

THE FUTURE OF PAKISTAN'S NATIONAL SECURITY:
CONFRONTING STRUCTURAL DEFICITS AND EMERGING
THREATS

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the evolving concept of national security through the lens of Pakistan's unique socio-political and economic challenges. It explores how economic fragility, demographic pressures, and climate-induced resource scarcity collectively threaten Pakistan's stability and security. The analysis highlights the interdependence between economic sustainability and national security, emphasising how fiscal weaknesses and informal economic dominance undermine state capacity. The paper concludes with a set of comprehensive reform recommendations, advocating for constitutional continuity, fiscal reform, resource management, and human capital development. Ultimately, it argues that Pakistan's national security requires a holistic, integrated approach that prioritises institutional strengthening and socio-economic stability alongside traditional defense considerations to navigate an increasingly complex threat environment.

Keywords: National security, non-traditional threats, economic sustainability, informal economy, demographic pressures, climate change, water scarcity, Pakistan policy reform

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1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of national security, traditionally limited to territorial defence and military threat, has expanded over the years to include political, economic, social, and environmental dimensions.¹ The four pillars of the classical nation-state model; population, territory, government and sovereignty, provide the framework in which security is assessed. Any interference with these pillars, whether through interstate conflict, non-traditional stressors, or any other means, constitutes a national security issue.

Non-traditional issues such as climate change, economic instability, organised crime, cyber vulnerability, and social fragmentation might not be as significant as armed aggression but can act as threat multipliers, exacerbating preexisting problems². National security should thus be viewed as the safeguarding of individuals, institutions, resources and social cohesion, in addition to the defence of borders. This requires a holistic approach incorporating fiscal policy, institutional reformation, resource management and social policy.

The situation paper discusses that Pakistan is currently not only insecure because of traditional military threats but also due to a set of non-traditional threats: economic vulnerability, demographic pressures, and severe resource and climate scarcity³. In this sense, Pakistan faces a broad spectrum of threats. To counter these

¹ Barry Buzan, *People, States, and Fear* (University of North Carolina Press, 1983), http://213.55.90.4/admin/home/Dmu%20Academic%20Resource/Postgraduate%20Studies/Political%20Science/IR_People%2C_States_and_Fear_National_Security_Problem_in_International_Relations_1983.pdf.

² Sherri Goodman, "Keynote Address: Moving from Climate Change as a 'Threat Multiplier' to Climate Action as a 'Peace Multiplier'," Wilson Center, July 3, 2024, <https://plasticpipeline.wilsoncenter.org/article/keynote-address-moving-climate-change-threat-multiplier-climate-action-peace-multiplier>.

³ Ali Tauqeer Sheikh, "Nontraditional Security Threats in Pakistan," October 11, 2011, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/nontraditional-security-threats-in-pakistan/>.

threats, it is imperative that the country devise a policy just as broad and diverse as the threats it is faced with.

1.1. Definitional Perspectives

Three widely cited definitions illustrate the conceptual range of national security:

- "A nation has security when it does not have to sacrifice its legitimate interests to avoid war, and is able, if challenged, to maintain them by war." — Walter Lippmann (1943)⁴
- "The distinctive meaning of national security means freedom from foreign dictation." — Harold Lasswell (1950)⁵
- "National security objectively means the absence of threats to acquired values and subjectively, the absence of fear that such values will be attacked." — Arnold Wolfers (1960)⁶

All these views emphasise the fact that national security is a multi-disciplinary phenomenon. The threats may be internal, external, or transnational and the policy should take care of each aspect in a systematic manner.

⁴ Walter Lippmann, *U.S. Foreign Policy* (Little, Brown and Company, 1943), <https://ia803405.us.archive.org/33/items/in.ernet.dli.2015.74564/2015.74564.U-S-Foreign-Policy-Shield-Of-The-Republic.pdf>.

⁵ "National Security," accessed August 7, 2025, <https://sapatgramcollegeonline.co.in/attendance/classnotes/files/1589354700.pdf>.

