

Pakistan and the Rethinking of Global Order: A Postcolonial State in a Dangerous Neighborhood

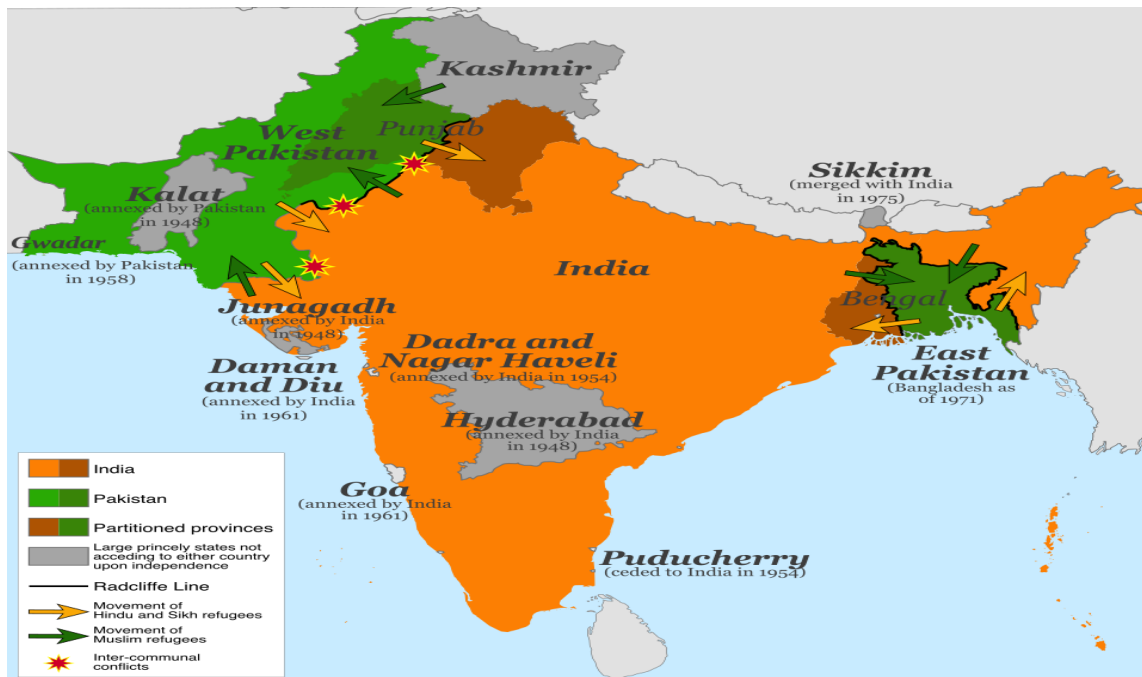
Pakistan is often described as a “frontline” state. The phrase is overused, but it captures something real about the country’s place in world politics. In 2026, Pakistan sits close to several overlapping crises at once: the U.S.-Israeli war on Iran, renewed instability on the Afghan border, an uneasy truce with India after the worst fighting in nearly three decades, and continuing dependence on external finance, Gulf energy and overseas remittances. That makes Pakistan a powerful case for rethinking the global order. It shows that the international system is not just a neutral arena where sovereign states make rational choices. It is also a historical structure shaped by empire, unequal borders, external dependence and regional power struggles. Pakistan’s position in the world today cannot be understood only through current events. It must be read through the longer afterlife of British rule in South Asia and the ways that legacy still shapes strategy, insecurity and development.

The most important starting point is Partition. Pakistan was created in 1947 through the division of British India, but Partition did not produce a settled political order. It produced a violent rupture, massive displacement and a set of unresolved questions that still structure South Asian politics.



Partition refugee train, 1947 [Partition refugee train, 1947](#)

Kashmir is the clearest example. Britannica notes that the division of British India created India and Pakistan under the Indian Independence Act, but it also left princely states and borders in dispute, and Kashmir quickly became the center of conflict. The ceasefire line that later became the Line of Control did not solve the issue; it froze it.



[Partition of India map, 1947](#)

This matters because it shows that Pakistan's rivalry with India is not simply the result of timeless hostility or bad decision-making by two states. It is rooted in the unfinished and uneven withdrawal of the empire. In that sense, the global order in South Asia was not peacefully "born" in 1947. It was inherited through a rupture.

