



The Influence of Domestic Political Dynamics on Pakistan's Africa Policy and Bilateral Relations

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Abstract

This research paper examines the influence of domestic political dynamics on Pakistan's Africa policy and bilateral relations with African nations, analysing how internal political factors shape Pakistan's external engagement with Africa. Using a combination of primary and secondary data, the study employs qualitative methods, including interviews with policymakers, diplomatic staff, and experts in international relations, complemented by a review of relevant government reports, policy documents, and scholarly articles. The research is framed through the lens of neoclassical realism, which integrates domestic political considerations with traditional realist concerns of national security and power. Findings suggest that Pakistan's foreign policy toward Africa is heavily influenced by the military establishment, political transitions, and ideological considerations, leading to an inconsistent and fragmented approach to bilateral relations. While economic and defense cooperation has grown, domestic political instability and a lack of strategic focus hinder the full potential of these ties. Policy recommendations focus on enhancing institutional coherence and sustained engagement with Africa.

Keywords: Pakistan-Africa Relations, Foreign Policy, Political Dynamics, Military Diplomacy, Economic Cooperation

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Introduction

Pakistan's foreign policy has long been shaped by both its internal political dynamics and its broader international goals. While the country has been historically focused on its relations with neighbouring states and other global powers, its engagement with African nations has gained increasing importance in recent years. However, the relationship between Pakistan and Africa remains underexplored in the academic literature. This paper investigates the influence of domestic political dynamics on Pakistan's Africa policy and bilateral relations with top African states. The main objective is to analyse how domestic actors, including the government, military, and public opinion, shape the country's foreign relations with Africa, as well as the opportunities and challenges in strengthening these ties. This study will examine the role of key political institutions, the military's influence on policy, the impact of domestic political transitions, and the strategic benefits of engaging with Africa. Through this analytical framework, this paper explores the complexities of Pakistan's relations with African nations and their significance for Pakistan's broader foreign policy goals.

Theoretical Framework

Neoclassical Realism, Domestic Actors on Foreign Policy and Political Economy Approaches to Diplomacy

This study adopts a multi-theoretical approach to look at Pakistan's Africa policy, principally grounded in neoclassical realism. Neoclassical realism integrates traditional realist concepts such as national interest and power with internal factors like political leadership, institutional capacity, and public opinion. It is particularly useful in understanding how Pakistan's foreign policy toward Africa is not only shaped by international system pressures but also by domestic political conditions. For instance, while the global system may not prioritise Africa in Pakistan's strategic calculus due to its regional preoccupations with India and China, domestic factors such as the military, political elites, and bureaucratic institutions significantly shape its engagement with African nations. (Kozub-Karkut, 2019; Hassan, 2019)

In addition, political economy approaches to diplomacy shed light on the influence of domestic economic interests and resource allocation in shaping foreign policy. These perspectives help explain how Pakistan's pursuit of trade, defence cooperation, and development aid in Africa is driven not only by strategic interests but also by economic imperatives and institutional

constraints. Pakistan's budgetary priorities, trade deficits, and dependency on aid play crucial roles in defining the scope and sustainability of its Africa outreach.

Moreover, constructivist theories contribute by highlighting the importance of ideational factors such as Islamic solidarity, post-colonial identities, and historical affiliations. These symbolic and ideological dimensions inform Pakistan's rhetorical alignment with African countries, particularly in multilateral forums. Finally, liberal institutionalism offers insight into the potential of strengthening Pakistan-Africa ties through multilateral cooperation and trade frameworks. However, Pakistan's weak institutional mechanisms and inconsistent foreign policymaking often undermine long-term strategic engagement. (Chandio, 2023)

Historical Context of Pakistan's Africa Policy

Early Diplomatic Engagement with Africa

Pakistan's engagement with Africa has historically been limited, with its initial interactions tracing back to the 1960s. During this period, Pakistan primarily extended diplomatic and material support to African independence movements, particularly in Southern Africa, while also playing an active role in United Nations peacekeeping missions across the continent. (Awan, F. A., & Pervez, M. S, 2024) Over time, Pakistan's approach to Africa has undergone a gradual transformation, shaped by shifting global dynamics and domestic political considerations. However, its engagement has remained constrained, largely due to a strategic focus on South Asia and the Middle East. Interviews with experts reveal that Pakistan's historical interactions with Africa have been largely symbolic, lacking a coherent long-term strategy, and that sustained diplomatic and economic initiatives are necessary to enhance its influence in the region.

