President Ayub’s era, set the stage for the empowerment of the local/village representatives in Pakistan. Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto introduced another local body system after the adoption of the 1973 Constitution, but Elections were never held.



The second practical attempt was made in 1979, with the enactment of the Local Government Ordinance (LGO), which reduced the powers of Bureaucrats in the LGs' management. A variety of functions were also devolved to District councils, including the management of hospitals and schools, construction of public buildings, water supply, roads, bridges, and school buildings.

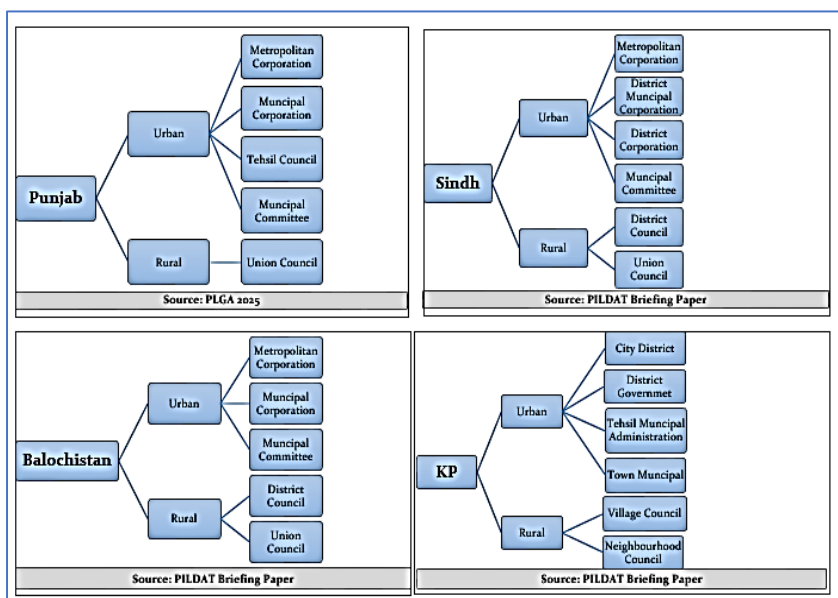


The Year 2000 saw another attempt by then-President General Pervez Musharraf to introduce the LGO 2001, with the distinction of having the same structure for rural and urban areas. The office of Deputy Commissioner was changed to District Coordination Officer, who reported to the elected head of the District Council. Almost all departments were devolved to the District Government except Police, Higher Education, Irrigation, and Water.



The Constitutional guarantee of Article 17 for LGO 2001 expired in 2009, followed by the passage of the 18th Constitutional Amendment in 2010. Provinces (and Islamabad Capital Territory) were mandated to enact LGs as per Article 140 (A) for further devolution. However, slow progress in the passage of Local Government Acts⁴ (LGAs) and the establishment of LGs with dubious devolution demonstrates profound reluctance on the part of Provinces to decentralise.

Balochistan was the first province to pass the LGA in 2010, bearing a few similarities with LGO 2001. Punjab and Sindh enacted LGAs in 2013 by adopting many provisions of the LGO 1979. KP also passed its LGA in 2013 with the LGO 2001 as a guide. LGAs vary in LGs' tenure, with Punjab having a 5-year term, while other Provinces maintain a 4-year term. All provinces have differences in rural and urban governance structures, as shown in the flowcharts below;



All Provincial governments authorized the Local Government Commission functioning under them to remove the LGs, thereby undermining guaranteed tenure. Absence of a constitutionally guaranteed duration renders the LG system highly weak and vulnerable.

The role of bureaucracy is pronounced in the case of Punjab, which assigned DCs the chair of District Authorities on all essential municipal functions as per the recently passed PLGA5 2025. It disposes bureaucracy to enjoy authority without public accountability. KP fares better in terms of devolution of administration by enlarging the role of the Chairmen or Mayors in the LGA.

Punjab, Sindh, and KP have formulated Provincial Finance Commissions (PFC) for the transfer of funds, while Balochistan has a Local Councils' Grant Committee. The role of Provincial Finance Minister as head of PFC and funds sanctioning authority leaves a huge space for influence. All LGs have been empowered for limited tax collection, which keeps them dependent on Provincial governments for funds.

As regards LG elections, Balochistan held elections in 2013, three years after passing the Act. Its first term ended in 2017–18, yet the next elections and formation of local governments were delayed until 2023, far beyond the legal limit of 120 days.

Punjab, Sindh, and KP held elections in 2015 only under pressure from the courts. After completing their first terms in 2019–20, KP and Sindh postponed elections, which were eventually conducted in 2021–22 and 2022–23, respectively.

Punjab avoided elections entirely and has not had functioning local governments since 2018, citing reasons such as repeated reviews and amendments to the Punjab Local Government Act (PLGA).

Empowerment of LGs is a precondition for effective governance, understood by all political and policy circles. Yet, the inability to enact well-functioning LGs reflects that Pakistan is hostage to deeply entrenched vested political interests⁶ and priorities.

Centralisation of political power and the associated benefits of members of provincial assemblies are felt threatened by devolution, especially the development funds, which are essential to build patronage. Maintenance of the status quo is also in the interest of bureaucracy, whose powers are at risk of erosion in the event of the empowerment of LGs. Inadequate training and capacity are other easy excuses for denying the transfer of responsibilities to the LGs. Public participation and community empowerment are purposefully denied to protect the rampant corruption of officials, to prevent the public from gaining rights awareness, and to divert development funds to favoured areas.

Notwithstanding the above, a politically, fiscally, and administratively decentralised LG system is a central pillar for responsive, efficient, and accountable governance. It may not be a panacea for all governance troubles, but surely a people-centric approach and a gateway for the attainment of SDGs. It can also help foster harmony in our ethnically heterogeneous landscape by promoting local ownership.

All Provincial governments bear the responsibility to ensure devolution in the true spirit of “subsidiarity”⁷. In the absence of any political resolve to establish the LG system in Pakistan, it is incumbent upon the judiciary of Pakistan as a constitutional watchdog to ensure compliance by Provinces.

