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## **The European Union's Policy Towards Pakistan: The Role of Selected External Determinants**

### **Abstract**

The main objective of this article is to analyse selected external determinants of the EU's policy towards Pakistan. The analysis focuses on power dynamics and the international system. Neorealism explains state behaviour primarily through the structure of the international system, especially the distribution of power. The EU's policy towards Pakistan is shaped not only by bilateral interests but also by the regional balance of power involving India, Pakistan, and China. It can be assumed that while promoting specific norms and values, the European Union must also consider structural factors, particularly the distribution of power in South Asia. The research methods used are qualitative in nature, with content analysis serving as the principal method. One of the key findings is that neorealism effectively captures how systemic pressures and regional rivalries shape the EU's foreign policy choices towards Pakistan in the context of the India-Pakistan conflict and China's growing presence in South Asia. The EU's foreign policy thus reflects systemic incentives to maintain relevance within a changing power structure, rather than being based purely on values.

**Keywords:** Pakistan, European Union, Foreign Policy, India, China, External Limitations, External Determinants

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## **Introduction**

South Asia plays a significant role in the European Union's global strategy. The most important element is the development of a political and economic partnership with India, although neighbouring Pakistan also occupies a significant position in the EU's approach, especially due to its geopolitical location as well as issues related to international security. At the same time, closer cooperation with Pakistan may pose a considerable challenge for EU policymakers, given the country's internal instability, problems related to human rights violations and challenging neighbours such as India and Afghanistan. The factors listed above affect the nature and quality of EU-Pakistan relations and can be divided into two groups: internal determinants and external determinants. These determinants are also taken into account when formulating goals and implementing the EU's foreign policy toward Pakistan.

The first group is related to the internal political situation in Pakistan. In this context, it is necessary to analyse the potential limitations in the implementation of the EU's foreign policy towards Pakistan due to the country's domestic challenges. The main factors are related to the violation of human rights and violations of the rule of law. The second group pertains to the external environment, focusing on selected limitations of the European Union's policy towards Pakistan due to the country's geopolitical context, particularly its proximity to such major powers as the People's Republic of China and India.

The main objective of this article is to analyse these external determinants of the EU's policy towards Pakistan. To examine the correlation between external factors and EU policy objectives and actions towards Pakistan, two working hypotheses have been formulated.

**Hypothesis 1** – The EU's policy towards Pakistan is determined by the current state of India-Pakistan relations.

**Hypothesis 2** – The EU's policy towards Pakistan is limited by the proximity and influence of the People's Republic of China.

The research methods applied are qualitative in nature. The primary research method is content analysis, while the main research technique involves the analysis of official documents adopted by EU institutions in relation to Pakistan, with particular emphasis on international factors. These documents include the 2004 *Cooperation Agreement on Partnership and Development*, the *EU-Pakistan Strategic Engagement Plan* of 2019, the *Generalized Scheme of Preferences Plus* (GSP+), European Council

conclusions, and statements issued by the High Representative. An important complement to the assumptions and declarations contained in official documents is the analysis of publications describing the actual actions undertaken by EU institutions in relation to Pakistan. Among them are selected monographs, academic articles, interviews, and press reports.

## **Theoretical Background**

The impact of the India–Pakistan conflict and China’s proximity on the EU’s policy toward Pakistan can be analysed through the lens of structural realism, which is also known as neorealism (Waltz, 1990, p. 21). Among the main classical assumptions of this theory is the portrayal of the international system as anarchic, that is, a system without any central authority (Kapitonienko, 2022, p. 99). Neorealists also assume that states are rational actors whose behaviour is driven mainly by the distribution of power and that their actions are based on relative gains rather than absolute morality or norms (Waltz, 2010).

Neorealism focuses on power dynamics and the structure of the international system, explaining state behaviour primarily through the distribution of power (Tabak, 2025, p. 182). The EU’s policy toward Pakistan is shaped not only by bilateral interests but also by the regional balance of power involving India, Pakistan, and China. It may therefore be assumed that while promoting specific norms and values, the European Union must also consider structural factors, particularly the distribution of power within the South Asian region. These factors create a context that, in turn, determines the extent to which constraints exist on the EU’s policy towards such states as Pakistan.