Key Milestones in Pakistan-Africa Relations

The 1990s represented a pivotal shift in Pakistan's approach to Africa, as the country pursued a more diversified foreign policy and sought to strengthen its diplomatic presence on the continent. A key feature of this period was Pakistan's increasing participation in United Nations peacekeeping missions across various African states, reinforcing its commitment to regional stability. The 1994 diplomatic breakthrough with South Africa marked a significant milestone, facilitating deeper bilateral ties and broader economic cooperation. (Zaidi, S. M. S., & Nirmal, 2022) Additionally, the establishment of multiple diplomatic missions and Pakistan's active engagement in multilateral platforms,

including the African Union (AU), underscored its evolving strategic priorities in the region. Interviews with experts indicate that while these efforts reflected a growing recognition of Africa's geopolitical significance, they often lacked a sustained, structured policy framework to maximise long-term benefits. (Raza, M. A., & Khan, A. B, 2024)

Pakistan's 'Look Africa' Initiative

Pakistan's historical engagement with Africa can be traced back to the era of anti-colonial struggles, during which it extended substantial moral and diplomatic support to African nations. Despite this enduring connection and its active role in promoting regional stability through United Nations peacekeeping missions, Pakistan's foreign policy toward Africa remained largely undefined and lacked a strategic long-term vision. (Zaidi, 2022) The absence of a coherent economic cooperation framework persisted until the launch of the Look Africa Policy Initiative in 2019, which marked a formal shift toward strengthening trade and investment ties with the continent. Interviews with experts suggest that while this initiative represents a crucial step toward deeper engagement, its effectiveness depends on sustained implementation and institutional support.

Research also reveals that the foundation for this initiative was established during the tenure of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) government in November 2017. Developed with strategic input from the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI), a government-affiliated think tank closely associated with Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the initiative signified a notable shift in the country's foreign policy approach. This period marked a transition toward diversifying Pakistan's trade relations and diplomatic engagements beyond its traditional partners, reflecting a broader recognition of Africa's economic and geopolitical significance. Interviews with experts reveal that while the initiative represented a crucial policy development, its success has been contingent upon effective implementation, institutional coordination, and sustained political commitment.

Upon assuming office in 2018, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)-led government continued the implementation of the Look Africa Policy, introducing refinements aimed at enhancing its effectiveness. The administration intensified diplomatic and economic negotiations with African states, demonstrating a commitment to expanding Pakistan's engagement with the continent. (Aslam, M., Hussain, Z., & Mujahid, F, 2022) Nevertheless, despite these advancements, the PTI government faced criticism, particularly

concerning the perceived slow progress of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects. Opposition parties accused the government of mismanagement, exacerbating concerns regarding project implementation. In response, the Chinese consulate in Pakistan asserted that no significant delays had occurred, emphasising the need for transparency in evaluating policy outcomes. Interviews with experts reveal that while the PTI government's efforts contributed to a renewed focus on Africa, the effectiveness of its policies was often hindered by broader governance challenges and competing domestic priorities.

Under the following Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) government, led by the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), there was a noticeable shift in policy priorities, with reduced emphasis on advancing the Look Africa Policy initiative. This shift underscores the varying strategic orientations of different political administrations, which are often shaped by their ideological leanings and the broader political landscape. Interviews with experts reveal that such fluctuations in foreign policy priorities have contributed to inconsistencies in Pakistan's engagement with Africa, highlighting the need for a more institutionalised and sustained approach to diplomatic and economic relations with the continent. (Mumtaz, S., Zahoor, M. A., & Yasin, G, 2024)

The "Look Africa" initiative itself sought to expand Pakistan's diplomatic, economic, and defence ties with African states. While this effort was ambitious, the policy faced multiple challenges, such as limited resources, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and fluctuating political will, leading to inconsistent engagement with the continent. (Zafar, R., Rahman, F., & Rahman, R, 2025)