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About Insight and Author

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Establishing a National Counter Terrorism Force in Pakistan: A Concept Brief

Adraak Hussain

Abstract

This INSIGHT highlights the persistent challenges Pakistan faces in combating terrorism, primarily relying on military-led operations, which, despite tactical successes, have not resulted in sustainable peace. Given the evolving terrorist threats and resource constraints on the military, it advocates for the establishment of a National Counter Terrorism Force (NCTF). The NCTF would provide a specialized, nationwide solution, bypassing the limitations of provincial Counter-Terrorism Departments and the military's engagement in civil duties. Drawing lessons from international models, the insight argues for the reorganization of existing resources, such as the Frontier Corps and Rangers, to create a legally robust and adaptable force capable of addressing current and future security threats.

Keywords: Counter-Terrorism, National Counter Terrorism Force, Internal Security, Terrorism Threat, Institutional Reform, National Security.

Pakistan has been caught in a continuous fight against terrorism for over twenty years, mainly using military-led efforts. Although significant tactical wins have been made through various military operations, these have not led to lasting peace. This analysis suggests that, due to the changing and ongoing terrorist threats and the growing pressure on military resources, Pakistan needs a dedicated National Counter Terrorism Force (NCTF).

Although Pakistan's counter-terrorism framework includes provincial Counter-Terrorism Departments (CTDs) and paramilitary forces, the reliance on the military as a primary force has caused several vulnerabilities. First, it potentially diverts the armed forces' focus and resources away from external threats, especially in an era of shifting geopolitical dynamics.¹ Second, operations conducted by armed forces in aid of civil power (Article 245) lack a robust, permanent legal framework. It also raises potentially serious concerns about

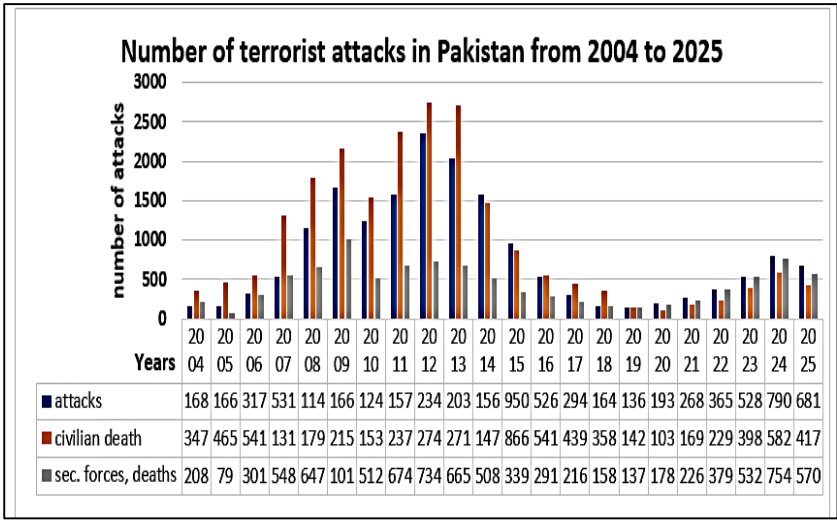
Since terrorism is a national-level threat, it demands a comprehensive, national-level response through a specialised force.

human rights compliance in counter-terrorism (CT).² Third, the Provincial CTDs are constrained by jurisdictional boundaries. At the same time, federal paramilitary forces, such as the Frontier Corps (FC) and Rangers, have mandates primarily focused on border security and law enforcement support, rather than specialised CT operations.³

Besides structural limitations, the military has been constantly engaged against terrorism since 2004. The CT operations intensified from 2008 to 2009. After the attack on Army Public School in Peshawar (2014), operations further increased, and Operation Zarb-e-Azab (2014), Operation Radd-ul-Fassad (2017) and other intelligence-based operations were launched. However, these operations achieved varied successes.

The threat of terrorism has increased after the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban in 2021, as shown in Graph 1.⁴ This rise in terrorism, along with the structural limitations, highlights the need for the establishment of a specialised force, NCTF, which could be the primary force against terrorism.

Graph -1



Source: South Asia Terrorism Portal⁵

Globally, nations facing significant internal threats have established specialised national-level forces to address terrorism without relying on the military, which Pakistan could emulate as a model. The French Gendarmerie, a military force with police duties that operates primarily in rural areas and small towns, specialises in counter-terrorism operations.⁶ The Italian Carabinieri, which functions as both a police force and a military branch, has specialised units dedicated to counter-terrorism that can operate nationally without regional limitations.⁷

Similarly, the Spanish Guardia Civil, a military force charged with police duties that has developed exceptional expertise in combating domestic terrorism, particularly against Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) – a far-left nationalist organisation, and jihadist groups.⁸ Another example is the United States Department of Homeland Security, which coordinates numerous agencies and resources under a unified command structure to address domestic terrorism threats.⁹ These forces demonstrate that effective CT requires a dedicated, hybrid institution with nationwide jurisdiction, clear legal authority, and capabilities that sit between those of a soldier and a police officer.

The first national internal security policy (NISP) 2014-2018 called for a Federal Rapid Response Force in collaboration with provincial CTDs.¹⁰ Similarly, point 8 of the National Action Plan (NAP) 2014¹¹ called for a specialised CT force, which has been omitted in the revised NAP 2021,¹² and needs to be reconsidered.

Pakistan recently converted the Frontier Constabulary into a federal force, a positive step; however, it remains a police force primarily aimed at maintaining law and order, rather than a counter-terrorism specialist unit.¹³ Moreover, CT tasks are still primarily undertaken by the Pakistan Army and paramilitary forces.

Pakistan does not need to build an entirely new force from scratch, as it would be cost-prohibitive and time-consuming. A more practical solution is to reorganise existing resources by designating Frontier Corps and Rangers wings in all provinces, currently employed on internal security duties, into the NCTF. These forces have years of experience and intelligence in countering terrorism across Pakistan.

This force may have a federal mandate to conduct CT operations across all provinces and territories without jurisdictional limitations. It may operate under the Ministry of Interior for day-to-day CT operations, but be placed under the Ministry of Defence in the event of war or as the situation demands.

Although the use of Article 245¹⁴ and the Anti-Terrorism Act 1997,¹⁵ amended over time, allows the armed forces to act in aid of civil power, a new NCTF Act that grants it permanent national jurisdiction and full police powers (arrest, investigation, prosecution) for terrorism-related incidents may be necessary. This will provide clarity, enhance judicial processes, and ensure compliance with human rights. With these capabilities, it might be a hybrid force with military-level tactical expertise, unified command and police-style investigative, forensic, and community engagement skills. It may also maintain close intelligence coordination with NACTA, IB, ISI, and CTDs.