Pakistan's western border tells a similar story. The Durand Line was drawn in 1893 as a frontier of British imperial management, not as the outcome of a democratic agreement between modern equal states.



[Sundayguardian](#)

<https://tribune.com.pk/pakistan-afghanistan-border>

After 1947, Pakistan inherited that border, but Afghanistan never fully accepted it as legitimate. Britannica notes that the Durand Line remained disputed after Partition and became entangled with Pashtun nationalism and regional rivalry. This point is crucial for any serious discussion of Pakistan's current tensions with Afghanistan. The border is often treated as if it were simply a technical line separating two sovereign territories, yet historically it was an imperial instrument. That means today's cross-border instability is not just a contemporary security problem. It is also a colonial problem that has never been fully resolved. When Pakistan and Afghanistan exchange fire, or when outside powers step in to mediate, they are operating inside a political geography shaped long before either state had meaningful control over it.

This longer history helps explain why Pakistan's current foreign policy looks so cautious and sometimes contradictory. Since the outbreak of the U.S.-Israeli war on Iran, Pakistan has tried to walk a narrow line. Its foreign ministry condemned the attacks on Iran and described them as a threat to regional stability. At the same time, Pakistan's spokesperson also stated that Islamabad condemned attacks launched from Iran against Gulf countries. Reuters described this as a "tightrope walk," and that description fits. Pakistan cannot afford to be careless here. It has a long border with Iran, a large Shia population at home, and strong domestic sympathy for Iran in the present crisis. But it also has deep military,

economic and political ties with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies. In September 2025, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia signed a Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement aimed at strengthening defense cooperation and joint deterrence. That does not mean Pakistan wants war. It means Pakistan's room for maneuver is constrained by the kind of partnerships and dependencies that middle powers often inherit in a hierarchical regional order.



[3 March 2026 bloomberg image](#)

Energy makes that balancing act even more obvious. Reuters reported in March 2026 that a Pakistan-bound tanker passed through the Strait of Hormuz during the Iran war, underlining how directly Pakistan's economy is tied to Gulf shipping routes. That was not a minor logistical detail. It was a reminder that foreign policy is often forced by material vulnerability. A country that depends heavily on Gulf oil imports cannot treat a crisis in Hormuz as a distant geopolitical drama. It becomes an immediate question of inflation, fuel security, and domestic stability. Seen from this angle, Pakistan's diplomacy is not just about ideology or alliance preferences. It is about survival in a region where security, energy, and commerce are tightly intertwined. That is why a purely moral or purely realist reading of Pakistan misses something important. Islamabad is not free to choose from a clean menu of options. It is managing exposure.

The economic side of that exposure is just as important. Pakistan remains in an IMF Extended Fund Facility running to October 2027, which is one more reminder that formal sovereignty does not always mean material autonomy. The IMF approved the 37-month arrangement in September 2024, and Pakistan has remained dependent on external financing to stabilize reserves and meet programed targets. Reuters reported in June 2025 that China rolled over \$3.4 billion in loans to Pakistan to help it meet IMF reserve



[Pakistani prime minister Shehbaz Sharif held a meeting with IMF chief Kristalina Georgieva in Riyadh aljazeera](#)

requirements. This is a revealing picture of contemporary global order. Pakistan is not a colony, but neither is it economically unconstrained. It operates inside a web of lenders, creditors, and strategic partners who shape the limits of its policy choices. That is why dependency still matters as an analytical lens. The language may be different from the colonial period, but the structure of unequal reliance has not disappeared. It has changed the form.

That external dependence is also social. The State Bank of Pakistan reported that remittances in June 2025 were mainly sourced from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, followed by the United Kingdom and the United States. This matters because it

shows that Pakistan's links to the Gulf are not only state-to-state or military. They run through households, labor migration, and everyday survival. Millions of Pakistanis are connected to the wider global economy through work abroad, and that gives Gulf politics a domestic echo inside Pakistan itself. In other words, Pakistan's place in the world order is not only made in ministries, summits and military headquarters. It is also made through remittance flows, fuel prices, and the livelihoods of families. That makes the Pakistani case especially useful for rethinking global order from below, not only from the perspective of elites.