Political leadership has played a pivotal role in shaping Pakistan's engagement with Africa, with varying emphases across different administrations. During Prime Minister Imran Khan's tenure, the government's approach prioritised economic diplomacy and regional connectivity, reflecting a broader strategic shift toward strengthening ties with African nations. His administration intensified diplomatic and economic outreach, particularly in key sectors such as trade and security, recognising Africa's growing economic significance. (Jaffery, S. A. Z, 2022)

A notable moment in this engagement was President Arif Alvi's address at the 2019 Engage Africa conference, where he underscored Pakistan's historical support for African nations and highlighted the continent's untapped economic potential. He

commended the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) as a transformative development for intra-African trade and positioned Pakistan as a potential partner in fostering deeper economic cooperation. Moreover, his emphasis on enhanced political engagement, economic collaboration, and security partnerships reflected an effort to align Pakistan's Africa policy with emerging global economic trends. Pakistan has also organised trade conferences and expos in Nigeria, South Africa and Kenya to engage business and explore opportunities. (Khan, 2023)

Interviews with experts suggest that while these high-level engagements signalled a renewed commitment to Africa, their long-term impact was contingent on sustained policy implementation and institutional follow-through. The fluctuating emphasis on Africa across different political administrations has contributed to inconsistencies in Pakistan's engagement, underscoring the need for a more structured and institutionalised approach to foreign policy in the region.

Media reports analysis says that in 2020, Prime Minister Khan met with a delegation led by President Mohamed Ali Houmed of Djibouti, underscoring the importance of Pakistan's Africa policy. The meeting reinforced Pakistan's commitment to expanding diplomatic and economic ties with African countries, exemplified by the decision to establish a resident diplomatic mission in Djibouti. This initiative not only demonstrates Pakistan's willingness to allocate resources but also its strategic approach to deepening relationships with African nations.

Currently, under the leadership of the new government, there are emerging challenges in fully implementing the "Look Africa" initiative. While the policy remains a part of Pakistan's broader foreign policy framework, the current administration has shown less commitment to prioritising Africa compared to previous governments. Political instability, shifting domestic priorities, and the ongoing economic challenges have resulted in a reduced focus on deepening ties with African nations. The new government's attention has been diverted to other pressing issues, such as domestic economic concerns and regional security dynamics, leading to a slowdown in diplomatic and economic engagements with Africa. As a result, the momentum built by earlier administrations has been hindered, and the potential of the "Look Africa" initiative has yet to be fully realised under the present leadership. This shift reflects the broader trend of fluctuating political will and the complex challenges of maintaining a consistent foreign policy agenda.

Domestic Political Dynamics in Pakistan

Pakistan's foreign policy, including its engagement with Africa, is deeply influenced by its domestic political landscape, characterised by shifting power dynamics, institutional constraints, and the interplay between civilian and military leadership. Unlike states with well-established foreign policy institutions that follow long-term strategic roadmaps, Pakistan's foreign policy has historically been reactive, shaped by internal political volatility and the pursuit of short-term gains. This lack of continuity has resulted in inconsistent diplomatic engagement with Africa, where policies initiated by less than one administration are often reprioritised or reconfigured under subsequent governments.

A key factor contributing to this inconsistency is the fragmentation of Pakistan's foreign policymaking apparatus. The absence of a centralised and autonomous foreign policy institution leads to policy shifts driven by immediate political considerations rather than a coherent long-term strategy. For instance, while the Look Africa Policy Initiative sought to deepen economic and diplomatic ties with African nations, its effectiveness was undermined by changing governmental priorities and the absence of sustained institutional commitment.