The longevity and adaptability of NCTF could be of critical importance. If the terrorist threat declines significantly, the force could be transitioned to remain a vital national asset, avoiding irrelevance. It could take on roles to tackle organised crime, cyber terrorism, civil defence, and community engagement etc. NCTF may also contribute to global CT efforts by sharing expertise with other countries. It may remain a flexible, cost-effective, and strategically relevant pillar of Pakistan's national security architecture. It may expand or scale back its functions depending on Pakistan's security needs.

The CT strategy of Pakistan necessitates institutional strengthening rather than quick fixes or improvised deployments. Establishing NCTF might be more of a strategic imperative than merely a tactical one for Pakistan. It has the potential to address the limitations of the current military-led approach by providing a dedicated, legally robust, and nationally coordinated solution. By learning from international experiences and optimising existing resources, NCTF offers a cost-effective and practical way forward. Additionally, its design allows for adaptability to future security environments, particularly if terrorism declines, ensuring it remains a valuable asset for Pakistan. The concept of NCTF represents a proactive investment in building a more secure, stable, and resilient Pakistan.

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Prospects of Pakistan-Afghanistan Free Trade Agreement

Muhammad Abdur Rehman

Abstract

This INSIGHT explores Pakistan and Afghanistan share a historically vital yet underdeveloped trade relationship constrained by the absence of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA). Despite Pakistan's 15 FTAs with other partners, bilateral trade with Afghanistan remains limited to \$1.7 billion, far below its \$5 billion potential. This Insight evaluates the structural bottlenecks in the existing Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) and recent Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA), noting challenges of smuggling, political frictions, and limited product coverage. It argues that a comprehensive FTA could formalize informal trade, strengthen economic interdependence, and enable both nations—particularly Pakistan—to expand exports across industrial and service sectors.

Keywords: Pakistan-Afghanistan Trade, Free Trade Agreement, Bilateral Trade, Trade Facilitation, Economic Integration, Regional Connectivity.

Pakistan and Afghanistan maintain one of South Asia's most significant bilateral trade relationships, yet the absence of a comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (FTA) continues to constrain their economic partnership. Since 2003, Pakistan has concluded 15 FTAs with various countries, whereas its trade with Afghanistan remains confined to the limited scope of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA). The recent Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) signed in July, 2025, between the two countries is also limited to eight agricultural products only, leaving all other sectors aside. The difference between a PTA and an FTA is that the former provides preferential tariff rates for a limited number of items, while the latter aims to eliminate most tariffs on goods.

This insight examines the merits of an FTA, reasons for its delay, associated challenges, and the way forward. Trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan is currently facilitated under the APTTA signed in 2010, replacing the 1965 Afghanistan Transit Trade Agreement (ATTA).¹ APTTA was intended to provide Afghanistan with access to sea routes through Pakistani ports.² Additionally, both countries are members of the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), which came into force in 2006. However, SAFTA has limited influence due to Afghanistan's late accession in 2011 and the broader geopolitical tensions in South Asia.

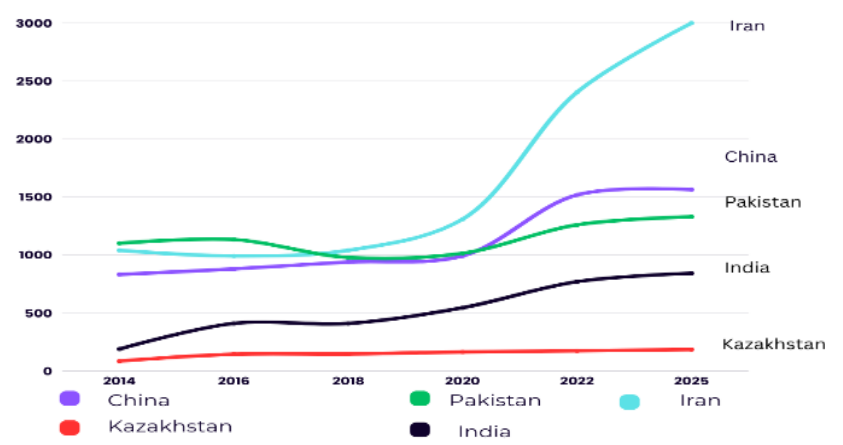
Pakistan and Afghanistan's lack of a formal FTA has constrained their bilateral trade to \$1.7 billion despite the potential for more than \$5 billion annually.

While APTTA theoretically promotes transit cooperation, in practice, its implementation has faced severe challenges. Pakistan has expressed concerns over smuggling and misuse of transit goods while Afghanistan accuses Pakistan of creating unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles.³ The frequent closure of key crossings like Torkham and Chaman has further disrupted supply chains and exacerbated political tensions.⁴

The bilateral trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan has demonstrated both resilience and volatility, with Pakistan's exports to Afghanistan reaching \$1.24 billion in 2024.⁵ It shows a 7.55% annual growth over five years.⁶ Despite this growth, the relationship faces structural challenges, including security concerns, infrastructure deficits, and the absence of a comprehensive trade framework that could unlock the full economic potential between these neighboring states.

Afghanistan's trade relations have witnessed a structural shift over the last decade. Iran has surged ahead as the leading partner, while China has also expanded its footprint significantly as shown in figure 1. Both countries now outpace Pakistan, which, despite geographic advantages, shows only moderate growth and declining relative share.

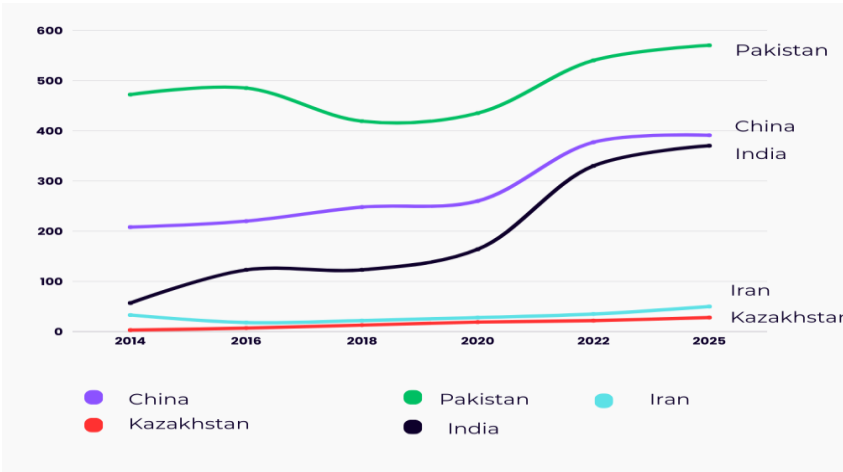
Figure 1: Afghanistan’s Imports with Leading Trade Partners (2014–2024) in Million Dollars



Source: Self Extracted

India has gradually increased its role, though it remains behind the top three partners. Kazakhstan’s share has stayed small but steady. Overall, the trajectory signals a reorientation of Afghan trade toward Iran and China, with Pakistan facing growing competition.

