

Determinants of Pakistan's Relations with Southeast Asian Countries

Mamoona Bashir¹

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Abstract

Pakistan has maintained cordial relations with Southeast Asian countries since its inception, and it introduced a "Vision East Asia" program in 2003 to deepen its political, economic, and cultural links with Southeast Asia. With the exception of Laos, Pakistan now has resident diplomatic representations in all Southeast Asian countries. Pakistan's "Look East Policy" primarily aims to boost trade and lure investors. However, there has not been a discernible growth in commerce between Pakistan and these nations, and the potential has not yet been fully realized. Pakistan is attempting to sign bilateral FTAs with these nations through multilateral agreements. Further, Pakistan can enhance its maritime cooperation with these states. Moreover, Pakistan can strengthen its bilateral ties with China, connecting the region through its One Belt One Road initiative.

Keywords: Southeast Asia, Economic Relations, Islamic Ties, Regional Forums, China Factor.

Introduction

Pakistan has maintained a "Look East" policy in its international relations since its statehood. The 1955 Bandung Conference was organized and led in part by Pakistan. As a SEATO member, it allied with Thailand and the Philippines in the 1950s. As associates of the Islamic community, Pakistan forged unique ties with Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei. With all of the Southeast Asian nations (Brunei, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Timor-Leste), it historically had amicable and cordial relations. Pakistan established its 'Vision East Asia' initiative in 2003 to capitalize on shared political and cultural values. The cornerstone of this program was strengthening ties with Southeast Asia on the political, economic, and cultural fronts (Khawaja, 2012). Pakistan established new embassies in this region, and as of right now, it maintains resident diplomatic representations in all but Laos PDR. The ongoing cooperation covers a wide range of issues, including developing human resources, drug trafficking, tourism, trade, science and technology, industry, and investment (Britannica, 2023).

Today, Pakistan enjoys close and cooperative relations with many Southeast Asian nations. It has been working to strengthen regional multilateral institutions and deepen bilateral ties with Southeast Asian countries to achieve this goal. Despite these initiatives, there has not been a discernible growth in commerce between Pakistan and these nations, and the potential is still far from being realized. Still, our exports to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries are much lower than our imports from those nations. Our overall commerce with the

¹PhD Scholar (International Relations), Lahore College for Women University, Lahore.
Email: mamoonabashir.82@gmail.com



region has been stable at around \$8 billion, which is tiny compared to India's \$50 billion (Javed & Ali, 2024).

Pakistan has historic ties and varying degrees of cooperation with Southeast Asian countries, primarily revolving around trade, cultural exchanges, and diplomacy. The extent of relations and cooperation depends on the specific country and the nature of the issues involved. This research analyzes Pakistan's relations with Southeast Asian countries.

Statement of the Problem

Pakistan's "Look East" policy and initiatives, like the 2003 Vision East Asia program, highlight its efforts to strengthen ties with Southeast Asian nations through cultural, economic, and diplomatic channels. However, trade remains limited, and economic integration lags behind regional competitors like India. While Islamic ties foster connections with countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, they have not translated into significant political or financial gains. China's growing influence also presents opportunities and challenges for Pakistan's regional role. This research examines key factors shaping Pakistan-Southeast Asia relations, focusing on Islamic ties, regional forums, economic and defense cooperation, and the China factor to identify barriers and opportunities for deeper engagement.

Objectives

The following objectives have been identified for this research based on the literature review.

- To analyze the effect of Islamic ties on Pakistan's relations with Southeast Asian countries.
- To examine the role of the ASEAN Regional Forum in shaping Pakistan's relations with Southeast Asian countries.
- To explore the economic and defense cooperation between Pakistan and Southeast Asian countries.
- To investigate the influence of the China factor on Pakistan-Southeast Asian relations.