One of the most important factors is the emphasis on security and strategic balancing. China’s growing influence in South Asia and its alliance with Pakistan have altered the regional balance, prompting the EU to engage cautiously with Pakistan in order to maintain strategic relevance and avoid deepening regional instability. Neorealism provides a useful framework for understanding these security-driven calculations. According to Joyce Kaufman, to many neorealists “the post-Cold War period is more dangerous and unstable than the Cold War was, with the ongoing power of the United States, but also the European Union, Russia, and more recently the rise of China, as well as any number of other countries also seeking to gain more power and international prestige” (Kaufman, 2022, p. 54).

Attention should be paid to a limited role of domestic factors and norms. While the EU emphasises human rights and trade standards, its

policy often reflects pragmatic strategic interests, especially in security and trade. Neorealism accounts for these interest-based behaviours more convincingly than liberalism or constructivism. At this point, however, an important question arises: can such a pattern be observed in the case of the EU's policy towards Pakistan, given its proximity to India and China? Is the European Union limiting itself in its policies or actions towards Pakistan taking into account the positions of these key regional players?

### **A Brief Overview of EU's Policy Towards Pakistan in the Post-Cold War Period**

EU–Pakistan relations date back to the 1960s. Diplomatic relations between the European Economic Community (EEC) and Pakistan were established in 1962. Initial cooperation focused on development aid and trade preferences under the EEC's general assistance for developing countries. Pakistan was one of many Asian partners receiving technical and economic assistance from the European Community (Noor, 2008, p. 19). The first commercial cooperation agreement between the EEC and Pakistan was signed in 1976, and, nine years later, the EEC opened its first office in Islamabad.

However, in the 1990s, bilateral cooperation was seriously limited and hindered by EU concerns over Pakistan's human rights record and its acquisition of nuclear weapons. The situation changed after the 9/11 attacks, when Pakistan joined the international anti-terror operations in Afghanistan at the beginning of the twenty-first century, various countries and international financial institutions restructured Pakistan's debt or offered financial support, and the European Union was among them, reducing duties on Pakistan's export and increasing import quotas for products made in Pakistan (Belokrenitsky, Moskalenko, 2014, p. 378). In this way, the Pakistani authorities benefited from their decisions that aligned with the Union's policy toward South Asia and its counterterrorism objectives.

The main objectives of the European Union at that time were, however, largely limited to Pakistan's internal social situation. These included the improvement of human development, the eradication of child labour, the promotion of democracy and human rights, and only very general references to regional security. As a result, the objectives were not directly related to diplomatic relations or cooperation between the EU and Pakistan, except in the areas of trade and conflict resolution efforts. The dynamics of change in the region, particularly those resulting from the situation in neighbouring Afghanistan and the need to secure supplies

for the military forces stationed there as part of the ISAF mission, quickly altered this state of affairs. In the opinion of Muhammad Riaz Shad, although the EU prioritised “its security in its relations with Pakistan, it did not lose interest in the promotion of norms” (Shad, 2017, p. 28).

Current EU–Pakistan relations are based on two major agreements: the 2004 *Cooperation Agreement on Partnership and Development* and the *EU–Pakistan Strategic Engagement Plan* of 2019. The 2004 agreement expanded cooperation beyond aid to include trade, energy, governance, and human rights. Article 11 of the agreement refers to regional cooperation and clearly states that “the parties agree that cooperation between them may include actions undertaken under cooperation agreements with other countries in the same region, provided that such action is compatible with this agreement” (Council Decision, 2004).

In response to shared global challenges, the European Union and Pakistan launched a strategic dialogue in 2012. Within the framework of new areas of cooperation, bilateral relations were broadened and specified. The *5-Year Engagement Plan* for 2012 and 2017 proved to be particularly successful and fruitful. This new dimension of cooperation facilitated the development and signing of the most important and comprehensive document within the framework of EU–Pakistan relations, namely, the *Strategic Engagement Plan* (Kugiel, 2012).