⁶ "National Security – British Democratic Alliance," Britishdemocracy.co.uk, 2023, <https://britishdemocracy.co.uk/national-security/>.

2. LINKING NATIONAL SECURITY TO ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY: THE CASE OF PAKISTAN

Pakistan's economic sustainability is deeply intertwined with its national security. The economic capability of a state determines its ability to modernise its defences, ensure internal stability and retain strategic autonomy against external pressure. The constant fiscal deficits, poor tax base, constant use of multilateral loans and lack of export diversification have made the country's economy prone to both internal and external shocks. The external debt of the country, for example, was recorded at a staggering USD 87.4 billion in March 2025.⁷ Consequently, around 46.9 per cent of the country's FY 2025-26 budget was consumed by debt servicing.⁸

The long-term reliance on foreign financial aid including IMF bailout repeatedly exposes Pakistan to conditionalities that prioritise debt servicing over long-term economic stability.⁹ Domestically, economic strain increases social unrest. Sky-high inflation, high youth unemployment rates, and poor social safety nets lead to the erosion of trust between the state and the public. Such dynamics weaken the capacity of governance and drain resources that are needed to support long-term security priorities.

Pakistan's economic growth faces structural weaknesses that have been embedded in the economy and have compromised fiscal stability, inclusive growth and weakened the ability of the state to address developmental demands. The presence

⁷ Tahir Amin, "Public Debt Recorded at Rs76,007bn by End-March," Brecorder, June 10, 2025, <https://www.brecorder.com/news/40366918/public->.

⁸ News Desk, "Pakistan's Debt Servicing to Consume 46.7% of Federal Budget in FY2025-26," Profit by Pakistan Today, June 11, 2025, <https://profit.pakistantoday.com.pk/2025/06/11/pakistans-debt-servicing-to-consume-46-7-of-federal-budget-in-fy2025-26/>.

⁹ Juvaria Jafri, "Structural Dependence | Juvaria Jafri," Phenomenal World, December 18, 2024, <https://www.phenomenalworld.org/analysis/structural-dependence/>.

of informal economy and the fiscal weakness of the country can be listed as mutually reinforcing limitations that contribute to Pakistan's economic vulnerability.

2.1. Informal Economy and Fiscal Limitations

The informal sector constitutes a massive chunk of Pakistan's economy, around USD 457 billion.¹⁰ This large unregulated sector involves small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), self-employed and informal trade networks that are not within the domain of formal taxation and regulatory control. Although the informal sector employs a lot of labour force especially in urban peripheries and rural markets, its opacity compromises the integrity of official economic statistics which results in poor macroeconomic planning and policy intervention mismatch.

From a fiscal standpoint, the dominance of the informal economy tightens the already constrained revenue base. While the government has been trying to expand the tax net, it continues to impose high taxes on the small pool of compliant taxpayers which is the salaried class. This inequitable burden discourages formalisation.

The prevalence of the informal sector also enables the use of parallel financial systems, including *Hundi/Hawala* (informal channels for transfer of money) networks, which drain remittances out of the formal banking system, distort the exchange rate and reduce the effectiveness of monetary policy. Smuggling further undermines the competitiveness of the domestic industry, deprives the customs of revenue and deepens corruption as enforcement agencies collude with the smuggling networks.¹¹

¹⁰ "Informal Economy," Business Recorder, May 20, 2024, <https://www.brecorder.com/news/40304405>.

¹¹ Editorial, "Relying on Remittances," The Express Tribune, July 11, 2025, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2555199/relying-on-remittances>.

The net effect of these dynamics is structural fiscal trap: the state does not have the revenue to increase its regulatory presence and the lack of effective regulation maintains the informality that undermines fiscal capacity. Unless there are specific formalisation policies which involve digitisation of transactions, streamlining of compliance procedures and crackdown on large-scale evasion, the fiscal constraints in Pakistan will remain to fuel macroeconomic imbalances and hinder long-term growth.