Review of Literature

Pakistan's relations with the Southeast Asian countries have had a mixed history. Overall, there have been economic and diplomatic ties between Pakistan and Southeast Asian countries, with the extent and nature of these relations varying among individual countries (Rose, 1981). Pakistan and Malaysia have traditionally enjoyed strong cultural, economic, and political ties. There has been substantial trade between the two nations. Trade and cultural interactions between the two countries (Kharal & Javaid, 2020) are the mainstays of the cordial relationship between Pakistan and Indonesia. As members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the two nations have worked together to combat extremism and terrorism. Pakistan's relationship with Singapore has also been centered around trade and investment. It has signed many bilateral agreements with Singapore to increase commercial ties. Since 1951, diplomatic ties have existed between Pakistan and Thailand. There has been some cooperation between the two nations in education, culture, and the military despite the lack of economic cooperation. Diplomatic relations between Pakistan and the Philippines date back to 1949, although their commercial and trade connections have remained weak (Yusuf, 2007). Pakistan and Vietnam have a long history of getting along and working together economically. The two nations have struck agreements in commerce, investment, and agricultural cooperation. (Hong, 2007). Pakistan's and Myanmar's relations have been complicated. While there have been some examples of collaboration, ties between the two nations

have been strained due to political conflicts and humanitarian concerns, most notably the Rohingya crisis (Leider, 2015).

Islamabad was the site of the 1997 ASEAN-Pakistan Sectoral Dialogue Relationship establishment. The areas of interest include commerce, manufacturing, investment, ecology, drugs and narcotics, tourism, and the cultivation of human potential. Pakistan proposed a Joint Working Group on Export Financing and Trade as a potential collaboration area.

The ASEAN-Pakistan Joint Sectoral Cooperation Committee (APJSCC) decided to step up their efforts to make their Sectoral Dialogue substantial and mutually beneficial during their first official meeting in Bali on 5 February 1999. Shamshad Ahmad suggested that Pakistan catalyzes collaboration between ASEAN and the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) (Yahya, 2004). The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) was established in 1994 to provide a platform for achieving peace through communication and mutual trust. Pakistan is the only Sectoral Dialogue Partner that is also an ARF member (Permana & Maksum, 2022). Since 1999, ASEAN has prohibited membership in the Full Dialogue Partner (FDP) category. The Philippines, Vietnam, and Singapore have opposed Pakistan's FDP status with ASEAN. As stated by the local official, Pakistan's policy towards China has led to opposition from Vietnam and the Philippines, hindering Pakistan's accession to ASEAN plus six (China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, and New Zealand). Pakistan continues to engage with ASEAN countries to obtain full FDP status. In this context, Pakistan's membership in ASEAN was formalized by establishing the ASEAN-Pakistan Joint Sectoral Cooperation Committee (APJSCC) (News Desk, 2018).

Research Questions

The following research questions are formulated to explore relations of Pakistan with Southeast Asian countries:

- How do Islamic Ties affect Pakistan's Relations with Southeast Asian Countries?
- What is the ASEAN Regional Forum's role in Pakistan's Relations with Southeast Asian Countries?
- What is the economic and defense cooperation between Pakistan and Southeast Asian countries?
- What is the effect of the China Factor in Pak- Southeast Asian Relations?

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative methodology to analyze Pakistan's relations with Southeast Asian countries, focusing on Islamic ties, regional forums, economic and defense cooperation, and China's influence. Data is collected from primary sources, such as official documents and reports, and secondary sources, including academic literature and credible online resources. A thematic analysis identified key patterns and themes in the data.

Discussion and Analysis

ASEAN Regional Forum and Relations with Southeast Asian Countries

To increase confidence-building measures and preventative diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific region, the ASEAN Regional Forum functions to encourage dialogue and consultation on political and security concerns. (Dawn,2000). It was established in 1994 to seek peace and mutual trust in the face of the strategic uncertainty brought on by the new post-Cold War security environment. Pakistan is a member of the Sectoral Dialogue and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). In 2004, Pakistan and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) signed the

Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), and in the same year, Pakistan joined the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).