Figure 2: Afghanistan’s Exports with Leading Trade Partners (2014–2024) in Million Dollars



Source: Self Extracted

The trends in figure 2 show that Afghan exports remain heavily oriented toward Pakistan, which continues to dominate as the primary destination. China and India have emerged as growing markets, with sharp increases after 2020, reflecting diversification in Afghanistan’s export base. By contrast, Iran and Kazakhstan account for only marginal shares in exports. Overall, though Pakistan is the biggest importer of Afghan products but recorded \$900 million trade surplus with Afghanistan in 2024.

Pakistan already dominates several essential export categories, including food items, vegetables, cement, and household articles as given below in table 1. This dependency underscores Pakistan’s leverage in trade negotiations.⁷ Out of \$8.5 billion, the below given table covers \$6.3 billion of Afghan imports. Pakistan only makes \$903 million in these categories despite domination in several areas.

Table 1: Afghan Imports from Pakistan and Their Share in Total Percentage in Imports in 2024

Ser	Commodity	Afghan's Imports (Million USD)	Pakistan's Share (Million USD)	Pakistan's Share in Import (%)	Other Major Contributor
1.	Minerals, Fuels and Oils	\$2410	\$89	3.7%	Iran (45%, Uzbekistan (25%) and Kazakhstan (10%)
2.	Milling Products & Cereals	\$566	\$401	71%	N/A
3.	Machinery & Appliances	\$1040	\$27	2.6%	China (50%), Japan (20%), Germany (10%)
4.	Iron and Steel	\$266	\$6.2	2.3%	China (35%), Iran (25%) and Türkiye (10%)
5.	Cement	\$163.66	\$70.92	43.3%	N/A
6.	Pharmaceuticals	\$380.12	\$103	27.1%	N/A
7.	Plastics and Articles	\$126	\$36	28.6%	N/A
8.	Textiles and Apparel	\$640	\$96	16%	Bangladesh (55%) and China (20%)
9.	Transport (Vehicles)	\$400	\$45.3	11.3%	Japan (40%) and Germany (30%)
10.	Edible Fats and Oils	\$384	\$29	7.6%	Malaysia (35%) and Indonesia (30%)

Source: Self Extracted

Current bilateral trade stands at \$1.7 billion.⁸ Pakistan already supplies key Afghan imports, including cereals (71%), cement (43.3%), and pharmaceuticals (27.1%), yet captures only \$903 million of \$6.3 billion in major sectors, highlighting vast untapped potentials.

This gap between Pakistan's current export share and Afghanistan's overall import demand needs a comprehensive FTA to unlock the full trade potential, as Pakistan has surplus in milling products, cement, and textiles. It can also expand several industrial areas. The economic rationale for a Pakistan-Afghanistan FTA is strengthened by Afghanistan's landlocked geography. This creates natural economic interdependence and gives Pakistani exporters a substantial advantage through lower transportation costs. Beyond staples, Pakistan has ample room to grow in higher-value sectors. An FTA could further enhance exports in transport, electronics, IT and professional services.

It will also help curb smuggling and bring the informal economy into the formal sector. As a result, the current bilateral trade can be expanded to an estimated \$5 billion.⁹

Although Afghanistan has not yet signed FTA with any other country, it has PTA with Iran and Uzbekistan. Afghan-Iran agreement focuses on technical services, pharmaceuticals, food products, and petrochemicals.¹⁰ Similarly, an initial phase of PTA was signed with Uzbekistan also.

In July, 2025, Pakistan signed Early Harvest Programme (EHP) or PTA to reduce tariffs on eight products, which each country was producing in surplus.¹¹ Afghanistan will export grapes, pomegranates, apples and tomatoes, and Pakistan will export mangoes, orange, bananas and potatoes on a preferential basis under the framework of this agreement. These products have limited economic value as they represent only 10% of the total bilateral trade. But the potential lies in medicine, cement, cosmetics, and other industrial sector.

In conclusion, a Pak-Afghan FTA would strongly favor Pakistan which can expand existing trade surplus. Since Afghanistan has no FTA with any country, Pakistan can be the first to secure preferential access.

Previously, Pak-Afghan trade talks failed in 2015, over Kabul's demand for access to India, but there has been no such demand at the signing of recent PTA.¹² Pakistan can leverage its existing PTA to pursue a comprehensive FTA by either gradually expanding the list of goods already covered or by moving directly to a full-scale FTA.

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Islamophobia: A Western Problem Demanding a Western Solution

Sonia Bashir

Abstract

This INSIGHT examines Islamophobia as an entrenched Western phenomenon rooted in colonial legacies, post-9/11 security discourses, and media-driven fear politics. It argues that Western institutions have perpetuated structural discrimination through surveillance, exclusionary laws, and biased narratives framing Islam as incompatible with liberal democracy. Despite incremental reforms, responses remain weaker than those addressing antisemitism. The paper concludes that Islamophobia demands accountability within Western political, legal, and cultural systems—only through self-reform can the West uphold its democratic ideals and restore global trust.

Keywords: Islamophobia, Anti-Muslim Discrimination, Western Politics, Media Bias, Counterterrorism Policies, Human Rights.

This Insight explores the contemporary dynamics of Islamophobia while examining the role of socio-political and institutional policies in the West that facilitate the spread of this phenomenon.