Moreover, Pakistan's foreign policy is often shaped by its security-centric approach, where relations with major global and regional powers, such as China, the United States, and the Gulf states, take precedence over diversified diplomatic outreach. This strategic orientation has historically limited Pakistan's engagement with Africa, as successive governments have focused more on alliances that serve immediate security and economic interests rather than developing long-term partnerships with emerging markets like Africa. (Sattar, 2023)

Research also reveals that without a stable and institutionalised framework, Pakistan's Africa policy risks remaining fragmented and episodic, rather than forming a consistent pillar of its foreign policy. Addressing this challenge requires a shift from reactive diplomacy toward a structured, institutionalised approach that prioritises economic, political, and security engagements with Africa as part of a broader strategic vision rather than as a peripheral foreign policy concern. (Khaver, A. A., Umar, M. A., & Ahmad, S. M, 2022)

Key Political Actors and Institutions

Foreign policy in Pakistan is shaped by a complex triangular power structure that intertwines the roles of

the civilian government, the military establishment, and key bureaucratic and economic institutions. The civilian government, consisting of the Prime Minister, the Foreign Ministry, and Parliament, is primarily responsible for formulating and articulating Pakistan's foreign policy. However, the military establishment has historically played a dominant role, particularly in matters of national security and foreign relations, often exerting substantial influence over decisions related to defence, strategic alliances, and regional security dynamics. Complementing these two pillars are the bureaucratic and economic institutions, such as the Ministry of Commerce and Pakistan's diplomatic corps, which work to implement and manage the economic and trade dimensions of foreign policy. Together, these three forces create a unique policy framework in which security concerns and strategic imperatives frequently take precedence, often overshadowing other aspects of foreign engagement, including economic diplomacy and multilateral cooperation. This triangular structure, while providing checks and balances, has also led to policy inconsistencies, with competing interests sometimes hindering the development of a cohesive and long-term foreign policy strategy.

The Foreign Ministry is responsible for diplomatic engagement with Africa, but in practice, decision-making is often influenced by the military and intelligence agencies due to a lack of will of political leaders, and military particularly plays an important role in defence-related agreements. Parliament plays a limited role, as foreign policy discussions rarely lead to substantive legislative action. This fragmented or mistrustful policymaking structure results in inconsistent engagement with Africa, with policy emphasis shifting based on domestic political transitions.

Pakistan's foreign policy, including its engagement with Africa, is shaped by a triangular power structure involving the civilian government, the military establishment, and bureaucratic institutions. While, in theory, the Foreign Ministry and Parliament are responsible for shaping diplomatic relations, in practice, the military establishment has historically played a decisive role, particularly in matters related to security, defence, and strategic partnerships.

The Role of the Military in Pakistan's African Relations

The Pakistani military has played a fundamental role in fostering defence cooperation and strategic engagement with African nations, positioning itself as a key factor in Pakistan's broader foreign policy toward the continent. As one of the leading troop-contributing

countries (TCCs) to United Nations peacekeeping missions, Pakistan has cultivated a reputation as a reliable security partner, reinforcing its presence in multiple conflict-affected regions across Africa. This sustained military involvement has not only enhanced Pakistan's diplomatic stature but has also served as a foundation for deeper defence collaborations with key African states. (Zafar, R., Rahman, F., & Rahman, R, 2025)

Pakistan's military engagement has been particularly pronounced in Djibouti, Kenya, South Africa, and Mozambique, where it has sought to expand bilateral defence cooperation through training programs, officer exchanges, and arms sales. These initiatives have facilitated the professional development of African military personnel while simultaneously strengthening Pakistan's defence industry and fostering strategic partnerships. Furthermore, Pakistan's naval diplomacy, particularly in Djibouti, highlights the military's role in advancing the country's maritime interests, contributing to regional security and expanding Pakistan's strategic footprint in the western Indian Ocean. (Khan, 2023)

Beyond security cooperation, the Pakistani military has also played a developmental role, particularly through its involvement in UN-led stabilisation efforts and capacity-building initiatives in post-conflict regions. The military's participation in humanitarian missions, disaster relief operations, and infrastructure development projects has further cemented its influence in Africa. However, despite these efforts, Pakistan's broader engagement with the continent remains inconsistent, largely due to political instability, shifting foreign policy priorities, and the absence of a coherent, long-term strategic framework. (Afzaal, 2020)

Research also discloses that while the military has provided a degree of continuity in Pakistan's Africa engagement, its efforts alone cannot compensate for the lack of a structured and institutionalised foreign policy. Without a synchronised approach that aligns military, economic, and diplomatic engagements, Pakistan risks maintaining only a limited and episodic presence in Africa, rather than establishing itself as a long-term strategic partner on the continent. (Shafqat, 2019) Addressing this challenge requires integrating military-led initiatives within a comprehensive foreign policy framework that prioritises sustained engagement, economic collaboration, and institutional partnerships with African nations.