The main areas addressed in the *EU–Pakistan Strategic Engagement Plan* are peace and security, democracy, the rule of law, good governance and human rights, migration and mobility, trade and investment, sustainable development, education and culture, and science and technology (*EU–Pakistan Strategic Engagement Plan*, 2019). Regarding the issue of maintaining peace and security in the region, both sides committed to exchanging “views and perspectives on regional stability and fostering inclusive cooperation towards regional peace, security, and prosperity,” as well as to holding “regular security and defense staff talks with special focus on regional security and in the field of crisis management” (*EU–Pakistan Strategic Engagement Plan*, 2019). Notably, the European Union concluded this agreement with Pakistan despite tensions in that country’s relations with India in 2019. The document proves that the EU treats Pakistan as an independent partner, rather than solely through the lens of its relationship with India.

Since 2014, Pakistan has benefited from Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+) status, which is a special trade arrangement offered by the European Union to selected developing countries. These partners are required to implement 27 international conventions on human rights, labour rights, the environment, and good governance. In

return, the EU cuts “its import duties to zero on more than two thirds of the tariff lines of their exports” (Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus – GSP+, 2025). The current GSP+ status is valid until 2027 and provides Pakistan with duty-free access to EU markets. Pakistan is one of eight countries which have been granted this special status, alongside Bolivia, Cape Verde, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Uzbekistan.

From 2014 to 2022, Pakistan’s exports to the EU increased by 108%, and the total trade volume rose from 8.3 billion euros to 14.85 billion euros. However, a significant limitation constraining the further development of the bilateral trade cooperation is Pakistan’s underutilisation of its GSP+ potential. Although it has the largest share in the textile sector of the EU, Pakistan could enhance its benefits by diversifying exports and increasing value-added products to its export basket (Shad, Malik, Rashid, 2025, p. 58). Nonetheless, political factors, rather than economic issues, constitute the principle challenge in the EU’s relations with Pakistan, especially in the context of that country’s relations with India and China.

### **The EU and the India-Pakistan Rivalry**

The conflict between India and Pakistan has persisted since the end of British colonisation and the emergence of these two independent states since 1947. The territorial division of colonial India led to the emergence of a number of international disputes, especially in the Kashmir region (see Khan, 2017; Puri, 2012; Sanjeev Kumar, 2022; Schofield, 2021). Over the past six decades, Pakistan and India have fought four wars, one of which resulted in the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 (Pande, 2021, p. 21; see also Hali, 2021; Raghavan, 2022).

The issue of the India–Pakistan conflict was not mentioned directly either in the *2004 Cooperation Agreement on Partnership and Development*, or in the *EU-Pakistan Strategic Engagement Plan* of 2019. This omission does not mean that this issue has no impact on the EU’s policy towards Pakistan or the South Asian region. Rather, it demonstrates that the EU avoids language that could be misinterpreted by either of the conflicting parties. Nevertheless, the fact that the conflict influences the EU’s actions towards Pakistan can be observed by analysing other sources and publications.

It is certainly worth noting that unresolved issues in the Kashmir region affect not only the situation in the region itself, but also the entire country. They also contribute to increasing security threats in India. According to Tughral Yamin and Muhammad Makki, “the conflict

between India and Pakistan over Kashmir has also been contributing to the weakened security situation in the country. The dispute has not, or has never, remained restricted to the region divided by the line of control (LOC) between India and Pakistan but has recurrently been voiced as a reason behind different terrorist incidents in the two countries” (Yamin, Makki, 2021, pp. 268–269).