3. HUMAN CAPITAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC PRESSURES

The health of the human capital and demographic pressures that Pakistan is faced with are inseparable from its national security economic sustainability. A large chunk of the country's population belongs to the working age group, with 64% of its population estimated to be under 30 years old.¹² Theoretically, this brings a possible demographic dividend, a period where a relatively high, skilled, and economically active workforce can speed up the country's growth and development. Nevertheless, unless there is a strategic investment in education, skills development and employment generation, this demographic change may prove to be a liability instead of an asset.

3.1 Harnessing the Demographic Dividend

Demographic dividend or demographic bonus is the economic advantages that can be attained when the number of working-age people increases at a higher rate than that of the dependent population¹³. The demographic trend of Pakistan in the last

¹² Shakeel Ahmad, "Unleashing the Potential of a Young Pakistan," [hdr.undp.org](https://hdr.undp.org/content/unleashing-potential-young-pakistan), July 24, 2018, <https://hdr.undp.org/content/unleashing-potential-young-pakistan>.

¹³ "Demographic Dividend," UNFPA Pakistan, December 13, 2017, <https://pakistan.unfpa.org/en/topics/demographic-dividend-5>.

few decades and the future in the next few years show that there will be a continued opportunity to exploit this trend. Nevertheless, these benefits are not automatic and cannot be permanent because they will need systematic investments in human capital, especially in quality education, vocational training, healthcare, and entrepreneurship promotion.

The inability to train the young generation in the skills required by a competitive global economy will only serve to deepen the unemployment, underemployment and social unrest. On the other hand, a trained and gainfully employed young generation would be able to boost the productivity of the country by a large margin, increase the tax base and socio-political stability.

3.2 Population Growth: From Asset to Strain

The population growth rate of Pakistan is one of the highest in South Asia, with the population projected to reach approximately 249 million by the end of 2025¹⁴. This has destabilised the economy, overstretched the scarce resources and contributed to social inequality. Attempts to reduce the birth rate have failed, with family planning programs being met with socio-cultural opposition and policy inconsistency. By contrast, other countries with similar socio-religious backgrounds, including Bangladesh¹⁵, have managed to lower fertility rates with the help of concerted policy, grassroots organising, and long-term investment in female education and empowerment.

¹⁴ "Pakistan Population - 2021 Data - 2022 Forecast - 1960-2020 Historical - Chart - News," Trading Economics, accessed August 6, 2025, <https://tradingeconomics.com/pakistan/population>.

¹⁵ Siow Li Lai, "Fertility Differentials in Bangladesh and Pakistan: Evidence from Demographic and Health Surveys," *Asian Population Studies*, October 7, 2021, 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17441730.2021.1986254>.

Uncontrolled population growth in Pakistan has consequences for the national security.¹⁶ It aggravates the competition over limited resources like water, food and energy; overloads the education and health sectors; and increases urban congestion and unemployment. The attendant socio-economic strain may further worsen the pre-existing fault lines leading to political instability and a rise in the risk of conflict over vital resources. The development of human capital is not only a social policy priority but also a national security strategic need. An illiterate, impoverished and disenfranchised community may develop to become a vector of instability, radicalisation and economic stagnation. Good policy should thus combine both demographic management and development of human resources, matching the population trends and the absorptive capacity of the economy.

4. ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES AND RESOURCE SCARCITY

Pakistan is facing acute resource shortage and worsening climatic change impacts. The lifeline resources of the country such as water, food, and energy have been drained by high population growth, climate change, and structural and economic weaknesses.¹⁷ This is not just a developmental challenge, but a national security issue which weakens economy, contributes to social and political unrest, and to political instability.

¹⁶ Waleed Khalid, "Balancing Population and Resources," The News International, August 14, 2022, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/982245-balancing-population-and-resources>.

¹⁷ Dr Muhammad, "The Disaster of Climate Change & Food Security in Pakistan | Pakistan Today," Pakistan Today, October 6, 2022, <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2022/10/06/the-disaster-of-climate-change-food-security-in-pakistan>.