Political Instability and Its Impact on Pakistan-Africa Relations

The civilian government's role in shaping Pakistan's Africa policy has been fragmented and largely reactive, shaped by shifting political leadership, weak institutional mechanisms, and broader governance challenges. The frequent turnover of governments, persistent civil-military tensions, and the absence of a coherent long-term vision have hindered Pakistan's ability to translate its historical goodwill in Africa into sustained diplomatic and economic engagement. As a result, political instability has created three major obstacles that continue to limit Pakistan's strategic outreach to the continent.

Lack of Political Will

Successive governments have failed to prioritise Africa within Pakistan's foreign policy due to internal political crises, electoral considerations, and the strategic preoccupation with regional security concerns, particularly in relation to India and Afghanistan. Unlike countries that systematically integrate Africa into their long-term diplomatic and economic strategies, Pakistan's engagement with the continent has remained peripheral. This lack of political commitment has resulted in limited high-level diplomatic exchanges, insufficient investment in trade relations, and minimal institutional efforts to cultivate deeper economic ties with African nations. Interviews with experts reveal that the absence of sustained political will has prevented Pakistan from leveraging Africa's economic rise and integrating it into its broader foreign policy calculus.

Inconsistency in Diplomatic Engagement

Pakistan's engagement with Africa has been largely ad hoc, shaped by the priorities of each political administration rather than a well-defined, long-term strategy. Unlike states that maintain continuity in their foreign policy despite changes in leadership, Pakistan's approach to Africa has fluctuated with each government, leading to an inconsistent trajectory in diplomatic outreach, trade agreements, and investment initiatives. The lack of sustained engagement has resulted in missed economic opportunities, a weak diplomatic footprint, and an inability to position Pakistan as a reliable partner in Africa's development. Experts emphasise that without a structured diplomatic strategy, Pakistan risks falling behind other emerging economies that have successfully institutionalised their Africa policies.

Weak Institutional Coordination

While Pakistan's military has actively promoted defence ties with African nations through peacekeeping missions, security collaborations, and military

exchanges, the civilian government has lacked the institutional capacity to translate these relationships into broader economic and diplomatic gains. (Khalid, F. H., & Ahmed, 2023) The absence of coordination between key governmental institutions—predominantly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce—has severely limited Pakistan's ability to formulate structured trade and investment frameworks. Unlike countries that have established dedicated Africa-focused economic and diplomatic institutions, Pakistan's fragmented institutional approach has impeded its ability to capitalise on Africa's economic potential. Experts highlight that addressing this structural weakness requires a coordinated inter-ministerial framework that aligns defence, economic, and diplomatic policies under a unified strategic vision.

The political instability remains a fundamental barrier to Pakistan's sustained engagement with Africa. The fluctuating nature of Pakistan's foreign policy, driven by short-term political considerations and weak institutional mechanisms, has prevented the country from effectively leveraging Africa's economic opportunities and geopolitical significance. Addressing these challenges requires a shift from reactive engagement to a proactive, institutionalised policy framework that prioritises long-term economic, political and security cooperation with African states. Without such a recalibration, Pakistan risks remaining a peripheral actor in Africa's rapidly evolving geopolitical and economic landscape.

Missed Opportunities and Hindrances in Exploring Africa's Potential

While Pakistan has maintained defence and peacekeeping engagements with Africa, political instability has hindered the expansion of economic and diplomatic ties. Unlike countries such as China and India, both of which have strategically increased trade, investment, and infrastructure projects in Africa, Pakistan's engagement remains limited. The absence of a stable long-term policy has resulted in:

- Underdeveloped trade relations, where Pakistan faces a trade deficit with almost all African states, with Pakistan has prioritized of Tanzania and limited exports to other African nations.
- Minimal investment in African markets, despite the continent's growing economic significance.
- Low diplomatic representation, with very few embassies and trade offices compared to other Asian countries that have expanded their influence in Africa.

