

In 2025, Pakistan's foreign policy appeared to turn a corner, with leaders in Islamabad claiming a newfound "sweet spot" in global affairs. After years of isolation and crisis, Pakistan portrayed itself as a rising strategic player – from rekindled ties with the United States to high-profile defense deals in the Middle East. The central argument of this optimistic narrative is that Pakistan has re-emerged as a country of strategic value to great powers and capable of providing regional security. However, a closer examination reveals that these gains are fragile and likely fleeting. Pakistan's diplomatic moves in 2025 mask deep limitations, and 2026 is poised to bring serious challenges for Islamabad's foreign policy, especially regarding its Middle East ambitions.

To start with, Pakistan's high international standing in 2025 is based on shaky foundations. The country's renewed importance seems more like a short-term tactical move rather than a lasting strategic breakthrough. Despite its leaders' proud rhetoric, Pakistan remains burdened by structural weaknesses that hinder its goals. Economic mismanagement, political instability, and security threats have not suddenly disappeared. Major powers may have temporarily engaged with Pakistan for tactical reasons, but such interest can fade as quickly as it appeared.

Without addressing its internal vulnerabilities, Pakistan cannot turn a year's worth of opportunity into lasting influence. One key element of Pakistan's potential success in 2025's foreign policy, a thaw with the United States, is already showing signs of fragility. The current U.S. administration's support is highly transactional and could easily be reversed. Notably, President Donald Trump's outreach to Pakistan was driven less by lasting trust than by short-term political motives. If U.S. priorities shift in 2026, Pakistan may once again be sidelined.

Pakistan's ambitious push into the Middle East in 2025, marked by a Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement with Saudi Arabia and a \$4 billion arms deal with Libya, faces significant limitations.<sup>[1]</sup> On paper, these agreements position Pakistan as a "security partner" to Arab nations, but meeting those commitments will be very difficult.<sup>[2]</sup> The Saudi defense pact,

signed in September 2025, reportedly includes extending Pakistan's nuclear deterrent to defend Saudi Arabia. Attempting to serve as the Gulf's nuclear shield would overextend Pakistan's limited resources and significantly increase the risk of miscalculation. Currently, the deal has sparked speculation and concern abroad: Iran and Israel are clearly worried about Pakistan's "nuclear umbrella" extending to Saudi Arabia. Such perceptions could draw Islamabad into a dangerous regional arms race or confrontation that it is not equipped to handle.

Similarly, Pakistan's much-hyped weapons export breakthrough, the multi-billion-dollar arms sale to Libya's eastern faction, could cause more problems than benefits. The deal to supply fighter jets and other equipment to Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army, finalized in late 2025, has been hailed in Islamabad as one of Pakistan's biggest defense exports. However, this agreement is riddled with geopolitical risks. It blatantly ignores a United Nations arms embargo on Libya, a fact that will likely attract international scrutiny and possible consequences.

By arming one side of Libya's ongoing civil conflict, Pakistan has involved itself in a distant struggle—and aligned against the UN-recognized government in Tripoli. By 2026, Islamabad could face diplomatic consequences from this action: Western powers and the UN might pressure Pakistan for violating the embargo, while any instability in Libya could draw Pakistan into disputes far from its own borders. In a region as unstable as North Africa and the Middle East, Pakistan's new role as an arms supplier and security partner could easily backfire. Instead of boosting Pakistan's influence as a regional powerbroker, these actions could leave it caught in the crossfire of others' wars and rivalries – a risky position for a nation with limited sway.

Pakistan's diplomatic achievements have had a limited effect on the persistent power imbalance in South Asia. India's economy and military surpass Pakistan's, and New Delhi maintains significant global influence—including a growing strategic partnership with the

United States that won't be sacrificed for Pakistan's benefit. Moreover, if a crisis occurs when external mediators are unavailable or unwilling, Pakistan could quickly face a full-scale conflict with its much larger neighbor. Essentially, the stability of deterrence that Pakistan claims is fragile at best—a fact that could become painfully apparent in the coming year.

Pakistan's regional challenges are not limited to India or the Middle East; they extend to its immediate neighbors, Afghanistan and Iran, further restricting Islamabad's options in 2026. Frustrated and alarmed, Islamabad openly blamed Afghan authorities and even warned that it "reserves the right to respond" against alleged Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) leaders inside Afghanistan. In effect, Pakistan faces a nightmare of a two-front security crisis – trying to contain an Afghan-based insurgency while also keeping its powder dry against India to the east. Any Pakistani military move across the western border could trigger retaliation or a wider conflict with the Taliban regime, plunging the region into chaos. Meanwhile, Pakistan's relationship with Iran is strained due to Islamabad's new alignment with Tehran's rivals. Iran views Pakistan's growing security ties with Saudi Arabia (and by extension with the U.S.) with suspicion.

Finally, and most critically, Pakistan's domestic vulnerabilities, especially its economic fragility, threaten to undermine its imaginary foreign policy achievements. Pakistan's debt-to-GDP ratio has risen above 80%, and its external debt now exceeds \$130 billion, a significant burden for a developing country. Any global economic setbacks or tighter financial conditions in 2026 could quickly plunge Islamabad back into crisis.

Considering all these factors, the outlook for Pakistan's foreign policy in 2026 is clearly bleak. The hope that 2025 marked a turning point is challenged by increasing evidence that Pakistan's recent progress is fragile and possibly illusory. Pakistan's talk of a "geopolitical sweet spot" will continue to sound hollow in 2026 due to ongoing economic meltdown, internal security instability, and its entanglement in the Middle East quagmire. The central lesson for Pakistan's policymakers is clear: ambitious foreign policy objectives are

meaningless unless the country's fundamental weaknesses are addressed. As 2026 dawns, that reckoning looms large, and the world may witness Pakistan's foreign policy gains unravel under the weight of harsh realities.

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<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3337888/china-pakistan-warplane-deal-libyan-faction-may-help-expand-beijings-influence>

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<https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/saudi-pact-puts-pakistans-nuclear-umbrella-into-middle-east-security-picture-2025-09-19/>