This engagement with ARF is beneficial for multidimensional relations in the ASEAN region. Pakistan increased its attendance at various meetings and workshops under ARF. Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, the former Foreign Minister, led the Pakistani delegation at the 29th ARF Ministerial Meeting held in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, from 4 August to 6 2022.

The Foreign Minister engaged in discussions regarding regional political and security matters. The objective was to find collaborative solutions to ongoing political and security issues through dialogue and partnership. Furthermore, on 8 June 2023, the resident Heads of Mission from Southeast Asian countries convened a roundtable discussion with Former Foreign Secretary Dr. Asad Majid Khan in Islamabad. The meeting was conducted as a part of Pakistan's ongoing interactions with ASEAN. By its East Asia Vision, Pakistan's Foreign Secretary emphasized Pakistan's commitment to boosting cooperation with Southeast Asian countries across all domains (Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Jakarta).

Table 1: International organizations

Name of Organization	Members countries	Purpose
ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations)	ASEAN comprising ten member states in Southeast Asia, namely Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.	ASEAN is a political and economic organization. It offers a platform for countries in the region to discuss and address regional challenges, enhance regional integration, and promote cooperation in various sectors such as trade, security, and cultural exchanges.
ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF):	The United States, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, China, the European Union, India, Japan, Mongolia, New Zealand, North Korea, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Russia, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste, and the ten member states of ASEAN meet annually for a multilateral security dialogue known as ARF.	ARF focuses on regional security issues, confidence-building measures, and preventive diplomacy through non-binding discussions.

Source: Severino, 2009; Yuzawa, 2012.

Islamic Ties in Relations with Southeast Asian Countries

Pakistan has also tried to strengthen its ties with ASEAN by appealing to Muslim sentiments in the region. This is in line with the strong Islamic ideology in Pakistan's foreign policy that has seen it supporting the cause of Muslims worldwide such as an independent Palestinian state. (Shahid, 2000) Moreover, the 1973 Constitution of Pakistan imposes an obligation on the government to develop closer relations with other Islamic countries. Under this, for example, Pakistan is keen to promote bilateral economic ties with Thailand based on trade, investment and cooperation in science and technology, by sponsoring a number of scholarships for Thai Muslims (Dawn, 2000).

Indonesia as the largest Muslim country in the world also has strong ties with Pakistan through the OIC. Among all the member countries in ASEAN, Malaysia has the closest relations with Pakistan. At the second meeting of the Pakistan-Malaysia Joint Commission in October 2000, Pakistani Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar said that there were a number of promising sectors for mutual collaboration between the two countries. (Sattar, 2001) Pervez Musharraf, former president of Pakistan, previously emphasized this when he visited Malaysia in March 2000. According to Musharraf, Malaysian investments can contribute to our economic growth. (Bernama, 28 March, 2000). According to the Pakistan High Commission in Malaysia, Malaysian investments in Pakistan registered RM192 million in 1999, a rise from RM5 million in 1998. Brunei is also a Muslim country. The Brunei-Pakistan Friendship Association (BPFA) was founded in 2008 to strengthen ties between the two nations.

Trade Relations of Pakistan with Southeast Asian Countries

According to various research and data sources, the trade capacity of Pakistan with different Southeast Asian countries can be analyzed as follows:

Pakistan-Indonesia Trade Capacity

The bilateral trade volume between Pakistan and Indonesia rose from \$2,152.53 million in Fiscal Year (FY) 2020 to \$4,471 million in 2023, indicating a substantial increase. Pakistan, however, exhibits a huge deficit as compared to Indonesia. In fiscal year 2022, Pakistan's imports from Indonesia amounted to \$4,619.10 million, while its exports were valued at \$128 million during the same year. (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2022). In FY 2023, Indonesian imports marginally decreased to \$4,319 million, while Pakistan's exports to Indonesia remained negligible, amounting to \$152 million. Textiles, leather goods, plastics, and chemicals are among the primary items that Pakistan ships to Indonesia. On the other hand, palm oil, rubber, and coffee are among the primary items that Pakistan buys from Indonesia. (Trade Development Authority of Pakistan, 2023).