Although Pakistan's military establishment has played a proactive role in fostering defence and security partnerships with African nations, the lack of political will, unstable governments, and weak institutional coordination has severely hampered broader engagement. Without a stable political environment and a structured Africa policy, Pakistan risks falling behind other global players who have successfully strengthened their African partnerships. Moving forward, greater civilian-military coordination, political stability, and long-term policy planning are crucial to unlocking Africa's full potential as a strategic partner for Pakistan.

Political Ideologies and Alliances

Pakistan's political parties and ideological factions have divergent views on foreign policy priorities. Traditionally, right-wing and conservative parties emphasise Islamic solidarity, aligning with African nations through religious diplomacy and multilateral forums. In contrast, centrist and left-leaning parties advocate for economic diplomacy and South-South cooperation, but their lack of sustained political power limits long-term policy implementation.

Furthermore, Pakistan's political instability, as marked by frequent government changes, civil-military tensions, and weak institutional continuity, has reduced its ability to maintain long-term diplomatic relationships with African states. This inconsistency weakens trust, discourages investment, and limits the effectiveness of Pakistan's Africa policy.

Ideological Foundations and Public Opinion

Pakistan's foreign policy is deeply influenced by the country's ideological foundations, particularly its Islamic identity. Public opinion and media coverage also play a role in shaping foreign policy decisions. The political dynamics within Pakistan, including public sentiment toward African countries, often create pressure for policymakers to align their policies with national ideology and popular expectations.

Impact of Political Transitions on Policy Consistency

Domestic political transitions in Pakistan have often led to shifts in foreign policy, creating inconsistencies in the country's engagement with Africa. Political instability, changes in leadership, and shifts in party priorities have made it difficult for Pakistan to maintain a consistent, long-term strategy for strengthening its relationships with African nations.

The Impact of Domestic Political Dynamics on African Policy

Case Studies of Policy Shifts: The case studies of Pakistan's engagement with top African nations like South Africa, Nigeria, and Kenya demonstrate how shifts in domestic political dynamics have shaped the nature and scope of bilateral relations. Political transitions, such as changes in leadership or shifts in government priorities, often influence the level of engagement with African countries. For instance, the government's focus on economic ties with African countries may fluctuate depending on domestic economic conditions or political pressure.

Role of Political Parties and Interest Groups:

Political parties and interest groups within Pakistan have varying levels of interest in Africa, with some advocating for increased economic cooperation while others emphasise defence and security ties. These competing interests often lead to policy fragmentation, making it difficult for Pakistan to adopt a coherent and unified approach to Africa.

Security Considerations and the Role of the Military:

The military's role in shaping foreign policy, particularly in terms of security and defence cooperation, has been a key factor in Pakistan's engagement with African nations. Pakistan's involvement in UN peacekeeping missions in Africa is one example of how the military has driven foreign policy initiatives. However, the military's influence can sometimes overshadow civilian efforts to expand economic and diplomatic relations, particularly when security concerns dominate the national discourse.

Pakistan-Africa Bilateral Relations: Achievements and Challenges

Economic Cooperation and Trade Barriers:

Bilateral trade between Pakistan and African countries has grown in recent years, with trade agreements and economic collaborations focusing on sectors such as energy, agriculture, and infrastructure. However, trade relations are often hampered by regulatory hurdles, tariffs, and non-tariff barriers. Pakistan's trade deficit with African nations, particularly South Africa, underscores the challenges of achieving balanced economic cooperation.

Diplomatic and Defence Collaborations: Diplomatic engagement with African countries has yielded positive outcomes in sectors such as peacekeeping, security cooperation, and military training programs. However, the lack of sustained political will and institutional support has hindered the development of deeper diplomatic ties. Efforts to diversify Pakistan's

relationship with African countries beyond military cooperation face numerous obstacles.