The India–Pakistan conflict adds urgency to these dialogues, especially during times of heightened tension. The EU, guided by structural constraints, adopts a cautious balanced approach to South Asia, avoiding favouritism towards India or Pakistan. India’s growing regional and global influence forces the EU to hedge its relations with Pakistan, maintaining a limited yet strategic engagement in order to preserve its influence in the region. This is one of the reasons why the EU remains neutral in the Kashmir dispute. It has repeatedly called for dialogue and a peaceful resolution, emphasising respect for human rights and international law. After the 2019 Pulwama–Balakot escalation, the EU urged both sides to “exercise utmost restraint”, deliberately avoiding direct alignment with either country. On 27 February 2019, High Representative Federica Mogherini stated: “Following the recent terrorist attack in Pulwama, tensions along the line of control between India and Pakistan have escalated militarily during the last days. This has the potential to lead to serious and dangerous consequences for the two countries and the wider region. We expect both countries to now exercise utmost restraint and avoid any further escalation of the situation. To this end, the resumption of diplomatic contacts at political level and implementation of urgent measures by both sides is vital” (Statement, 2019).

Kaja Kallas’s statement of 8 May 2025, referring to the terrorist attack in Jammu and Kashmir, serves as another example of this attitude. The incumbent High Representative neither identified those responsible for the attacks, nor exerted any pressure on either India or Pakistan. At the same time, Kallas declared: “The EU urges both sides to engage in dialogue. It is vital that India and Pakistan also live up to their obligations under international law and take all measures possible to protect civilian lives” (India/Pakistan Statement, 2025). This formulation illustrates the EU’s pragmatic approach to tensions in India–Pakistan relations and highlights its own diplomatic limitations in that part of the world. Wherever possible, the EU strives to maintain a neutral stance while maximising the potential benefits of pursuing such a cautious and balanced policy.

This neutral stance may have been appreciated by citizens of the EU or Pakistan, but not by those of India, where the terrorist attacks occurred.

Some Indian commentators directly accused the EU of hypocrisy, even claiming that its neutral stance effectively legitimised the actions of Islamabad-backed terrorist groups. Shreya Sinha, for instance, stated that “Europe, being a normative power, with its historical commitment to human rights, international law, and principled foreign policy, must recognise that treating India and Pakistan as equals in moments of terror completely misreads the regional security architecture in the South Asian theatre” (Sinha, 2025). Although such opinions are not officially shared by the Indian authorities, they reflect a widespread perception of the EU’s neutrality towards the conflict in South Asia. A similar reaction was evident during the crisis in 2019, when Federica Mogherini, instead of condemning the attacks by Pakistani-backed groups, as expected by the Indian public, limited her response to urging Pakistan to de-escalate the conflict (EU dials Pakistan, 2019).

### **The Proximity of the People’s Republic of China**

In the twenty-first century, the People’s Republic of China has increasingly sought to weaken the dominance of the United States and the European Union in Asia. China has challenged the West not only in key international institutions but also in individual regions (Cheng, 2016, p. 322). There is little doubt that China views its immediate neighbourhood, including Pakistan, as being within its own sphere of influence. Although it avoids using this term and constantly emphasises the partnership-based nature of these relations, in practice, as the stronger actor, it demands loyalty – if not submission – from other states.

According to Shivshankar Menon, “the India–China fault line in the subcontinent has not achieved the salience or nature of the India–Pakistan one, which has prevented subcontinent-wide cooperation from gaining momentum. The subcontinent’s Asian or global significance remains largely a function of India’s role, one that would be strengthened if India worked with, rather than against, her neighbours” (Menon, 2021, p. 282). At the same time, it would be difficult to deny that the People’s Republic of China exerts significant influence over the political situation in Pakistan and, therefore, plays a major role in the South Asian region (Bhaskar, 2022, p. 11). This raises an important question: does Chinese involvement in Pakistan indirectly influence the European Union’s actions towards the country?

As with the rivalry between India and Pakistan, official EU documents related to its cooperation with Pakistan lack any reference to the growing role of the People’s Republic of China in South Asia, and especially in

Pakistan. This omission does not, however, imply that Chinese influence in Pakistan is disregarded by EU diplomats. In this respect, the EU adopts a position akin to structural realism, taking into account the actual distribution of political and economic power in the region. The EU does not directly challenge Beijing in Pakistan, but continues to promote democratic values and respect for human rights in the country. At the same time, European policymakers act cautiously, realistically assessing the situation and trying not to damage their positive economic relations with Pakistan (Small, 2020, p. 96).