4.1 Climate Change

Pakistan is listed among the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world, despite contributing less than 1% to global greenhouse gas emissions¹⁸. Due to a diverse terrain, the country faces a variety of threats such as torrential rains followed by floods, pervasive smog, and accelerated glacier melting. These climate induced disasters disproportionately affect people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds¹⁹.

Climate change is a threat multiplier that exacerbates existing weaknesses in the resource management systems of Pakistan. Increasing temperatures, unpredictable rainfall, faster glacial melt and extreme weather events have the potential to derail agricultural productivity, reduce water supply and destroy energy infrastructure.²⁰ Even with these existential risks, climate change has not been fully incorporated in the defence and climate policies of Pakistan as a national security problem. The existing frameworks only provide general references to environmental risks without a detailed resilience-building strategy or plan to action.

4.2 Water Insecurity

Pakistan is one of the ten most water-scarce countries in the world. The water storage capacity of the country stands at approximately 30 days compared to the recommended 120 days²¹. This vulnerability is reinforced by the fact that Pakistan

¹⁸ Government of Pakistan, "Updated Nationally Determined Contributions 2021," 2021, <https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/NDC/2022-06/Pakistan%20Updated%20NDC%202021.pdf>.

¹⁹ Erwin Knippenberg et al., "Quantifying the Poverty Impact of the 2022 Floods in Pakistan," World Bank Blogs, May 18, 2023, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/developmenttalk/quantifying-poverty-impact-2022-floods-pakistan>.

²⁰ Shah Meer Baloch, "Accelerated Glacial Melt and Monsoon Rains Trigger Deadly Floods in Pakistan," The Guardian (The Guardian, July 9, 2025), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jul/09/accelerated-glacial-melt-and-monsoon-rains-trigger-deadly-floods-in-pakistan>.

²¹ From the Newspaper, "We Need Dams, and Need Them Urgently," DAWN, April 16, 2025, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1904578>.

heavily relies on the Indus River System, whose major sources of flow are snow and glacial melt, which are becoming increasingly threatened by climate change.

The water crisis in Pakistan requires immediate national response. The Indus River System Authority (IRSA) states that the Indus is supplied with approximately 136 million acre-feet (MAF) of water per year. Out of this, 106 MAF is lost in canals, 20 MAF is lost in saline regions and an additional 20 MAF is contaminated with freshwater in the aquifers. In addition, 30 MAF of usable freshwater is left unutilised and flows into the sea. Such losses, around USD 1 billion per MAF, are enormous, especially considering the fact that one MAF would irrigate four million acres of land.²² Pakistan needs to embrace best global practices in water management to address increasing agricultural, domestic, industrial and forestry demands, enhance storage, avoid losses, and position qualified technical professionals at the helm.

4.3 Food Insecurity

The food insecurity in Pakistan is at critical levels. Hunger Hotspots report (May 29, 2023) categorised Pakistan as a ‘very high concern area’²³, warning that conditions are likely to deteriorate as a result of economic stagnation, political instability, and declining household purchasing power. The risks of acute malnutrition are escalating, with vulnerable groups being at risk of losing access to basic nutrition due to food price inflation. This crisis is not only a threat to the health of the populace, but also to the development of human capital in the long-run.

²² Brig Usman Saeed, “Synergising National Power Systems for Economic Turnaround”, Hilal Magazine, August 2021, <https://hilal.gov.pk/view-article.php?i=5342>.

²³ “Pakistan: 2022 Monsoon Floods - Situation Report No. 17 (as of 12 June 2023)” (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, June 13, 2023), <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/pakistan/pakistan-2022-monsoon-floods-situation-report-no-17-12-june-2023>.