Pakistan-Malaysia Trade Possibilities

The bilateral trade between the two countries has risen from \$1,171.2 million in 2020 to \$1,259 million in 2023. Despite an increase in exports to Malaysia, Pakistan continues to experience a significant trade gap. Palm oil, rubber, and electrical equipment are Malaysia's main exports to Pakistan, whereas Pakistan sells textiles and apparel. (The Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2024).

Pakistan-Thailand Trade Capacity

Pakistan's trade relations with Thailand have witnessed positive growth in recent years. The total bilateral trade volume between the two countries reached \$1.1 billion in 2020. Pakistan's exports to Thailand amounted to \$172 million in FY 2021, while imports from Thailand stood at \$369.55 million a 114.45 per cent increase. Major exports from Pakistan to Thailand include textiles, agricultural products, and other manufactured goods, while Pakistan mainly imports machinery, electronics, and chemicals from Thailand. (Trade Development Authority of Pakistan, 2023)

Pakistan-Philippines Trade Capacity

Trade between Pakistan and the Philippines has shown potential for growth. In 2019, the total trade volume between the two countries amounted to \$58 million. Pakistan's exports to the Philippines reached \$24 million, comprising mainly textiles, garments, and pharmaceutical products, while

Pakistan imported \$34 million worth of goods from the Philippines, including electrical machinery and machinery parts. (Embassy of the Republic of the Philippines in Islamabad, 2023)

Pakistan-Singapore Trade Capacity

Singapore is an important trade partner for Pakistan in Southeast Asia. In FY 2022 Pakistan's exports to Singapore amounted to \$81 million, consisting primarily of textiles, while imports from Singapore reached \$903.14 million, including machinery, petroleum products, and electrical goods. In fiscal year 2023, Singapore's imports rose to \$965 million. (The Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2024).

Pakistan- Timor-Leste Trade Capacity

In 2021, Pakistan exported \$2.17M to Timor-Leste. The main products exported from Pakistan to Timor Leste were Rice , Potatoes , and Packing Bags . Pakistan's trade with Timor-Leste has increased at an annual rate of 12.8%, from \$247k in 2003 to \$2.17M in 2021. (Ministry of Trade and Industry - Timor-Leste ,2021)

Pakistan - Myanmar Trade Capacity

Myanmar's traditional surpluses of rice help to meet food shortages in East Pakistan. Further, Myanmar exports her tea to Pakistan and imports from Pakistan cotton. In 1949, Myanmar had to face an acute threat from the Karens, a hill people. The Karens rose in open revolt against the Government. As a result, the economy of Myanmar was deeply affected, and she felt urgent need of foreign aid to finance her rice export. In response to this need the Commonwealth offered a loan of £6,000,000, to which Pakistan contributed a sum of £500,000. Thailand, having never been under foreign domination, was spared the consequences of a fight for freedom. Pakistan had very little contact with Thailand until she joined SEATO.

Despite southeast Asian nations' proximity to Pakistan and their extraordinary economic progress, Pakistan has not been able to increase trade with this region proportionally. The issue is that we haven't taken any domestic action to revitalize our economy or our dying industries. (Basit, & Alam, 2020). Pakistan has not been able to benefit from the chances brought about by the expanding trade bloc in the Asia-Pacific area because of governmental failure. Pakistan is attempting to enter into multilateral agreements for bilateral FTAs with these nations. Future prospects will rely on how and to what extent Pakistan continues to make its own efforts to strengthen the nation's law and order situation and produces strong economic results (Britannica, 2023).