The term 'Islamophobia' is defined as the fear and hostility toward Muslims or Islam, comprising the discriminatory, exclusionary, and violent practices arising from these attitudes.¹ The notion of Islamophobia became mainstream in global discourse and was employed in academic, legal, and political spheres after the Runnymede Trust report of 1997(UK) 'Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All' marked the first comprehensive study of this issue.² It described Islamophobia as an unreasonable aversion to Islam, emphasising its structural and ideological aspects, which undermine freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life.³

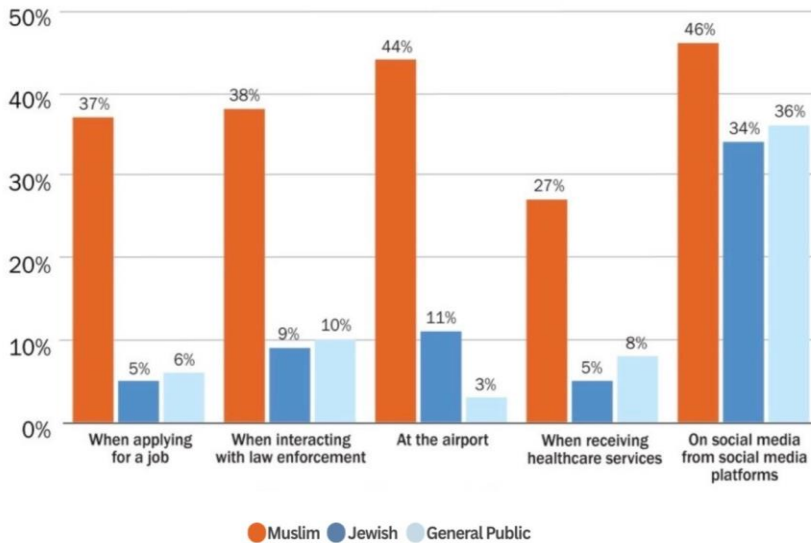
Western societies especially in North America and Europe have experienced rising Islamophobia over the last few decades. The phenomenon is underlined by perspectives rooted in historic colonial encounters,⁴ and reinforced by the 'Clash of Civilisations' theory, which advanced the characterisation of Islam as a cultural and ideological opponent.⁵ The geopolitical conflicts, such as the Iranian Revolution (1979), Gulf Wars, and post-9/11 security discourses, also framed Muslim identities through the lens of terrorism. These perceptions portray Islamic ideology as inherently incompatible with Western liberal values.⁶

Islamophobia is a distinctly Western problem, requiring the West to take primary responsibility for dismantling its roots and leading meaningful reforms.

The 'War on Terror' marked a threshold in positioning of Islam as a global threat.⁷ In the aftermath of multiple US/West-driven post 9/11 wars in the Muslim world; refugee inflows from conflict-affected regions deepened fears of cultural displacement. The pronounced discourse on secular-religious tensions aggravated these apprehensions as a result of the influx of Muslim migrants. These fears are also strengthened by conspiracy theory i.e. 'Great Replacement', which projects the idea that Muslim migrants are displacing European populations.⁸ Moreover, the right-wing populist leaders use these narratives to gain political support in Western societies.

The counterterrorism narratives, largely constructed by the U.S., indirectly institutionalised Islamophobia.⁹ These state-driven apprehensions resulted in the national security measures, including mass surveillance, drone attacks, indefinite detention, e.g., Guantanamo Bay, and racial profiling, such as Patriot Act¹⁰ and immigration policies. Consequently, Muslims experience incidents of violence, workplace discrimination, and biased media coverage. Islamophobia continues to be prevalent in the form of the Muslim travel ban and anti-Sharia propaganda, particularly during the Trump administration.¹¹

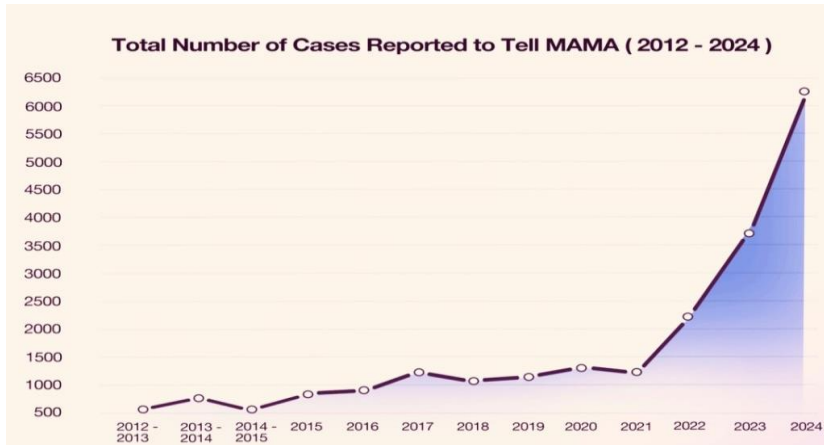
In 2024, the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) recorded up to 8,658 anti-Muslim and anti-Arab complaints in the U.S., which is a 7.4% increase, marking highest level since tracking began in 1996.¹²

Figure-1: Muslims in America Facing Religious Discrimination**Muslims in the U.S. More Likely than Other groups to Experience Religious Discrimination in Personal Interactions**

Source: ISPU Islamophobia Index-2022¹³

Europe also witnessed a pronounced rise of Islamophobia in the post 9/11 era. Muslim communities have experienced intolerance and socioeconomic marginalisation, leading to psychological trauma and identity crisis.¹⁴ The anti-Islamic incidents are predominantly related to immigration, secularism, and national identity issues.¹⁵ There have been 6,313 anti-Muslim incidents since 2012 in the UK, including a 73% surge in physical assaults in 2024, as Tell MAMA (UK-based Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks) recorded. This trend became noticeable in post-Brexit and the Prevent program (UK) aimed to fight radicalisation and terrorism.¹⁶

Figure-2: Number of online and street cases in 2024 Compared to Any Year since Founded in 2011.¹⁷



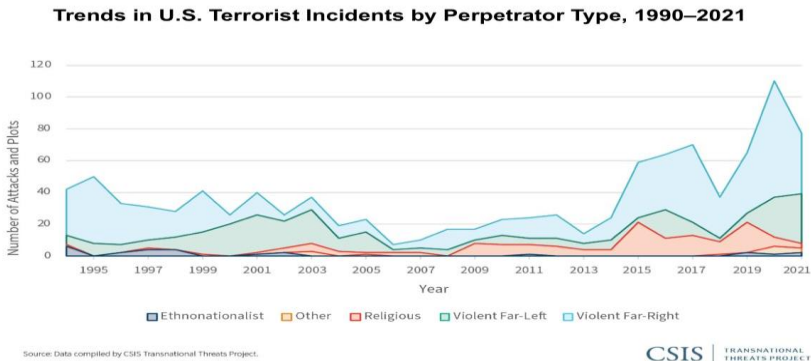
Similarly, Germany and Scandinavia have seen increased level of far-right movements such as Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the West (PEGIDA)¹⁸ and the Alternative for Germany (AfD),¹⁹ characterising Muslim identity as clashing with that of Europeans. Likewise, France has demonstrated aggressive secularism (laïcité), such as France's National Rally,²⁰ outlawing headscarves and veils in the name of liberating women. Denmark's ghetto laws²¹ also disproportionately feature Muslim-majority immigrant areas, requiring involuntary residential displacement.