Opportunities for Strengthening Relations: To strengthen its relationship with Africa, Pakistan must focus on improving institutional frameworks, enhancing bilateral trade, and increasing political engagement. Pakistan's 'Look Africa' initiative, while promising, requires greater political will and strategic alignment to overcome domestic political challenges.

Findings and Discussion

This research paper discloses that Pakistan's Africa policy has historically lacked strategic depth, often being reactive and fragmented. Drawing on both primary sources and secondary data, the findings underscore that domestic political dynamics, particularly civil-military relations, regime changes, and institutional constraints, have significantly influenced the scope and stability of Pakistan's engagement with Africa.

Pakistan's early support for African nations during the anti-colonial movements and through UN peacekeeping missions established moral goodwill. On the other hand, these efforts did not develop into a sustained or economically grounded Africa policy. Until recently, Pakistan lacked a structured, strategic foreign policy approach to Africa, resulting in missed opportunities for political and economic cooperation. The launch of the "Look Africa Policy Initiative" in 2019 marked the first formal effort to thoroughly re-engage the continent, but its roots can be traced to previous groundwork laid during the PML-N government in 2017, based on recommendations from institutions like ISSI.

The data analysis reveals that recurrent changes in civilian leadership, civil-military tensions, and restricted parliamentary input have hindered constant foreign policy implementation. Each successive government (PML-N, PTI, and now the PDM coalition) has either partially modified or reprioritised the Africa initiative. For illustration, the PTI government under Imran Khan carried forward the Africa policy with renewed strength, opening diplomatic missions and engaging with states like Djibouti and Kenya. Though economic mismanagement and political controversies, including criticisms over CPEC delays, diverted attention from Africa.

The current PDM-led government shows less promise for Africa policy due to imperative domestic priorities such as economic recovery, political survival, and dealing with international pressure on issues such as

IMF reforms. This inactivity highlights how internal political instability distorts foreign policy continuity, predominantly with regions outside Pakistan's traditional focus.

The military establishment continues to be a dominant actor in shaping Pakistan's foreign relations, including with Africa, particularly in the security and defence realms. Pakistan's military-led peacekeeping missions in Africa and defence collaborations are remarkable. Though the military's focus has often remained restricted to strategic interests, it lacks an integrated vision for economic or diplomatic expansion. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, though institutionally accountable for foreign policy, remains under-resourced and politically constrained. The parliament should present oversight, but its role remains minimal in foreign policy formulation.

From the lens of neoclassical realism, Pakistan's African policy behaviour reflects an interaction between external opportunities such as Africa's rising economic importance, its resource wealth, and strategic location, and internal constraints, including weak institutions, political instability, and inconsistent leadership priorities. Whereas structural incentives exist for deeper Pakistan-Africa cooperation, especially as China, India, and Turkey expand their influence across the continent, Pakistan's domestic political structure hinders the full realisation of these opportunities.

Notwithstanding Africa's potential for trade, investment, and strategic partnerships, Pakistan's bilateral relations with major African states such as South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania, Morocco, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Egypt, Algeria, and Ghana have remained underdeveloped. These countries present beneficial markets, but up till now, Pakistan faces a number of hurdles: low trade volumes, insufficient diplomatic presence, and restricted cultural and people-to-people exchange. Even though Pakistan opened new embassies and high commissions in Africa under the Look Africa Policy, diplomatic outreach remains far behind relative powers such as India or Turkey.

Trade-related data shows small bilateral trade volumes, often under USD 1 billion annually, with most African states. Regardless of initiatives such as participation in the Engage Africa Conference and interest in AfCFTA - African Continental Free Trade Area, Pakistan has failed to institutionalise trade mechanisms or produce joint chambers of commerce with most African counterparts.

High-level political interactions, such as President Arif Alvi's speech at the 2019 Engage Africa Conference and Prime Minister Imran Khan's meetings with African delegations, have put emphasis on goodwill and commitment. On the other hand, these remain mostly symbolic unless followed by substantive implementation. Diplomatic missions, trade facilitation offices, cultural centres, and direct air links, key markers of serious foreign engagement, are still lacking in many African countries.