It is indeed the case that “China is an even stronger ally for Pakistan. Antipathy towards India provides them their common strategic glue” (Dogra, 2020, p. 101). Security considerations make good and close relations with China absolutely essential for Pakistan. Pakistan’s security strategy is built on cooperation with Beijing, a factor that must be taken into account not only by the EU but also by all other international actors.

The EU remains mindful of the geopolitical dynamics in South Asia, especially where these intersect with its interests in trade, connectivity, and global security (South Asia, 2025). European policymakers must also respond to the realities of global polarity and the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China. Deepening relations with Pakistan enables the EU to retain strategic flexibility in Asia, even though it is not a traditional hard-power actor.

The European Union observes the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as evidence of deepening ties between Beijing and Islamabad. Agnieszka Nitza-Makowska, for instance, identified several key factors affecting the EU’s position on the CPEC. According to her, “establishing a peaceful environment and improving connectivity in Pakistan serves both China’s and the EU’s strategies *vis-à-vis* the country. However, while the EU and China have similar goals, they are applying different strategies to achieve them. Contrary to China’s schemes, the EU’s emphasise conditionality” (Nitza-Makowska, 2020, p. 39).

In China’s case, this corridor primarily serves to achieve its foreign policy goals, especially as an integral component of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). For the European Union, by contrast, it represents an infrastructure initiative expected to contribute to the development of Pakistan. Although the Chinese authorities also highlight that they support the development of Pakistan, it is easy to see that the development of the corridor primarily advances China’s strategic interests. For the EU, meanwhile, it constitutes just one of many forms of economic cooperation it supports in the countries of the Global South.

The CPEC also affects the EU's approach to regional connectivity and infrastructure standards, as the Union promotes its own Global Gateway strategy as a counterweight to China's model. As Ursula von der Leyen stated, the EU "will support smart investments in quality infrastructure, respecting the highest social and environmental standards, in line with the EU's values and standards" (Global Gateway, 2025). The EU remains cautious about investing in areas such as the Gwadar port, due to China's dominant presence and strategic influence.

Seeking regional stability, the EU views the China–Pakistan nexus as a factor that complicates its conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts. Its selective cooperation with Pakistan can be interpreted as an effort to preserve strategic access in a China-dominated neighbourhood without engaging in direct confrontation. From a neorealist perspective, the Union must consider how closer EU–Pakistan ties could be perceived by Beijing, potentially disrupting regional power equilibriums. While the EU supports engagement with Pakistan, it often emphasises rules-based multilateralism, partly as a contrast to China's state-led model.

## **Conclusions**

Neorealism effectively captures how systemic pressures and regional rivalries shape the European Union's foreign policy choices towards Pakistan in the context of the India–Pakistan conflict and China's growing presence. EU foreign policy in that region reflects systemic incentives to maintain relevance within a changing power structure, rather than decisions based purely on values.

The India–Pakistan conflict influences the EU's policy toward Pakistan, but it does not fully determine it. The Union maintains a balanced, multi-dimensional policy that considers regional tensions, while simultaneously addressing trade, development, human rights, and counterterrorism.

While the conflict constitutes a contextual factor, the EU's policy toward Pakistan is ultimately shaped by independent and pragmatic interests, including development aid, trade, and diplomatic engagement. China's proximity and deepening ties with Pakistan further influence the EU's strategic caution, its focus on transparency and rules, and its push for alternatives such as the Global Gateway initiative. Although the EU does not confront China directly in Pakistan, it adjusts its engagement in response to China's expanding influence.

The EU's neutral stance on Kashmir, its strategic prudence regarding the CPEC, and its efforts to balance ties with both India and Pakistan in a region of rising Chinese power are best understood through a neorealist

lens focused on power balancing, survival, and influence within an anarchic international system.

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