Figure-3: Islamophobic biases embedded in Western legal and policy frameworks



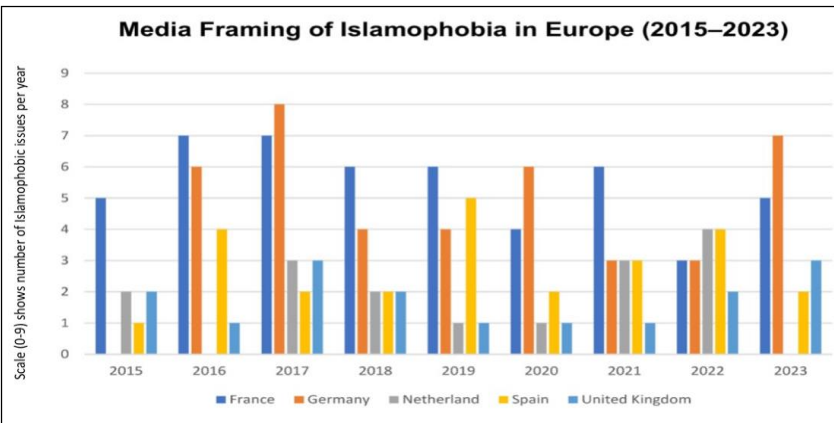
The Western-driven media and information ecosystems promote these socio-cultural insecurities and Xenophobic tendencies. Over 80% of negative media coverage includes explicit or implicit links to Islam,²² where almost 89% of anti-Muslim hate content reported on social media remained online without surveillance.²³ This political framing collectively blames Muslims, while attacks against them are downplayed as isolated and victim-blaming, obscuring structural Western violence as shown in the graphs below.

Figure-4: Domestic terrorist attacks by perpetrator type in Media coverage (2021)



Source: Self-complied

Figure-5: The graph shows media outlets across European states frame Islamophobia²⁴



Western governments acknowledge Islamophobia challenges and have adopted several institutionalised measures. For example, the U.S. Special Envoy and Department of Justice (DOJ) have made efforts to track hate crimes and expanded its Community Relations Service (CRS) to strengthen engagement with Muslim communities.²⁵ The EU and the Council of Europe have also implemented policy tools and monitoring systems to combat anti-Muslim hatred.

The EU Anti-Racism Action Plan 2020-25,²⁶ mandated the systematic data collection on hate crimes, establishing over 100 reporting centres for Islamophobic incidents. France also criminalised online hate speech under Avia Law (2020). The media literacy programmes, civil society organisations (CSOs), groups (CAIR) and the Islamophobia Response Unit (IRU), have offered legal and psychosocial support to victims. These responses indicate policy-driven community initiatives to curb discriminatory actions.

Nonetheless, Western reactions to Islamophobia are less effective compared with those addressing antisemitism. For instance, the U.S. has no federal law to address Islamophobia equivalent to Global Antisemitism Review Act (2004).²⁷ Likewise, 25 EU Member States have endorsed the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) antisemitism working definition as key reference for national and EU-level counter measures through education, awareness, and law enforcement.²⁸ Therefore, there is a need for equal legal recognition of Islamophobia and sustained Western efforts to ensure consistent protection and accountability.

It is imperative to comprehend that Islamophobia patterns rely on institutional practices embedded in law, media, and political discourses. The West is trapped in a vicious cycle of fear, surveillance, leading to excessive policymaking. It can be argued that the U.S.-driven framing of 'Islamic extremism' has shaped and amplified anti-Muslim sentiments particularly across Europe, which is portrayed as Islamophobia's epicentre. In reality, Islamophobia is a manufactured construct of the Western political order, normalised and projected globally through interconnected policy and cultural narratives.²⁹

In essence, a thorough analysis of the phenomenon suggested that Islamophobia is not the product of instinctive actions or beliefs of Muslims; rather, it is strategically oriented as evident in Western politics distorting security discourses. Responsibility for resolving this problem lies primarily within Western institutions; otherwise, unaddressed Islamophobia would sabotage democratic values and provoke the destabilisation of multicultural societies. Western governments should enforce strong anti-hate laws, monitor media biases, and ensure fair representation to protect Muslim rights of dignity, freedom, and security to strengthen democratic stability.

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About Insight and Author

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The Endless Wait: Crisis of Backlog in Pakistan's District Judiciary

Ms Noor ul Ain Tahir

Abstract

This INSIGHT examines the district judiciary in Pakistan faces a significant backlog, with nearly 1.86 million pending cases as of 2025, primarily due to judicial vacancies, frequent transfers, poor infrastructure, and corruption. Despite various reforms like the National Judicial Policy (NJP) and the introduction of model courts, progress has been limited, and the backlog persists. This crisis of delayed justice exacerbates social issues, including rising crime, as citizens resort to self-help. To address these systemic challenges, reforms must focus on filling vacancies, stabilizing judicial appointments, improving infrastructure, and fully implementing legislative recommendations.

Keywords: Judicial Backlog, District Judiciary, Access to Justice, Judicial Reform, Alternative Dispute Resolution, Court Digitization.

Justice delayed is justice denied. This saying embodies the core issue of Pakistan's judicial system, where the backlog of cases increases daily with no immediate solution. Pakistan has a multi-tiered court structure, with the Supreme Court at the top, followed by High Courts, the Federal Shariah Court, and Lower Courts.¹ The lower judiciary, comprising District and Session Courts, deals with civil and criminal cases, respectively. These courts bear the heaviest burden,² with 1.86 million pending cases compared to 0.39 million at the higher levels in 2025.³ Civil cases in the district judiciary make up 64% of this backlog. Therefore, this insight focuses on district courts, examining the causes of backlog, past reforms, and why a solution remains elusive.