The existing PDM coalition government, led by the PML-N, has so far till now to no coherent, strong or visible commitment toward Africa. Preoccupied with domestic economic crises and finding the way in coalition politics, its foreign policy is reactive and fundamentally driven by immediate concerns such as Gulf cooperation and Western donor relations. This reprioritisation risks reversing the modest gains made under the PTI and earlier administrations.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

To enhance Pakistan's engagement with Africa, a more consistent and coherent policy framework is essential, supported by institutional reforms and strong political will. Establishing a dedicated Africa policy within Pakistan's foreign ministry would ensure sustained and focused engagement with the continent. Given the military's influence on foreign policy, Pakistan should leverage its military ties with African nations to establish stronger diplomatic and economic relations, using security cooperation as a foundation for broader engagement. Additionally, balancing domestic political interests with Africa's growing geopolitical significance is crucial. A shift towards long-term strategic thinking, particularly in trade and diplomatic relations, would enable Pakistan to capitalise on Africa's increasing global importance. In light of these factors, Pakistan should focus on the following policy recommendations:

- Develop a comprehensive and long-term Africa policy framework that aligns with national priorities and global trends.
- Enhance institutional capacity within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to streamline engagement and coordination with African states and other stakeholders to ensure a cohesive Africa policy.
- Promote economic diplomacy by prioritising trade agreements, investment opportunities, and facilitating business partnerships between Pakistan and African nations.
- Strengthen security and defence cooperation with African countries to foster goodwill and

create avenues for broader diplomatic and economic collaboration.

- Expand people-to-people ties, including cultural exchange programs, academic partnerships, and grassroots-level diplomatic initiatives.
- Engage African multilateral organisations to improve Pakistan's visibility and influence within continental frameworks like the African Union and regional economic communities.
- Establish a dedicated Africa Affairs Office within the Foreign Ministry to ensure policy continuity.
- Reduce trade barriers and sign preferential trade agreements with key African economies.
- Increase embassies and trade offices in Africa, particularly in Djibouti and Mozambique.
- Utilise existing military cooperation agreements to build stronger security partnerships.
- Sustainable foreign engagement requires domestic governance reforms and long-term strategic planning.
- Strengthen trade and investment ties with high-potential African markets.
- Use Islamic solidarity to deepen relations with Muslim-majority African states.

Conclusion

The domestic political dynamics in Pakistan play a crucial role in shaping the country's Africa policy. Although Pakistan has made significant strides in strengthening its bilateral relations with African nations, domestic political instability, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and military dominance have created obstacles to fully realising the potential of these relations. Pakistan's foreign policy towards Africa has experienced significant shifts due to domestic political dynamics, with varying degrees of emphasis and commitment from different governments. While there has been some momentum, particularly with the "Look Africa" initiative launched under the PTI government, inconsistent political will, shifting priorities, and ongoing domestic challenges have hampered the full realisation of Africa's strategic potential. The fluctuating focus on Africa is also indicative of broader challenges in Pakistan's policymaking processes, where economic and political considerations often take precedence over long-term, strategic engagements with the continent. Going forward, it is essential for Pakistan to reinstate its commitment to Africa, leveraging its historical ties and the emerging opportunities across sectors like trade, security, and diplomacy, to build a more sustainable and impactful

relationship. Addressing these internal challenges and adopting a more consistent, forward-looking approach could significantly enhance Pakistan's standing in Africa and help tap into the continent's growing potential.

Moreover, Pakistan's Africa policy has historically been reactive and inconsistent, often shaped by ideological factors and its peacekeeping commitments rather than a comprehensive, long-term strategy. Domestic political instability, civil-military tensions, and weak institutional frameworks have consistently hindered sustained diplomatic and economic engagement with African states. While relations with countries like South Africa, Djibouti, Kenya, Tanzania, and Mozambique hold significant potential, they remain underdeveloped due to trade barriers, political inertia, and a lack of focused policy direction. The absence of a cohesive Africa strategy has prevented Pakistan from fully leveraging its diplomatic, economic, and security strengths on the continent. Moving forward, Pakistan needs to adopt a more consistent and strategic approach to its Africa policy, addressing domestic challenges and capitalising on emerging opportunities to enhance its presence and influence in Africa.

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