

Overview of Pakistan's Foreign Policy (1999–2013)

The period from 1999 to 2013 marked one of the most dynamic and challenging phases in Pakistan's foreign policy. The era began with General Pervez Musharraf's military coup and later transitioned into a democratic setup under Asif Ali Zardari. Pakistan's foreign relations were primarily shaped by global security concerns, the 9/11 attacks, and shifting international alliances. The country faced increasing international pressure to align with Western objectives, particularly the United States. Domestically, Pakistan struggled with political instability and terrorism, which influenced its diplomatic priorities. The major goals of foreign policy during this period revolved around national security, sovereignty, economic stability, and maintaining a strategic balance in the South Asian region.

Relations with the United States

Pakistan's relationship with the United States during 1999–2013 was one of both cooperation and confrontation. After the 9/11 attacks, Pakistan became a frontline state in America's War on Terror, receiving billions of dollars in military and economic aid. This alliance brought Pakistan temporary strategic importance but also deepened dependency on Washington. However, tensions grew over U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan's tribal areas, which killed militants but also many civilians, causing widespread anger. The 2011 Abbottabad operation, where U.S. forces killed Osama Bin Laden without informing Pakistan, severely damaged mutual trust. Despite this distrust, the U.S. continued to rely on Pakistan for supply routes to Afghanistan, proving Pakistan's unavoidable strategic importance in regional affairs.

Relations with India

Pakistan-India relations remained largely hostile and unpredictable during this period. The Kargil War of 1999, launched under General Musharraf's command, severely affected diplomatic ties and Pakistan's global image. Although both countries attempted dialogue under the Composite Dialogue Process to address Kashmir, trade, and border issues, major terrorist incidents like the 2001 Indian Parliament attack and the 2008 Mumbai attacks derailed peace efforts. India consistently accused Pakistan of supporting cross-border terrorism, while Pakistan maintained that dialogue was the only solution to the Kashmir dispute. Water-sharing disagreements under the Indus Waters Treaty and political mistrust further complicated ties. Despite sporadic peace gestures, relations remained dominated by suspicion and security concerns.

Relations with Afghanistan

Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan have historically been shaped by border disputes, ethnic ties, and competing regional interests. After 2001, when the U.S.-led invasion toppled the Taliban regime, Pakistan officially supported the new Afghan government and participated in reconstruction efforts. However, Kabul repeatedly accused Islamabad of providing sanctuary to Taliban leaders who conducted cross-border attacks. Pakistan, on the other hand, claimed it had sacrificed the most in the War on Terror, losing thousands of soldiers and civilians. The presence

of millions of Afghan refugees in Pakistan created economic burdens and security challenges. Although occasional diplomatic efforts were made to improve ties, mutual suspicion over border control and intelligence cooperation persisted throughout the decade.

The War Against Terror

The War on Terror defined Pakistan's domestic and foreign policy for more than a decade. As a key U.S. ally, Pakistan launched multiple military operations in its northwestern regions, including Swat, FATA, and Waziristan, to dismantle militant networks. The human and economic cost was devastating — over 70,000 lives were lost, and the economy suffered billions in damages. Pakistan faced a dual image internationally: it was seen both as a victim of terrorism and as a country accused of providing safe havens to militants. Internally, terrorism led to widespread fear, displacement, and challenges to state authority. This war reshaped Pakistan's national security strategy, emphasizing intelligence coordination, border management, and counter-extremism policies.

The Nuclear Issue

Pakistan's nuclear program remained central to its defense and foreign policy. The country's nuclear tests in 1998 had established a deterrence balance with India, but global concerns intensified after the A.Q. Khan network was exposed in the early 2000s for illegal nuclear technology transfers. This scandal placed Pakistan under immense international scrutiny. In response, Pakistan strengthened its nuclear command and control system, ensuring strict civilian oversight and safety mechanisms through the Strategic Plans Division (SPD). Despite external pressures, Pakistan maintained that its nuclear capability was purely defensive and essential for regional stability. Over time, international recognition of Pakistan's responsible management of its nuclear arsenal helped restore some confidence in its credibility.

Overall Assessment and Global Role

Between 1999 and 2013, Pakistan's global position oscillated between being a crucial ally and a controversial state. Its foreign policy was heavily influenced by security imperatives rather than economic diplomacy. Dependence on U.S. aid constrained independent decision-making, while tensions with India and Afghanistan prevented regional cooperation. Pakistan's internal instability, terrorism, and governance issues further affected its international image. However, by 2013, with the return of democratic governance and growing international engagement, Pakistan sought to redefine its global role through diplomacy, peace initiatives, and regional economic partnerships. The era highlighted both Pakistan's strategic importance and its persistent struggle to balance sovereignty with global expectations.