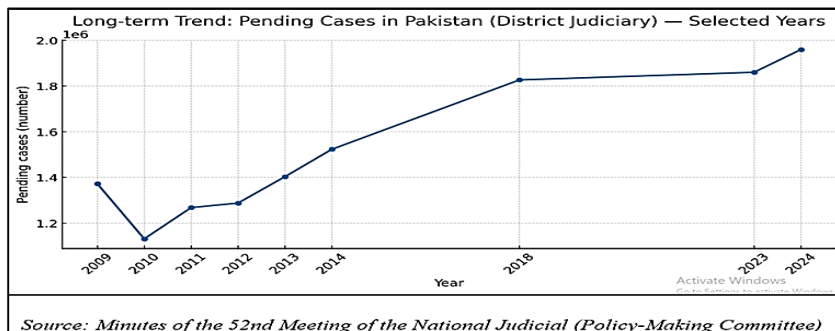
A ‘backlog’ is: “number of pending cases not resolved within an established timeframe.” Although no time limit is specified in the law, the National Judicial Policy-Making Committee (NJPMC) has given deadlines for case disposal. For instance, 12 months to close civil court decrees.⁴

Pakistan’s district judiciary has faced a backlog of over a decade due to vacancies, disruptive transfers, and poor infrastructure.

When these timelines are not met, the resulting accumulation of unresolved cases constitutes a backlog.

Emerging studies suggest that the backlog of civil cases may be contributing to rising crime rates as delayed justice pushes people to take matters into their own hands.⁵

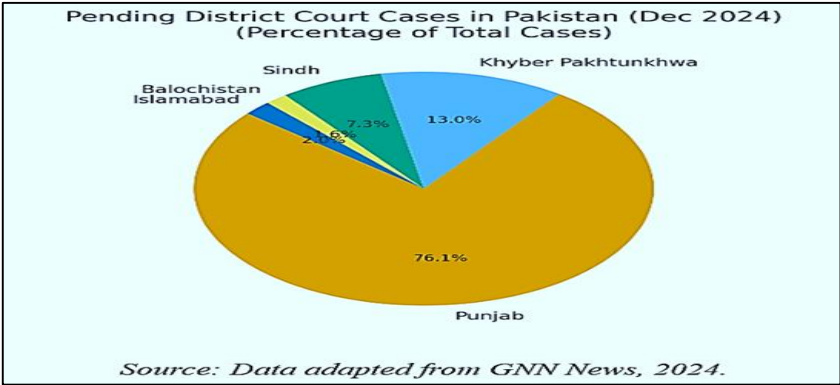
In Pakistan, the issue of backlog is concerning.⁶ The following graph illustrates the trend of backlog in the district judiciary over the past 15 years:



The National Judicial Policy (NJP) was introduced in 2009 under the leadership of the then Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry.⁷ It was a judicial reform plan developed by NJPMC.⁸ The policy established timelines for case disposal and mandated that all cases filed before December 31, 2008, must be resolved within one year.⁹

This initiative achieved moderate success in 2009, resulting in a 13.7% reduction in backlog.¹⁰ However, once the extraordinary push eased and leadership changed, the underlying problems reasserted themselves, and pendency rose again.¹¹

This pattern is most visible at the provincial level. The following chart presents a province-wise breakdown of pending cases in district courts.¹² However, very little to no data is available regarding Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) and Azad Jammu & Kashmir (AJ&K).



After conducting research, it appears that vacant judicial posts, frequent transfers, infrastructure deficiencies, and corruption are the primary factors contributing to the backlog.

One of the primary obstacles driving the backlog is the shortage of judges. This stems from slow, politicised appointments, delays in filling vacancies, and budgetary limits on recruitment, all of which reduce judicial productivity.¹³ The following table presents judicial vacancy statistics in Pakistan's district judiciary for 2024.¹⁴

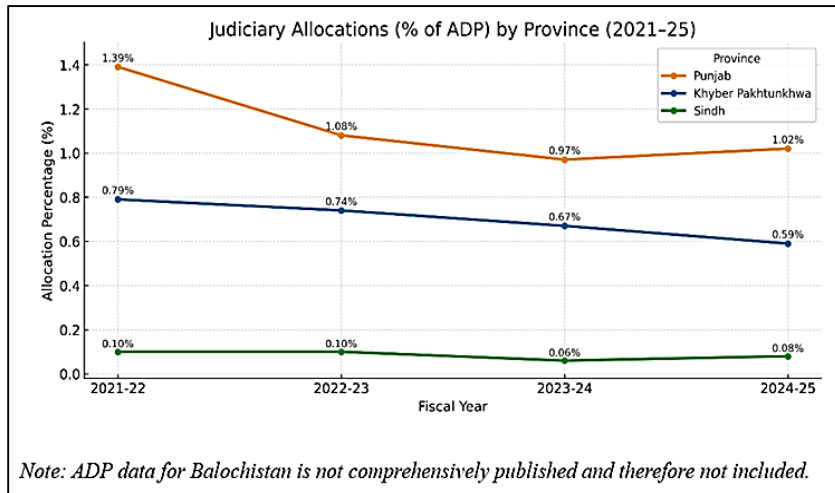
Province	Sanctioned Positions	Working Infield	Vacant Positions	Shortfall %
Punjab	2364	1565	799	33.8
Sindh	661	591	70	10.6
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	708	550	158	22.3
Balochistan	321	251	70	21.8
Islamabad	107	87	20	18.7
Total	4161	3044	1117	26.8

Source: Law & Justice Commission of Pakistan, Judicial Statistics 2024, Islamabad, 2024.