4.4 Energy Insecurity

The energy crisis in the country is a result of systemic problems: circular debt, weakly negotiated contracts with Independent Power Producers (IPPs), politically driven and fiscally unsustainable subsidies, transmission and distribution losses and electricity theft.²⁴

Use of costly imported fuels increases the cost of production and electricity becomes too expensive to the consumers. Inefficiencies in distribution are often hidden by the use of the term 'line losses. Such structural weaknesses negate energy security, fiscal budget, and industrial competitiveness, further deepening the economic vulnerability of Pakistan.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

While the country has always managed to pull out of peril, there is a need for long-term strategic planning especially when it comes to non-traditional threats. There is need to have a strategic and coordinated reform agenda to restore stability and put the country on a sustainable path. Immediate and long-term actions are described in the following recommendations:

5.1 Constitutional and Governance Reforms

To ensure the continuity of policy, a constitutional amendment should be made to make all governments work within a 50-year National Policy Framework that can only be changed by a two-thirds majority in parliament. There should be an

²⁴ Shafqat Abbas, "How Operational Inefficiency of DISCOs Shapes Circular Debt in the Power Sector" (Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, Islamabad, October 3, 2023), <https://pide.org.pk/research/how-operational-inefficiency-of-discos-shapes-circular-debt-in-the-power-sector>.

Independent Constitutional Oversight Commission to enforce compliance and penalise non-compliance. Annual parliamentary audits of security and development expenditure should be carried out to provide transparency and accountability.

5.2 Taxation and Fiscal Reform

The tax base should be expanded to cover high-income professionals, retail POS systems should be connected to the FBR to monitor them in real-time, a progressive tax on luxuries should be imposed, and tax contributions by lawmakers and senior officials should be made publicly available in order to establish transparency and equity.

5.3 Energy Sector Overhaul

The energy reform in Pakistan must focus on renegotiating IPP contracts to eliminate capacity payments and move to settle in rupees, modernise transmission to reduce losses to less than 10 percent, increase rural solar microgrids, and establish a fast-track tribunal to prosecute energy theft.

5.4 Water Security Strategy

The water security plan of Pakistan must focus on construction of five medium sized reservoirs in water deficient provinces within 10 years, increasing rainwater harvesting, and making drip irrigation mandatory in all large-scale agricultural projects. Water distribution in the Indus Basin should be computerised to prevent unauthorised diversions and harsh punishment of over-pumping groundwater should be accompanied by subsidies on water-saving agricultural technologies.

5.5 Austerity and Import Control

The reform agenda should include a five-year ban on luxury imports to ease the pressure on foreign exchange and reduce the trade deficit. Restrictions should be imposed on government vehicle acquisition and foreign travel in order to curb non-essential expenditure.

5.6 Formalisation of the Informal Economy

Pakistan must make CNIC-linked digital payment systems compulsory in all commercial transactions exceeding Rs. 50,000 while encouraging SMEs to formalise themselves by providing them with lower corporate tax rates during their first three years. The country also needs to clamp down on hawala/hundi networks by combining the operations of FIA with the intelligence units of banks and impose mandatory jail sentences on repeat offenders.

5.7 Education and Human Capital Development

Primary and secondary education ought to be made free and compulsory. Awareness campaigns should target underprivileged families in order to curb the dropout rates. The government can also collaborate with the ed-tech companies to offer online skill certification courses to people between the age of 15-35 years, ensuring that the course contents align with the demands of the labour market.

6. CONCLUSION

While the role of conventional military capability remains central to safeguarding sovereignty and deterring external aggression, Pakistan's national security today encompasses far more than traditional defence preparedness. The nation is experiencing an expanding range of non-traditional threats such as economic

vulnerability, demographic pressures, climate change, water scarcity, and food and energy insecurity that, if not addressed, have the potential to undermine the basis that traditional security is built upon. These issues exert more pressure on governance, institutional capacity, and strategic decision-making, and require the state to enhance every aspect of its security system.

A strong defence capability must be combined with economic, social and environmental policies. The conventional security approaches should be accompanied by governance reform, fiscal restructuring, human capital development, and climate-resilient resource management, which will together constitute a balanced national security architecture that will address both internal and external threats. Pakistan has the resources, demographic potential and strategic location to have a stable future. The effective integration of the power of its military forces and the non-military measures will enable the state to become resilient, sustain deterrence, and guarantee long-term stability and prosperity of the population. In the modern era, enduring national strength will come from the integration of traditional and non-traditional security priorities.

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