[Pakistanis in the region are generally doing low-paid jobs particularly in the UAE where workers of Indian origin are preferred for white collar jobs DAWN](#)

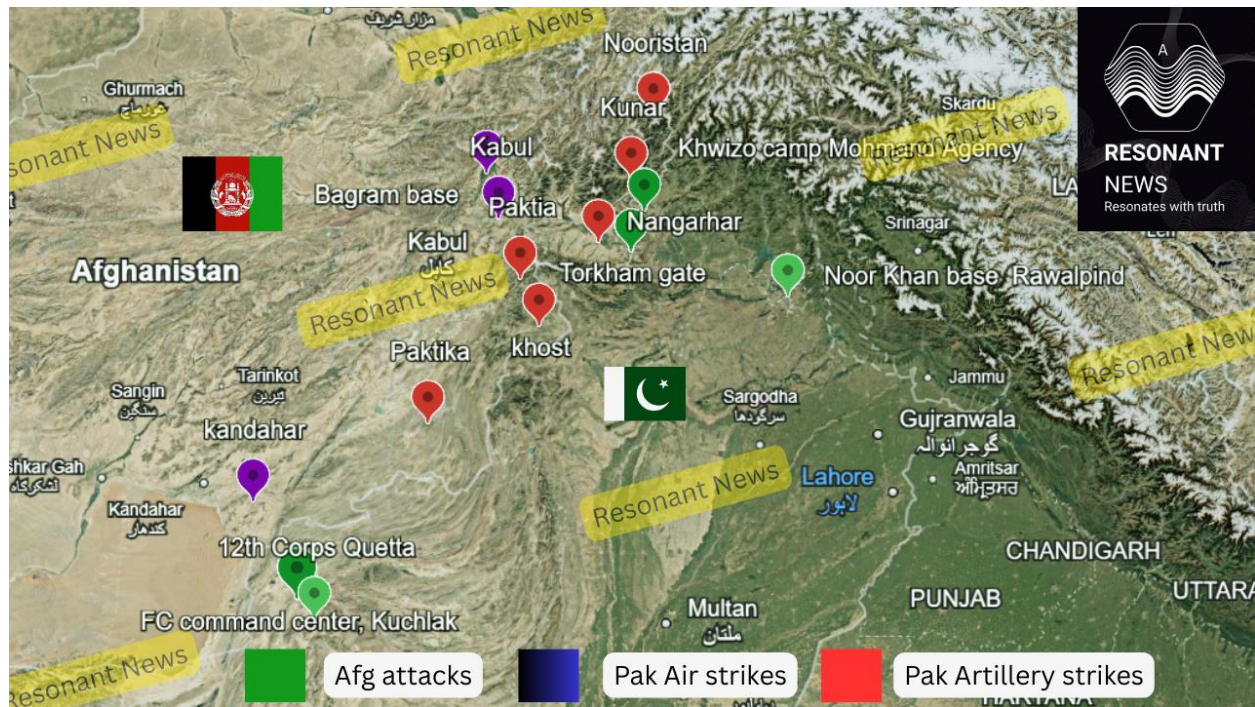
India, of course, remains central to Pakistan's strategic outlook. Reuters reported in May 2025 that India and Pakistan halted their worst fighting in nearly three decades after agreeing to a ceasefire.



India-Pakistan Conflict Escalates:

A realist or game-theoretic perspective helps explain part of this: both states are nuclear powers, both worry about signaling weakness, and both must think in terms of deterrence, escalation and credibility. But game theory can only take us so far. It can map the logic of moves and countermoves, yet it cannot explain why this dangerous game exists in this particular form. For that, history matters. The rivalry sits on top of Partition, the unresolved Kashmir question and decades of mutual securitization. So, realism helps describe the rules of the contest, but a postcolonial reading explains why those rules are still so combustible. Pakistan's security dilemma with India is not floating above history. It is rooted in it.