Frequent transfers of judges also hinder the administration of justice. When judges who have heard evidence are transferred, the newly appointed judges must restart the proceedings, which delays disposal.¹⁵ For instance, in 2019, the Peshawar High Court reshuffled 129 judicial officers.¹⁶ Later, in 2024, the Sindh High Court transferred 64 civil judges.¹⁷ Most recently, in 2025, the Lahore High Court transferred 53 additional district and sessions judges.¹⁸ These transfers are carried out by the Chief Justice of the respective High Court. Although there is no statutory minimum stationing period, NJP recommends that judicial officers should not be transferred before a three-year tenure at a station.¹⁹ Corruption also fuels delay,²⁰ with litigants facing demands for informal payments to expedite or stall cases. The National Corruption Perception Survey (NCPS) ranks the judiciary as the third most corrupt sector, after police and tendering/contracting.²¹ According to NCPS, citizens in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were reported to pay the highest average bribe to access the judiciary, approximately Rs. 0.16 million per case in 2023.²²

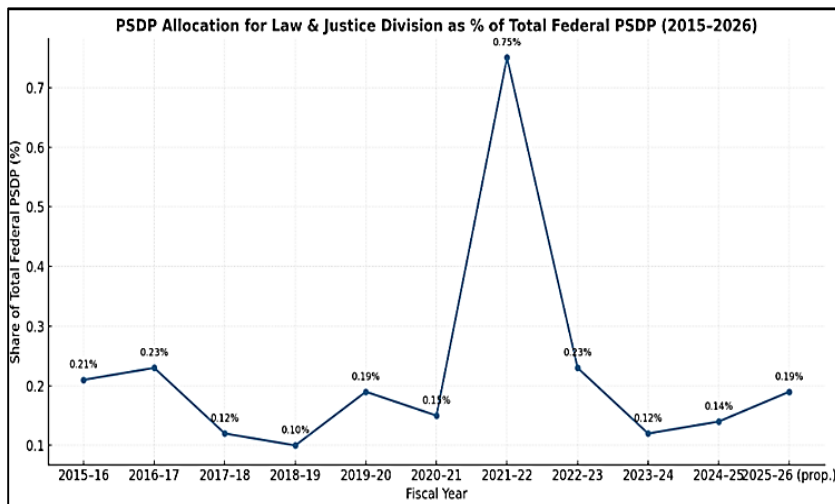
Infrastructure deficiency is also an issue: over 200 subordinate courts in Karachi's judicial complex are housed in an overcrowded, ageing structure lacking basic amenities, which degrades service.²³ Case records remain largely paper-based; for instance, in Lahore in 2011, over 5,000 files were discovered in staffers' homes because storage was inadequate.²⁴ Although Sindh²⁵ and Islamabad²⁶ have introduced online portals and virtual courts, most districts lack comprehensive digital systems.

Over the years, the federal government has attempted to strengthen judicial capacity through the Public Sector Development Programme (PSDP), while provincial projects are financed through Annual Development Programmes (ADPs). The following graph shows ADP allocations for Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Sindh and Balochistan.



Despite these fluctuations, judicial infrastructure has not expanded: district courts in Punjab²⁷ and Sindh²⁸ still function in overcrowded and rented buildings.

The following graph illustrates PSDP allocations over the past decade, highlighting a sharp spike in 2021-22 when funding surged for 17 projects, including judicial complexes and automation schemes and Islamabad High Court facilities.²⁹

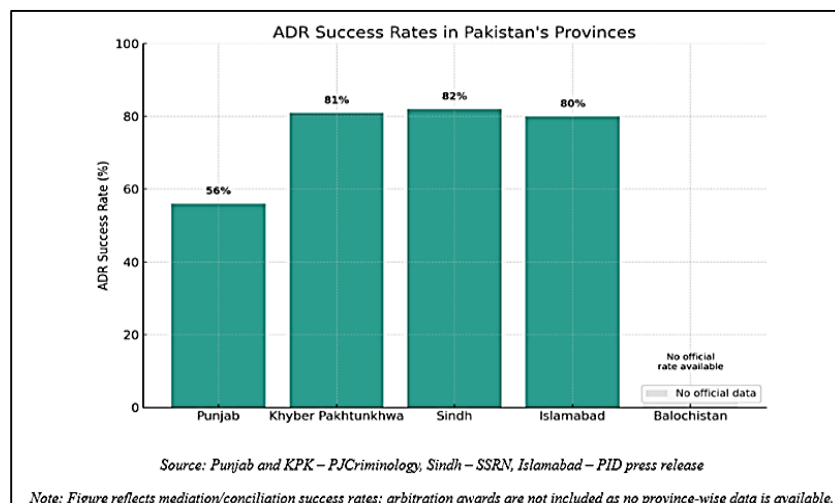


To tackle the backlog issue, the Law and Justice Commission of Pakistan (LJCP), a permanent statutory body established in 1979, was tasked with proposing improvements to ensure swift justice.³⁰ Since its inception, it has regularly issued Annual Reports summarising recommendations on judicial reform and law revision. However, its reports are advisory only; they require adoption by the executive, legislature or judiciary to have effect. As a result, implementation has been weak: in 2017, it was reported that at least 74 out of 138 recommendations were still unimplemented.³¹ The News International in 2025 noted that no comprehensive audit of its reports exists, leaving many suggestions unenforced.³²

In 2019, to expedite cases pending for more than five years, model courts were launched,³³ and within their first year, they disposed of 50,743 cases nationwide.³⁴ But they faced strong resistance (lawyer strikes, procedural/legal objections)³⁵ and were scaled back rather than permanently adopted.

Given these shortcomings, policymakers have increasingly turned to Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) as a tool to ease pressure on the courts. ADR has long existed in Pakistan's legal system, beginning with the Arbitration Act of 1940, followed by Section 89-A of the Code of Civil Procedure (CPC), empowering civil courts to refer matters to mediation or conciliation,³⁶ and later the ADR Act 2017, which sought to institutionalise court-annexed ADR.

Yet, despite a strong legislative framework, ADR and mediation centres in Pakistan have not reached their full potential. When implemented effectively, they show high settlement rates, for example, in Islamabad, about 80% of cases sent to mediation were resolved without returning to court.³⁷ Resolution is also faster, Punjab's ADR centres report most cases concluding within 30–60 days, compared to years in traditional courts. The graph presents provincial ADR performance...



Still, overall utilisation has remained limited due to the absence of clear referral procedures, inconsistent accreditation and payment systems for mediators and hesitation among litigants to adopt non-traditional processes.³⁸ But, with stronger institutional support and better implementation, ADR mechanisms can deliver more effective results.

The way forward lies in filling posts promptly, ensuring stable judicial tenures, investing in modern court infrastructure and digitisation, and implementing the Law and Justice Commission's annual recommendations in full. Only sustained political and judicial commitment can secure timely justice.

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