Defense Relations of Pakistan with Southeast Asian Countries

This region, from the strategic point of view, is very important. Myanmar, Siam and Indochina remained Pakistan's first line of defense against an attack from the East. In the last World War, the conquest of Burma, which became the base for the Japanese land attack on the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent, became possible only after the Japanese had acquired control of Siam and Indochina. Apart from this, Pakistan has economic and cultural interests in this region. The cultural interests stem from the fact that there is a large number of Muslims living in the East Asian countries. There are more than 70 million Muslims in Indonesia, about 2.5 million in Malaysia, nearly 2 million' in the Philippines, the same number in Thailand. The welfare of their co-religionists living in East Asia is a matter of interest to the people of Pakistan. As part of the arms agreement with Pakistan, the Malaysian military has since 2002 received a number of weaponries developed in Pakistan,

including the Anza and Bakhtar Shikan (Yahya, 2005). Further reports state that Pakistan and Malaysia were having informal discussions on the potential transfer of Pakistan Aeronautical Complex's JF-17 Thunder combat aircraft on April 15, 2018 (Khan et.al. 2018).

China factor in Pakistan-Southeast Asian Relationship

The political orientation of Pakistan after CPEC indicates a distinct transition towards geoeconomics. Pakistan seeks to establish itself as the hub for connectivity among South, West, and Central Asia. Thus, Pakistan has placed greater emphasis on economic integration within its transregional foreign policy. The corridor linking Gwadar and Kashgar is expected to enhance trade between the two regions. However, Pakistan may become a less preferable trade route, considering the relationships Southeast Asian nations have with China, especially in the context of the competing claims in the South China Sea. Southeast Asian nations may perceive Pakistan through a Chinese lens. Consequently, Pakistan ought to integrate maritime corridors into its geoeconomic strategy, linking it with Southeast Asian nations (Javed & Ali, 2024).

Pakistan remains dedicated to collaborating with ASEAN in a variety of sectors. Pakistan has the potential to contribute to the advancement of ASEAN's objective of regional peace and prosperity. ASEAN is striving to become a dynamic and potent segment of the global supply chain in the future, given the rapid pace of globalization. In addition, it is endeavoring to broaden its influence beyond the ASEAN Economic Community's borders in order to establish itself as a true global player. Pakistan can assist ASEAN in a various way to achieve this objective. Pakistan's strategic location at the intersection of key regions offers an opportunity for ASEAN to reach the western areas of China, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Pakistan is inherently endowed with a critical role in the promotion of Asian connectivity. It has a vested interest in the security of the Malacca Strait, as it is situated on the Indian Ocean Rim. It shares ASEAN's concerns regarding the rivalry between key powers in the region. It also bolsters the "centrality" of the ASEAN in the management of regional affairs. Pakistan believes that burden in the Malacca Straits can be eased by the development of its Gwadar port as a sea corridor for Western China. It is positioned to enhance inter-regional connectivity. It is the only country in South Asia that is a member of three major regional organizations: SAARC, ECO, and SCO. This establishes a connection between South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Thus, Pakistan's strategic location, common interests, and proactive involvement make it a significant partner in ASEAN's efforts toward regional integration, global influence, and sustainable connectivity.

Conclusion

The relationship between Pakistan and the nations of Southeast Asia has undergone substantial changes and is expected to continue to improve. Pakistan has actively cultivated commercial and political ties with Southeast Asian nations throughout the years, realizing the enormous potential for mutual gain and peace in the region. Trade and economic cooperation are important aspects of Pakistan's relations with Southeast Asian countries. Pakistan has worked to strengthen trade connections with a number of nations, including Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and Singapore. Increased bilateral trade, easier investment prospects, and sector-specific opportunities have all been sought after. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the ASEAN Regional Forum on Counterterrorism are two examples of regional organizations and forums in which Pakistan has taken an active position. This interaction has aided in communication, collaboration, and the sharing of ideas on a variety of issues, including as security and counterterrorism. However, efforts must keep concentrating on boosting commerce, luring capital,

and removing obstacles to economic cooperation. Collaborations in education, cultural exchange, and people-to-people contacts can all be improved to further cement relationships between the two areas. In addition, closer cooperation on security issues, counterterrorism, and regional stability will make Southeast Asia and Pakistan safer and more affluent.

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