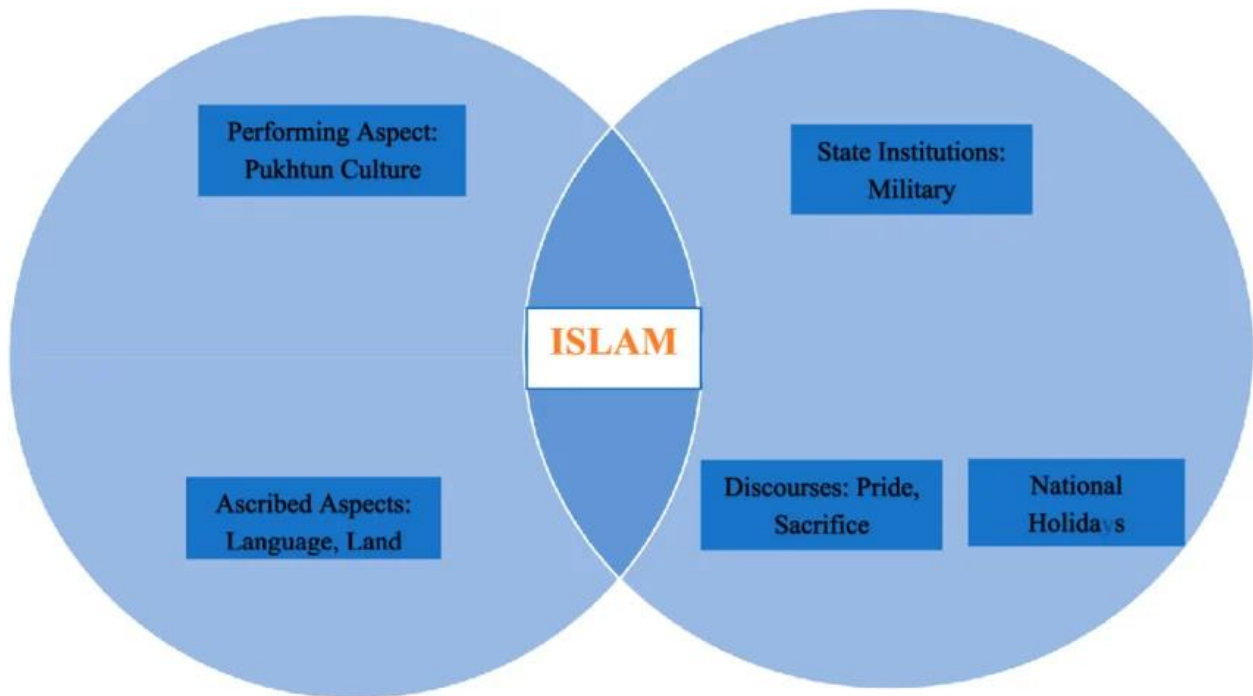
The same layered reality can be seen on the Afghan front. Reuters reported in March 2026 that Chinese mediation helped ease fighting between Pakistan and Afghanistan after some of the worst violence since the Taliban returned to power in 2021.



[Pakistan-Afghan Taliban Conflict 2026](#)

That detail matters for two reasons. First, it shows that regional instability around Pakistan is ongoing, not theoretical. Second, it shows that the management of South Asian and borderland crises is now shaped by a changing distribution of power in the wider world. Britain drew the old frontier, but China is now one of the actors trying to contain the fallout. That is exactly the kind of historical layering that the phrase “rethinking global order” should capture. The order is no longer simply Western in the old sense, yet the conflicts it contains are still deeply marked by imperial history.

It is also important not to speak about Pakistan as if the whole country experiences this global order in the same way. The 2023 census put Pakistan’s population at about 241.5 million, spread across very different provinces, regions and social realities. The World Bank has warned that national averages hide profound spatial inequalities: poverty ranges from 3.5% in Islamabad to 76.9% in Tharparkar, and seven of the ten poorest districts are in Balochistan.



[researchgate Pakistan Venn Diagram to illustrate the Framework of Religion, Ethnic and National Identity.](#)

That means the costs of insecurity, underdevelopment, and external dependence are not evenly shared. Borderland communities, poorer districts and already marginalized regions carry a much heavier burden than elites in major urban centers. This is where the Pakistan case becomes especially valuable. It shows that global order is not only something that states experience externally. It is also something people experience internally, through unequal development, uneven protection, and highly unequal access to opportunity.

For all these reasons, Pakistan is a strong case through which to rethink the global order. It is not simply a country reacting to one crisis after another. It is a postcolonial state whose present has been shaped by inherited borders, unresolved territorial disputes, external financial discipline, regional dependency, and shifting great-power politics. The current Iran war makes those pressures more visible, but it did not create them. They were already there. Pakistan therefore reminds us that the global order is not flat, neutral or fully post-imperial. It is layered. It carries the marks of colonial decisions, but it is also being reshaped by new actors, new crises, and new forms of dependence. If we want to understand where Pakistan stands today, we must look beyond short-term events and see the longer structure underneath them. That is exactly why Pakistan belongs at the center of any serious discussion about rethinking global order.